

Unjust Evictions: How Predatory Landlords Impact Communities

Imagine this: You hear a noise in the basement - not the furnace kicking on or the creaking of pipes - you hear water, and not just a drip, but a gush. You rush downstairs in fear and it's even worse than you thought. You discover a mix of sewage backing up into your home; the smell and toxicity overpower your senses. Your mind immediately goes to the children living in your home, who already suffer from asthma. How will this affect them?

What do you do? You're renting this house, so your first instinct is to call your landlord, but the landlord doesn't respond. You know that this is unacceptable, but what recourse can you take right now? First you must take care of this issue. You have a friend help you pump the liquid out of the house several times a week while the kids are gone. Now, you have to decide whether to register a complaint against your landlord. In response to your claims, the city is unresponsive and unhelpful, too. Additionally, your landlord hasn't officially registered this rental property and therefore is not on the city's rolls. In protest, you do the only response that you believe is within your power to get justice: withhold rent.

The problem is that while the landlord has not undergone proper inspections with the city or upheld his end of the contract, this fact barely matters in an eviction court. Here, the only thing that matters is that you, the tenant, have not paid rent. From here, eviction is almost inevitable. You will have to uproot your family and find another affordable housing option, this time with an eviction on your record. Chances are high that you will have to move to a place with a similarly negligent landlord. You feel trapped.

This is not a hypothetical situation. The Detroit News recently reported on a [story](#) very similar to this that happened to Latasha Tucker in Detroit. While this is a particularly dramatic case, there are thousands of stories of renters being evicted for withholding rent from grossly negligent landlords in Detroit, with low-income families being more significantly impacted. The News did extensive research and found that one in five renters are evicted every year, flooding the eviction courts with cases. Detroit's 36th District court has averaged 35,000 eviction cases a year since 2009. While renters withhold rent for a wide variety of reasons, and there are poor tenants just as there are poor landlords, the failures in the system are revealed in the many cases where rent is withheld out of protest for lack of heating, sewage, or lead testing - things essential to safety and dignity.

Many tenants withhold rent because that action is their only option. If occupants have the resources, they may move to new housing. However, that is a strong "if" considering that low-income families are the population most