

SECTIONS

HOME

SEARCH

The New York Times

LOG IN

ments Like
Are Shrinking
Built-In
in the House



Republicans Couldn't
Knock Down Obamacare.
So They're Finding Ways
Around It.



The Big Question for
Markets: Is There a
Kudlow or Powell 'Put'?



The 10-Year Baby Window
That Is the Key to the
Women's Pay Gap



FOLLOW US:   

GET THE UPSHOT IN YOUR INBOX

SHARE

In 83 Million Eviction Records, a Sweeping and Intimate New Look at Housing in America

By **EMILY BADGER** and **QUOCTRUNG BUI** APRIL 7, 2018



can households received eviction judgments in 2016 in new data spanning dozens of states. Candace Williams was evicted in Richmond, Va., which has one of the highest rates of evictions in the data. Matt Eich for The New York Times

RICHMOND, Va. — Before the first hearings on the morning docket, the line starts to clog the lobby of the John Marshall Courthouse. No cellphones are allowed inside, but many of the people who've been summoned don't leave that until they arrive. "But it is your case," the

3ARTICLES REMAINING

SIGN UP

Subscriber login

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/07/upshot/millions-of-eviction-records-a-sweeping-new-look-at-housing-in-america.html

1/9

phones in the bushes nearby.

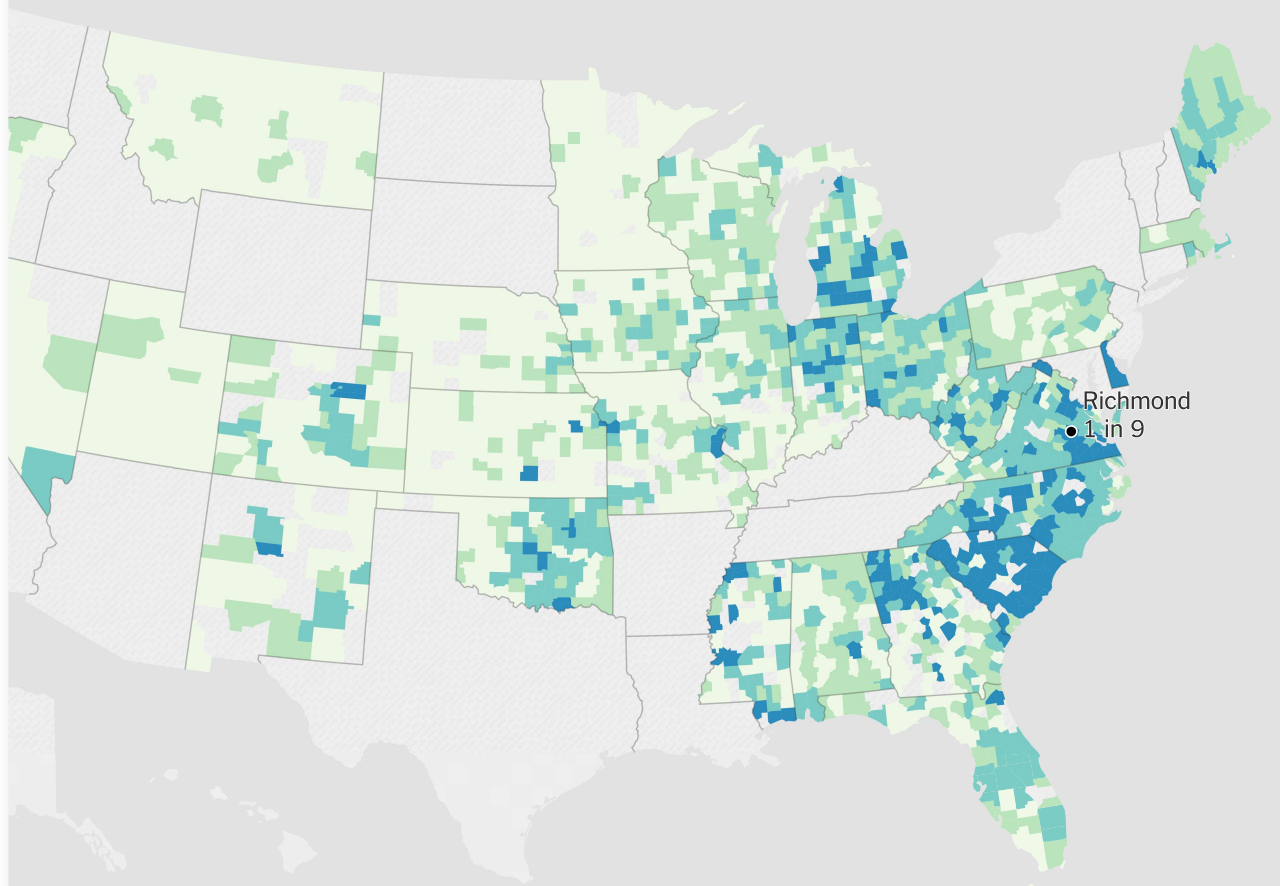
This courthouse handles every eviction in Richmond, a city with one of the highest eviction rates in the country, according to new data covering dozens of states and compiled by a team led by the Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond.

