

CHICAGO  
APPLESEED  
CENTER FOR FAIR COURTS

# evicted *in the* dark

**FINDINGS & OBSERVATIONS  
FROM COOK COUNTY  
EVICTION COURTS**

**AUGUST 2025**

**FINAL  
NOTICE OF  
EVICTION**

Court Case No. 1652-03  
Address 452 WEST STREET, TINE

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## **FINDINGS & OBSERVATIONS FROM COOK COUNTY EVICTION COURTS**

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***AUGUST 2025***

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Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization using mixed-methods research approaches and community-driven advocacy to interrupt cycles of poverty, mass incarceration, and racial injustice inherent to the legal system.

Visit [chicagoappleseed.org](http://chicagoappleseed.org) for more information about our work.

# background

Eviction is the civil procedure by which the owner of a property (“the plaintiff”) seeks to remove a tenant (“the defendant”) because the tenant allegedly violated the terms of their contract or remained in a property longer than was agreed. The most common example of this is a property owner, the landlord, seeking to remove someone from an apartment or other residence because the tenant failed to pay their rent on time. Eviction is an incredibly destabilizing experience for individuals and families—not only because it upends their housing, but because interruptions in housing may also disrupt their employment, education, childcare responsibilities, food security, and physical and mental health. Between 2007 and 2016, an average of 7.6 million people, including 2.9 million children, faced eviction each year in the United States. Tens of thousands of Illinois families – approximately 1 in 25 renters – are threatened with eviction annually, and almost half of the eviction cases filed here in 2016 ultimately resulted in people losing their housing.

## DISPARATE HARMS OF EVICTION

Tenants are at an automatic disadvantage in eviction proceedings. The very nature of these cases indicates, most likely, that they are experiencing some kind of socioeconomic or other hardship; because of this, tenants in eviction proceedings are much less likely to have attorneys representing them. ***Injustice Watch found that 20% of tenants in Cook County eviction cases are represented by an attorney as opposed to 80% of landlords.*** Tenants with legal representation are less likely to be evicted or receive a default judgment, tend to experience greater outcomes such as better settlements, and often have greater access to more opportunities to challenge their eviction and extend the period of searching for new housing.

It is important to note that, unlike in criminal proceedings, the court is not obliged to provide an attorney to the defendant in eviction cases. Nineteen cities, two counties, and five states have passed “right-to-counsel” (RTC) ordinances, which guarantee eligible tenants the right to legal representation during, and in some cases prior to, eviction proceedings; eligibility varies across programs, in some cases encompassing all tenants and in others setting an income limit. Cook County offers some support to people navigating eviction courts: In November 2020, Cook County established the Cook County Legal Aid for Housing and Debt (CCLAHD), a partnership between government entities, legal aid organizations, and community partners designed to assist litigants in eviction, foreclosure, or consumer debt cases through its Early Resolution Program (ERP).<sup>1</sup> In April 2022, the Chicago Department of Housing announced a temporary RTC pilot program that outsources full representation

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<sup>1</sup> The ERP offers legal advice early in the process to all litigants in eviction cases. Litigants without lawyers are directed to the ERP in their first appearance for eviction cases and provided a 30-day case management period to utilize its services; any agreed order negotiated out of court is not entered by the judge until self-represented litigants have been granted an opportunity to meet with an attorney.

for a very limited set of eviction cases in Chicago (only 4% of eviction cases were included between February 2022 and December 2023). This pilot was only initially funded for three years, but there is potential for it to be renewed beyond 2025, or even expanded: Mayor Brandon Johnson proposed an ordinance in 2023 to make the RTC program permanent and ensure that, by mid-2027, every eviction litigant earning less than 80% of the Chicagoland median income who has “a meritorious legal defense” would be guaranteed full legal representation.

