

Legal Support for Renters

Renters have legal protections, but few can access those protections when faced with eviction because most don't have the means to obtain legal representation. By addressing this representation gap, Legal Support for Renters policies help people at risk of eviction remain safe in their homes and avoid homelessness, keep their records free from evictions, and reduce rent debt.

The Eviction Challenge

- Eviction has been associated with adverse physical and mental health outcomes, as well as decreased access to healthcare.¹
- Homelessness or unstable housing is associated with poorer health outcomes such as depression, stress-related illness, substance use disorder and increased emergency department use.²
- Families with children are more likely to face eviction,³ and frequently moving within the first three years of a child's life is associated with increased attention problems and externalizing behavior in children in poverty.⁴
- A systematic review of 47 studies found that individuals under the threat of eviction showed negative physical and mental health outcomes.⁵

A Healthy Solution: Legal Support for Renters

- **Creates Increased Housing Stability** – A pilot program in NYC saw that 84% of tenants receiving legal representation from the program remained in their homes.⁶
- **Has Flexible Design** – Legal support policies can cover services beyond right-to-counsel for eviction including, but not limited to, subsidy termination.
- **Reduces Stress for Renters** – Even in cases where residents need to move, legal representation increases the chances that they will have sufficient time to find new housing and reduces the risk of homelessness.^{7,8}

What is the Evidence that Legal Support for Renters Can Improve Health?

Legal Support for Renters policies are designed to support the provision of legal services for tenants at risk of eviction or displacement. Legal Support for Renters improves health by staving off the poor mental health effects of eviction, homelessness and housing instability.

- An analysis in Massachusetts updated in 2020 conservatively estimated that providing legal representation in eviction cases would prevent roughly 692 families and 289 individuals annually from experiencing homelessness and needing to enter the shelter system.⁹
- In a study of NYC's Universal Access to Counsel Program, researchers found that receiving representation through the program reduced the probability of an eviction warrant being executed by up to 77%.⁷
- Evictions can disrupt patient-provider relationships and impact treatment continuity, which can worsen health outcomes.¹⁰ Legal Support for Renters policies could mitigate these disruptions through its ability to prevent evictions.⁷

How Can Legal Support for Renters Help Address Health Disparities?

Low-income residents, people of color, women, and families with children are most at risk of eviction and subsequent exposure to violence.¹¹ Legal Support for Renters policies can help prevent eviction for those that are at disproportionate risk of both eviction and other poor health outcomes.

- Legal Support for Renters policies can provide support for structurally disadvantaged groups. In Kansas City MO, 73% of the tenants represented through "Right to Counsel" were Black, compared to 26% of the city's population, and 67% of tenants were women.¹²
- Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative health impacts of evictions. Eviction during pregnancy was associated with lower infant birth weight and lower gestational age at birth compared to eviction at any other time, according to a case control study of more than 88,000 births in Georgia from 2000-2016.¹³
- Economic stability is a social determinant of health and low-income people often suffer disproportionately from poor health outcomes.¹⁴ Legal Support for Renters policies can focus efforts on aiding low-income renters. In the San Francisco Tenant Right to Counsel program, 82% of cases were for renters of extremely low income, and 92% of tenants who received representation through the program avoided homelessness.¹⁵

What Are Some Future Issues to Consider?

Legal protections for renters are a relatively recent policy development, and cities will need to navigate this new frontier. The provision of legal support requires dedicated funding to pay the attorneys, and thus these policies will rely on ongoing political support. Local leaders might also consider setting parameters around eligibility. Some programs offer services to all tenants while others set eligibility based on tenant income. Cities might consider additional eligibility requirements to include groups such as the elderly and people without citizenship.

Resources for Cities

National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel: [Tenant Right to Counsel](#)
 Local Housing Solutions: [Brief on Legal Assistance for At Risk Renters](#)
 Center for American Progress: [Legal Representation Brief](#)

References

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