Two years ago, Mr. Desmond turned eviction into a national topic of conversation with “[Evicted](#),” a book that chronicled how poor families who lost their homes in Milwaukee sank ever deeper into poverty. It became a favorite among civic groups and on college campuses, some here in Richmond. [Bill Gates](#) and [former President Obama](#) named it among the best books they had read in 2017, and it was [awarded a Pulitzer Prize](#).

But for all the attention the problem began to draw, even Mr. Desmond could not say how widespread it was. [Surveys of renters](#) have tried to [gauge displacement](#), but there is no government data tracking all eviction cases in America. Now that Mr. Desmond has been mining court records across the country to build [a database of millions of evictions](#), it’s clear even in his incomplete national picture that they are more rampant in many places than what he saw in Milwaukee.

2016 eviction judgment rates for renting households

In states with more complete data



Mr. Desmond's team found records for nearly 900,000 eviction judgments in 2016, meaning landlords were given the legal right to remove at least one in 50 renter households in the communities covered by this data. That figure was one in 25 in Milwaukee and one in nine in Richmond. And one in five renter households in Richmond were threatened with eviction in 2016. Their landlords began legal proceedings, even if those cases didn't end with a lasting mark on a tenant's record.

For landlords, these numbers represent a financial drain of unpaid rent; for tenants, a looming risk of losing their homes.

In Richmond, most of those evicted never made it to a courtroom. They didn't appear because the process seemed inscrutable, or because they didn't have lawyers to navigate it, or because they believed there is not much to say when you simply don't have the money. The median amount owed was \$686.

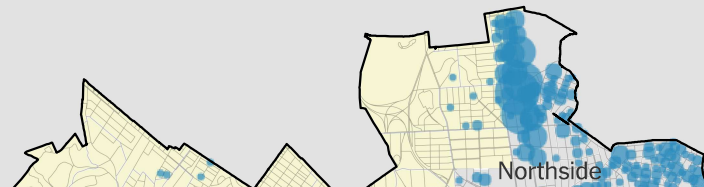
Inside the courtroom, cases sometimes brought in bulk by property managers are settled in minutes when defendants aren't present.

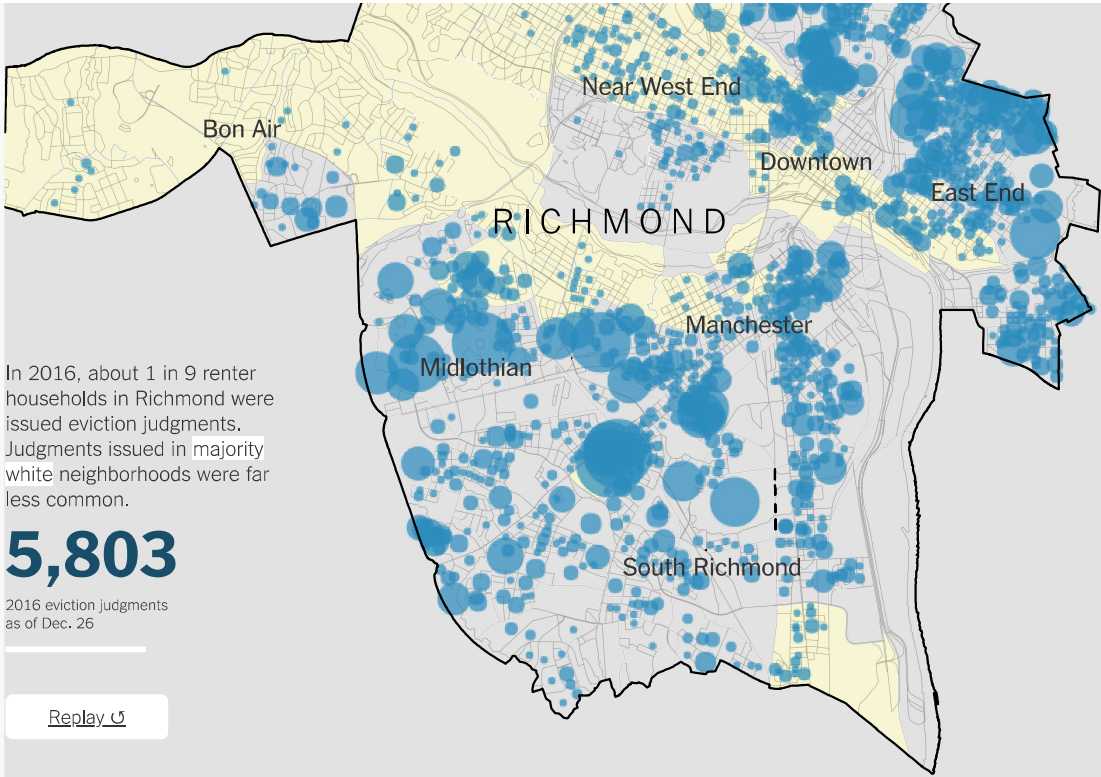
"The whole system works on default judgments and people not showing up," said Martin Wegbreit, director of litigation at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society. "Imagine if every person asked for a trial. The system would bog down in a couple of months."