Unsurprisingly, the harms of eviction disproportionately fall on Black people, especially women and families. Residential segregation, redlining, community disinvestment, gentrification, discrimination, and economic inequalities have created an ever-widening racial gap in homeownership. This divide sets up a system where Black people are much more likely to rent housing rather than own it, and where the fate of their housing is more likely to rest in the hands of landlords. While White homeownership has not dropped below 70% since 1995, there has never been a time when a majority of Black Americans were homeowners. Moreover, Black people face eviction at disproportionate rates compared to other renters, likely due to widening gaps in wealth and income, as well as ongoing housing discrimination. A national study found that 33% of tenants in eviction cases are Black, even though they make up only 22% of total renters. In Chicago, 92% of the 25 community areas with the highest eviction case filing rates in 2017 were predominantly Black.

It is estimated that 1 in 5 renters facing eviction in the United States are Black women. In families with children, Black women experience eviction filings far more often than others (followed by White women, Black men, White men, and Latine women, in that order). In poor Black neighborhoods, women are more likely to face eviction and often less likely to recover from it than men, primarily due to structural constraints, such as higher rates of job loss and lower wages, the impacts of mass incarceration and criminalization on families, and systemic barriers to legal representation in eviction proceedings. According to Graetz & Gershenson et al. (2023):

*Black women face a double burden: They are most likely to live in a household targeted for eviction (especially if children are present) and, within that household, are most likely to bear the mark of the eviction court record itself.*

More than half of the households with eviction filings have children living in the home, with approximately 33% including a child under the age of 15. **Children with Black (19.2%) and Latine (16.7%) mothers are much more likely to experience being evicted than children born to mothers of other races.** In Cook County, women are 50% more likely than men to be unmarried parents, and childbearing responsibilities make it more difficult to find and retain affordable housing. Moreover, women earn less income on average, and 18% of single-mother households in Chicago were below the poverty line in 2022 as opposed to 8% of all households. In recent decades, the cost of living has greatly outpaced minimum wages and welfare benefits, potentially widening this divide.

# EVICTION IN COOK COUNTY

**In 2023, the Cook County Sheriff's Office was reportedly "ordered to enforce" 11,988 evictions, or about 999 every month that year.** Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, Illinois prohibited the enforcement of eviction orders as well as any eviction proceedings filed against a tenant with an annual income below \$99,000, or families with joint annual incomes below \$198,000, who struggled to pay rent due to pandemic-related hardship or who would be unhoused as a result of eviction, among other potential conditions. As a result, evictions decreased tremendously during that time (from March 2020 to June 2021); however, they returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2023 with nearly 12,000 eviction orders executed that year, and some months even exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

There is a specific civil process landlords must go through to evict tenants in Cook County. First, they must serve the tenant with a written eviction notice identifying the reason for termination and the end date of the lease. It may be possible to avoid an eviction case by resolving the conflict within the notice period, but in practice, these periods are often quite short. In an eviction for failure to pay rent, for example, the notice period is only five days. If and when the notice period ends without resolution, the landlord may file a civil court case against the tenant, at which point the Cook County Sheriff's Office (most often) would serve them with a summons, which specifies where and when to appear in court, and a complaint, which details the landlord's reasons for seeking eviction.

Cook County eviction cases may be resolved through agreement among litigants or by a judge at trial. If the judge decides in favor of the landlord, they enter an eviction order and sometimes require the tenant to pay a specified amount to resolve their debt or cover the legal fees of the landlord. Most eviction proceedings in Cook County are hybrid or virtual, meaning that they may be accessed remotely and happen over Zoom.

## methods

Chicago Appleseed utilized volunteers from our Court Observation & Education Program (COEP) to collect data in Cook County's eviction courtrooms. COEP is Chicago Appleseed's community court-watching program, which mobilizes members of the public to witness injustices firsthand and helps to educate them about court processes. Volunteer court-watchers are tasked with collecting data about each case they observe, which we then analyze to better understand the roles of court actors in producing the courtroom culture and impacting case outcomes.

Between November 2024 and April 2025, Chicago Appleseed conducted two rounds of court-watching in virtual initial appearance eviction courtrooms for all six districts of the Circuit Court of Cook County and held a focus group of court-watchers who participated in the first round.

