

New report details mental, physical impacts on tenants facing eviction in Oregon

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Eviction rates in Oregon have surpassed pre-pandemic levels with more

than 22,000 eviction filings in 2023. [New research](#) from Portland State University's Evicted in Oregon project documents the ways that eviction is traumatic for tenants, forcing them into a fight, flight or freeze response.

Individual response is shaped by access to support and resources, meaning tenants who lack formal support often freeze or flee their home. Those who can access support, like rental or [legal assistance](#), are more likely to fight and either challenge or avoid their eviction.

"Eviction is a threat to shelter, and how tenants respond to this threat depends on various factors such as income, language barriers, [immigration status](#), prior eviction experience, and knowledge of available resources," said Natalie Cholula, co-author of the report and Ph.D. candidate in sociology.

"In our study, we use the fight-flight-freeze framework to understand how tenants respond to the threat of eviction, and we describe their actions and their [emotional reactions](#) that, in part, shape the trajectory of their eviction experience. "

Fight, flight, and freeze responses are not mutually exclusive, meaning tenants can experience more than one response in the face of an eviction threat. Flight was the most common response reported by tenants, with about 58% of tenants experiencing a flight response. These tenants left their home in order to avoid problems with the legal system or the landlord.

Some tenants—51%—stated that they took action to avoid or challenge their eviction, meaning they responded with "fight." This included tenants who tried to talk with their landlord, sought support from community organizations, or went to court. About 17% experienced a freeze response, feeling overwhelmed with fear or uncertainty and

unable to take action.

Only 25% of tenants accessed formal services or programs like legal or financial support. Respondents were either unaware that support was available or encountered barriers that prevented them from getting assistance. Barriers include confusing requirements, time limitations and frequent lack of communication from support organizations that were contacted.

"Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been a number of new programs and policies implemented in Oregon to support tenants facing eviction," said Alex Farrington, co-author of the report and research associate in the Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning.

"However, only a small portion of the tenants we talked with were actually able to access any type of formal support during their eviction. Many tenants did not know that these resources existed or were too overwhelmed during the eviction process to seek them out."

Navigating an eviction caused tenants to experience a multitude of health impacts, including anxiety, depression, insomnia and high blood pressure.

"The stress of eviction was due to concerns about being displaced and the difficulties of navigating the legal system, seeking assistance, and paying back rent. Although new forms of tenant support have been implemented recently, they often fail to reach the tenants who need them the most," Cholula said.

"Many tenants have trouble accessing available programs due to a lack of outreach, complicated applications, or challenges with seeking assistance in a stressful situation. Defending oneself from eviction is already a challenging and overwhelming task, particularly when the threat of being

forced to vacate the premises has long-lasting impacts."

Historically marginalized groups faced unique challenges, in addition to barriers accessing support and health impacts. For example, Black, African American and African tenants faced racial discrimination from their landlord. Latine immigrants faced [language barriers](#) and tenants with a criminal record often chose to avoid engaging with the legal system altogether.

After the immediacy of an eviction has passed, tenants were left to manage ongoing impacts not only to their health, but the stabilization of their household.

Cholula and Farrington propose several policy and program recommendations to address these impacts felt by a growing group of Oregon's population. Creating proactive outreach programs focused on informing tenants of their rights and resources before they face eviction could reduce or eliminate a freeze or flee response.

The creation of eviction navigation programs could also offer a point of contact for any tenants in need of support. Cholula and Farrington also recommend the formation of a Tenant Right to Counsel that guarantees legal representation for tenants facing [eviction](#), as well as making an investment in public health by increasing emergency rental assistance funds.

More information: Fight, Flight, Freeze: How Access to Support Shapes Tenant Responses to Eviction in Multnomah County.

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