The consequences of what happens here then spread across the city. The Richmond public school system reroutes buses to follow children from apartments to homeless shelters to pay-by-the-week motels. City social workers coach residents on how to fill out job applications when they have no answer for the address line. Families lose their food stamps and Medicaid benefits when they lose the permanent addresses where renewal notices are sent.

"An eviction isn't one problem," said Amy Woolard, a lawyer and the policy coordinator at the Legal Aid Justice Center in town. "It's like 12 problems."

Follow a year of eviction judgments in Richmond





Block-level eviction data was compiled by The Eviction Lab; population data is from the American Community Survey.

The new data, assembled from about 83 million court records going back to 2000, suggest that the most pervasive problems aren't necessarily in the most expensive regions. Evictions are accumulating across Michigan and Indiana. And several factors build on one another in Richmond: It's in the Southeast, where the poverty rates are high and the minimum wage is low; it's in Virginia, which lacks some tenant rights available in other states; and it's a city where many poor African-Americans live in low-quality housing with limited means of escaping it.

"This isn't by happenstance — this is quite intentional," said Levar Stoney, Richmond's mayor. A quarter of households here are poor, leaving many people a car repair or a hospital visit away from missing the rent check. But that poverty collides with a legal structure that responds to such moments swiftly.

Cities in the data with the highest rate of eviction judgments in 2016

CITY	EVICTON FILING RATE	EVICTON JUDGMENT RATE
1 North Charleston, S.C.	35.6%	16.5%
2 Richmond, Va.	30.9%	11.4%
3 Hampton, Va.	37.3%	10.5%
4 Newport News, Va.	34.1%	10.2%

6	Norfolk, Va.	27.6%	8.7%
7	Greensboro, N.C.	19.8%	8.4%
8	Columbia, S.C.	20.4%	8.2%
9	Warren, Mich.	29.8%	8.1%
10	Chesapeake, Va.	23.7%	7.9%

For cities with a population of 100,000 or more. Eviction filing rate refers to eviction cases filed per 100 renter households. Some households experience more than one summons in a single year.

This is a state, Mr. Stoney and others say, that favors property owners, as it has since plantation days. And aid to the poor has been limited.

Mr. Desmond's eviction calculations are probably conservative: They include only households that touched the legal process, not those in which people moved with an informal warning. The data undercount places where eviction records can be sealed or are harder to collect. In his eviction rates, Mr. Desmond counts the moment when a court delivers a judgment, not when the sheriff shows up. Tenants have often left by that point.

In Richmond, property managers say that filing an eviction is their only recourse when tenants have not paid, and that they allow many to stay even after court judgments if they pay in full before the sheriff arrives. This means the court process also functions as a cumbersome rent-collection system, one that attaches attorney fees and court costs to rent checks, and one that saddles even tenants who don't lose their homes with lasting eviction records.



Candace Williams was evicted from in 2016. Matt Eich for The New York Times

Candace Williams experienced the threat, the judgment and the sheriff's visit when she fell behind on her rent in 2016. She was making \$178 a week at a convenience store, a job she could reach without a car. Some of that money went to the space heaters and foam insulation she needed for the holes in the walls on the cheapest home she could find for her family.

She brought photos of the neglected repairs on her phone to court. When she learned she couldn't bring in the phone, she hid it under a trash can outside. When she arrived, late, to the courtroom, a default judgment had already been entered against her.