DISTRICT	ROUND 1 NOV 2024 - JAN 2025		ROUND 2 FEB 2025 - APR 2025	
	# OBSERVERS	# COURT CALLS	# OBSERVERS	# HEARINGS
CHICAGO	8	11	7	414
SKOKIE	5	5	8	187
ROLLING MEADOWS	4	5	5	310
MAYWOOD	8	11	12	285
BRIDGEVIEW	5	7	15	347
MARKHAM	5	10	13	294

For the first round of court-watching, which took place between November 2024 and January 2025, 17 trained volunteers submitted an observation form for 49 eviction court calls; specifically, volunteers observed in virtual courtrooms that were primarily used for people’s first appearances in eviction cases. For round two, conducted between February and April 2025, 30 trained volunteers submitted an observation form for 1,837 eviction *hearings* in the same courtrooms. The focus group, held in February 2025, hosted six attendees in an hour-long virtual space focused on their observations of eviction proceedings in round one.

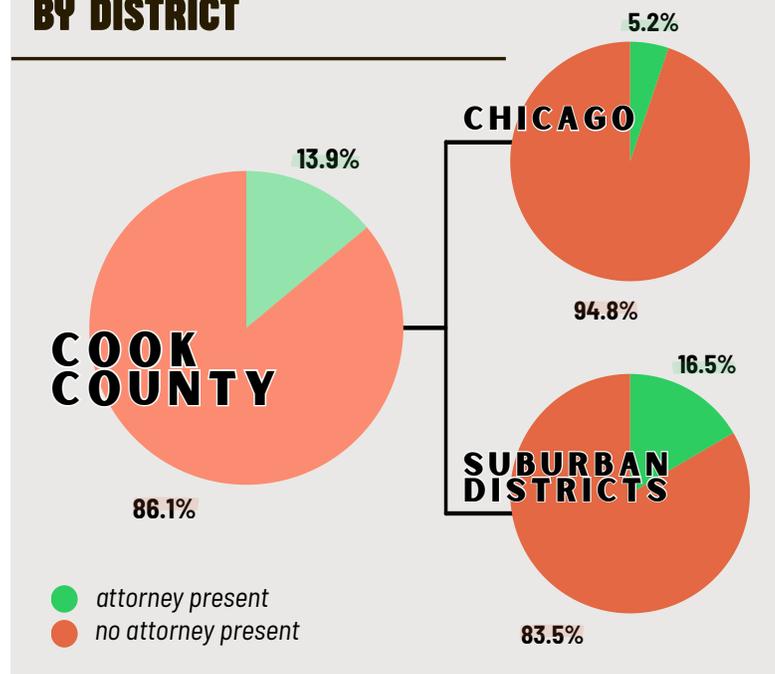
## findings

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Our court-watchers observed that the vast majority of tenants (over 86%) were self-represented, especially in proceedings in the city of Chicago (almost 95%). A majority of the hearings observed were first appearances, so it is possible that some of these people would gain representation later in the process or would be referred to a nonprofit that would take their case free of charge through the [RTC program](#) in Chicago.

figure 1

### PRESENCE OF ATTORNEYS FOR TENANTS IN COOK COUNTY EVICTION COURTS, BY DISTRICT



See Figure 1 for the prevalence of self-represented tenants in Chicago and the suburban Cook County districts.

Court-watchers found that Black people were disproportionately represented as tenants in Cook County's eviction courtrooms and reported that feminine-presenting people represented approximately half of all tenants they observed in eviction court. Black people were especially overrepresented in Chicago eviction courts, where they made up almost 71% of tenants but less than 31% of the city's population. **Black feminine-presenting people represented up to half of all tenants in eviction court, yet Black women comprise just 17% of the city's population, indicating that Black women face the greatest burden of eviction.** Feminine-presenting people in general made up the majority (62%) of those at eviction hearings in the city of Chicago. Hispanic or Latine people were the second-largest category of tenants at the eviction hearings observed.

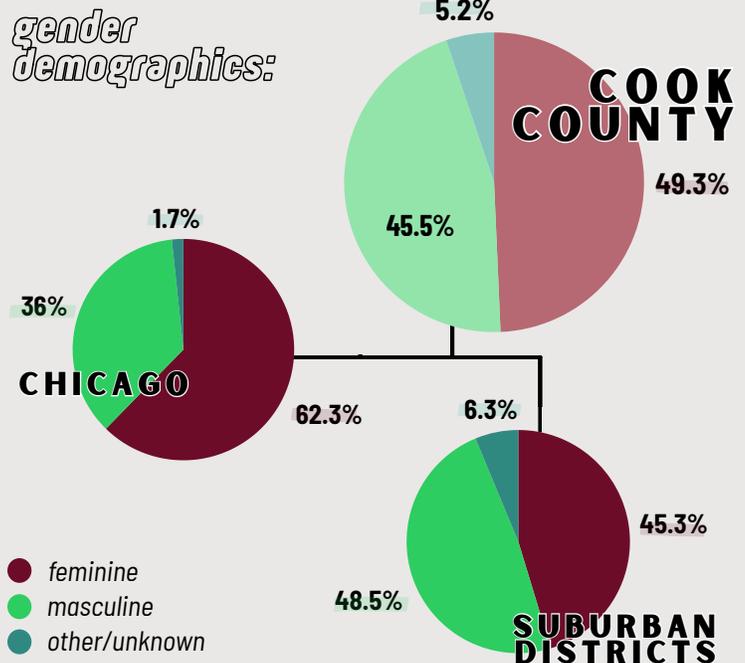
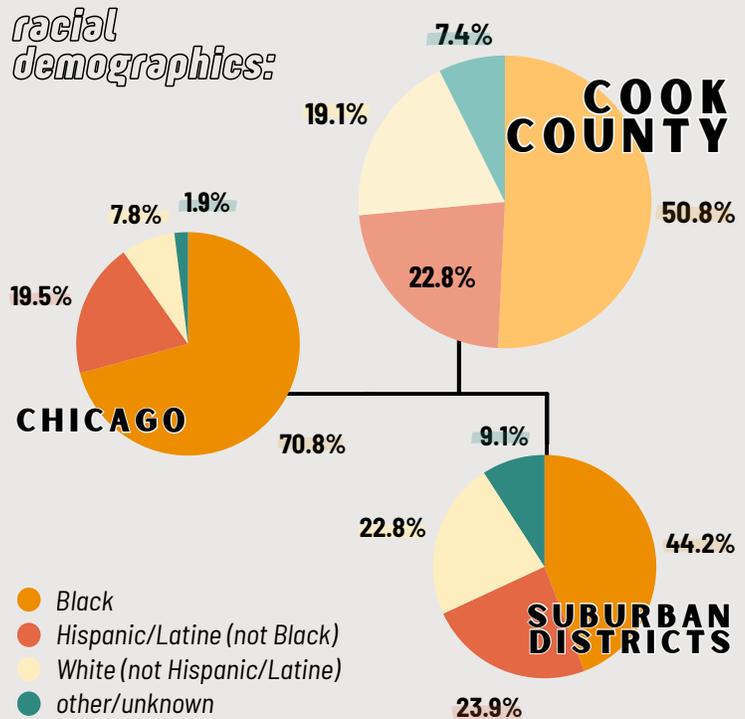
See Figure 2 for a more complete breakdown of the racial and gender demographics of tenants, as observed by court-watchers.<sup>2</sup>

## PACING + UNDERSTANDING

**Eviction proceedings in all districts were generally described as fast-paced and overwhelming, and the resulting confusion was extremely**

figure 2

### DEMOGRAPHICS OF TENANTS IN COOK COUNTY EVICTION COURTS, BY DISTRICT



<sup>2</sup> We chose to combine the suburban district for this analysis, but it should be noted that the suburban districts of Cook County have varying racial demographics.