"I definitely understand my fault in it," Ms. Williams, 43, said. "But they don't allow you any opportunity to make a mistake."

The process is meant to be efficient, said Chip Dicks, a lawyer in Richmond who works on property management issues and has written provisions in the state's landlord-tenant law. Efficiency is good public policy, he argues: Neither the landlord nor the tenant benefits from a drawn-out process that would burden renters with even more unpaid rent, late fees and attorney costs. And landlords can't provide housing if they can't pay their mortgages, he added.

"The landlords are the victims because they're the ones not being paid when they're supposed to be paid," Mr. Dicks said. "What happens when you don't pay your car payment? They come and take your car."

come and take care of your house.

Poor tenants here, however, are not ensured access to legal aid or shielded from steep rent increases, as in some cities. And they have no right, as [tenants in some states do](#), to deduct their own repair costs from the rent.

Laura Lafayette, the chief executive of the regional realtors' association, which has been supportive of more tenant protections, fears that this system can become a "churning machine" that fails to distinguish between the tenant who made one mistake and the tenant who habitually flouts the lease. Today, both walk away from court with the same consequences.



ey's apartment does not work well, so on cold days she leaves the oven on. Matt Eich for The New York Times

After Whitney Gulley was evicted in 2014, she and her three children passed through many of the places people go when they carry an eviction on their record. They doubled up with family. They stayed in a long-term motel. They moved into a homeless shelter. They finally found an apartment willing to risk an evicted family — with a two-month deposit up front.

was subsidized by a housing voucher. Her landlord said she did not receive the check, and Ms. Gulley did not go to court because she said she believed she could not bring her children with her.

Before that disputed \$569, Ms. Gulley was in recovery from an addiction to pain pills. She got her G.E.D., her driver's license and a car while in that home, one she remembers happily. After the eviction, she said, she relapsed.

"I felt stripped down," she said. In the eviction she lost the writing journals she used as therapy. "It was like the only power and inspiration and the motivation had been taken out of me."

The sum still nags at her: All this over \$569. It has taken years for the family to stabilize, and it will take several more before the eviction recedes from her record.



g development in Richmond. One in five renter households in Richmond were threatened with eviction in 2016. Matt Eich for The New York Times

This part of the process — what happens after the eviction — isn't efficient for anyone. Landlords, too, have to turn over vacant apartments, and they face a rental pool full of potentially disqualified tenants. The public housing authority in town, which was responsible

on average 60 days turning over apartments, costing the agency more in lost rent than unpaid rent cases are often worth. The median amount owed on a public housing eviction here, according to Mr. Desmond's data, was \$328.

The agency provides housing of last resort. But it is also a property manager. "I don't think you ever eliminate that tension," said Orlando Artze, the interim C.E.O. of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

That tension is built into public housing, just as it is embedded in a school system that struggles to serve transient children while producing well-educated ones, or in a court system that tries to offer due process but in mass quantity.

"A lot of people get caught up in: 'Oh, is it the tenant's fault? Oh, is it the landlord's fault?'" said Elora Raymond, an assistant professor at Clemson University who has [studied eviction in Atlanta](#), where many of these same forces converge. "I think it really doesn't matter," she said. "Because this doesn't work. As a societal way of renting housing, this doesn't work."

Eviction rates for Alaska, Arkansas, North Dakota and South Dakota are not yet available.

The researchers caution that the eviction rates are underestimated in parts of Arizona, California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Washington and Wyoming. Data for incomplete states is available at [The Eviction Lab](#).

Eviction counts are based on court records collected by The Eviction Lab in 13 states and other records purchased from LexisNexis Risk Solutions and American Information Research Services Inc. Estimates of the number of renter households are based on census and Esri Business Analyst data.

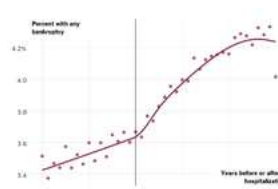
hot



ts for
is and
ke Your



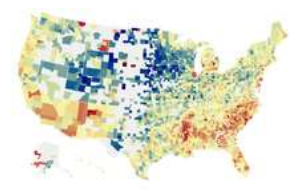
Extensive Data Shows
Punishing Reach of Racism
for Black Boys MAR. 18, 2018



Getting Sick Can Be Really
Expensive, Even for the
Insured MAR. 21, 2018



How Redlining's Racist
Effects Lasted for Decades
AUG. 24, 2017



The Best and Worst Places to
Grow Up: How Your Area
Compares MAY 3, 2015