**prevalent in Chicago’s eviction proceedings, according to court-watchers’ responses.**<sup>3</sup> Cases were resolved very quickly “with little explanation for those unfamiliar with legal terminology or procedure,” according to court-watchers in Chicago.<sup>4</sup> One observer noted that litigants and their attorneys were “given no more than 2 seconds to respond” when asked to speak by a judge or clerk. Because of this fast pace, many tenants seemed to not understand the proceedings for their own cases. From a Chicago court-watcher:

*One of the biggest challenges was the rapid pace at which cases were called and resolved, often with little explanation for those unfamiliar with legal terminology or procedure. It was clear that many people did not fully grasp what had just happened in their cases or what their next steps should be.*

*I couldn’t help but notice how many [tenants] seemed visibly confused about the process. Many of them attempted to ask questions or clarify their situations, but the [judges] often responded with a firm reprimand.*

Judges weren’t the only court actors who were observed refusing to support tenants in understanding their own eviction proceedings. In one example, court-watchers in Chicago witnessed a court coordinator who “would raise [their] voice at people who unmuted and [asked] questions about the call.” This impatience is likely due, at least somewhat, to the high volume of cases moving through the eviction courts,<sup>5</sup> which results in court actors attempting to get through the calls as quickly as possible, sometimes at the expense of self-represented tenants. One volunteer documented that some court actors in Chicago demonstrated more patience with attorneys than with self-represented litigants: *“The judge was much more patient with [landlords’] attorneys than [tenants]. The clerks were the same way, although they were much more rude, curt, and aggressive than the judge.”*

The virtual modality of most eviction proceedings also contributed to the confusion that tenants experienced.<sup>6</sup> Multiple court-watchers observed technological difficulties experienced by tenants. From a court-watcher in Rolling Meadows:

*It was disheartening to watch as some [tenants] struggled even with basic functions like unmuting themselves to state their names when the judge called on them. The technology, meant to facilitate access to justice, seemed instead like another barrier for those already in precarious situations.*

A court-watcher in Maywood explained how litigants with little “technological and legal knowledge” might experience greater confusion, speculating that in-person appearances in court “with a lawyer alongside [the tenant]” could be helpful.

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<sup>3</sup> We do not have enough data to provide a nuanced analysis of this variation by district.

<sup>4</sup> Spelling and capitalization errors were corrected in quotes. All other changes or clarifications were marked with brackets.

<sup>5</sup> In 2022 alone, 38,000 eviction and foreclosure cases were filed in Cook County.

<sup>6</sup> Court calls observed for this project were either virtual or hybrid, but all court-watchers observed virtually.

**Confusion among tenants in an eviction courtroom not only hinders their ability to engage in their own eviction hearings but could also have a direct impact on the outcomes of eviction cases.**

Another court-watcher recalled a case, also in Maywood, where a judge granted additional time for a self-represented tenant to “negotiate with the landlord regarding back-rent,” but did not “summarize any next steps” because there was an “assumption that the renter knew what they should do next in order to not be evicted.” A court-watcher in Markham noted that even though the judge “clearly explained what was expected of them at trial,” self-represented tenants “struggled introducing evidence and arguments.” The power imbalance favoring landlords is exacerbated by this confusion, especially when the landlord has ongoing access to legal expertise through their attorney and the self-represented tenant may not even be aware of their rights.

## **LANGUAGE ACCESS**

The failure of the Circuit Court of Cook County to consistently provide people interpreters to ensure language access also contributed to confusion in eviction proceedings. Court-watchers repeatedly raised this concern throughout the entire six-month court-watching period and during the focus group. In Illinois, the court has a responsibility to appoint an interpreter for any litigant in a civil case who they deem incapable of understanding or speaking English. The Illinois Supreme Court Language Access Policy clarifies that the court must appoint a certified or qualified interpreter when one is available and should make “reasonable efforts to avoid appointing” court personnel, friends, family, witnesses, or other people with conflicts of interest.

Court-watchers witnessed multiple violations of this policy. For example, though the Language Access Policy specifies that the court should try to avoid appointing “court personnel employed for a purpose other than interpreting,” as an interpreter, court-watchers observed court personnel acting as interpreters: “There was a [litigant] from India. . . He asked for an interpreter, and there wasn’t any. And one of the [court clerks], I think, was Indian, and the judge said, ‘here, come, you talk to him.’” There were multiple recorded instances of the courts failing to provide an interpreter at all. Even though the court has access to LanguageLine Solutions, which provides on-demand interpretation services via telephone, court-watchers observed cases of judges relying on machine translators in multiple districts. In Skokie, for instance:

*The court did not have a Russian interpreter, but the judge told him that he must bring his own interpreter when he returns to court. . . The judge gave these instructions by translating his words from English to Russian with a machine. This machine was not as efficient as an interpreter for it only allowed the judge to communicate. The defendant merely nodded.*

A court-watcher in Bridgeview recounted:

*There was an unrepresented tenant who spoke Serbian who needed an interpreter but was not provided one. Consequently, he was unable to participate in his own case. . . Eventually, the*

*baliff suggested using Google Translate to communicate the date the tenant needed to file a motion by, where to file the motion, and how to waive the fee.*

It is important to note here that machine translators, such as Google Translate or ChatGPT, cannot adequately substitute the role of a certified interpreter. Whereas qualified interpreters really do interpret the meaning of text or speech and creatively determine the way to communicate it most effectively and faithfully in a different language, machine translators instead use their training sample of translated texts to mathematically produce an approximation of a human translation and are known to be especially flawed in a legal context.

It is imperative that appointed interpreters are certified and qualified to interpret in the legal context. One court-watcher noticed that a court-appointed interpreter in Maywood did not translate a tenant's speech very faithfully:

*As a Spanish speaker, I noticed [the interpreter] did not fully translate how the Spanish-speaking tenant was feeling. The Spanish-speaking tenant said she felt nervous, but the [interpreter] disregarded this. It might seem like a small detail, but it could have led the judge to approach the situation in a more [calm manner].*

A court's failure to ensure reliable, precise, and culturally competent interpretation has obvious consequences for litigants who are not proficient in spoken English. In eviction proceedings, which are very overwhelming and confusing for people who do speak English, the absence of a qualified interpreter could leave self-represented litigants in total darkness regarding the status of their case and the next steps required of them.

## conclusion

In Cook County, tenants rarely have any form of legal representation at the start of eviction proceedings, though some certainly obtain representation for later stages of the process. Aligning with national trends, Black women in Cook County compose an incredibly large proportion of tenants in eviction court, with Black men and Hispanic or Latine people also highly prevalent as tenants. Likely due to high caseloads, court staff tend to move through hearings rapidly, causing confusion among tenants that is exacerbated by uneven representation and the virtual or hybrid modality of many eviction court proceedings. Furthermore, the courts fail to consistently provide high-quality interpretation for people who are not proficient in spoken English. The fact that tenants generally do not appear to understand their own eviction proceedings very well creates serious implications for their capacity to participate fully in the legal process and impacts the outcomes of their cases.

*To address these concerns, we provide the following recommendations.*

## **ENSURE THAT ALL TENANTS IN EVICTION PROCEEDINGS HAVE LEGAL REPRESENTATION.**

**Tenants are very often at a disadvantage in eviction proceedings, as they rarely have access to legal representation throughout their cases.** Because Cook County's ERP program only provides limited communication with attorneys and Chicago's RTC pilot serves a very limited set of tenants, the Cook County Board of Commissioners should follow the example set by multiple jurisdictions and pass a low-barrier or barrier-free right-to-council ordinance. By ensuring that all Cook County residents facing eviction have access to legal representation regardless of their socioeconomic status, Cook County could reduce the number of evictions and unjust outcomes.

## **CREATE ADDITIONAL COURTROOMS FOR EVICTION PROCEEDINGS OR EXTEND THE CASE MANAGEMENT PERIOD.**

**The high caseload of eviction courtrooms often results in incredibly fast-paced proceedings that limit the capacity of tenants to participate effectively in their own cases.** Since the Circuit Court of Cook County does not have agency over how many eviction cases are filed, it should respond to the caseload by spreading eviction hearings across more courtrooms or extending the currently 30-day case management period of eviction cases to 60 days.

## **HIRE MORE LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS FOR THE COURTS AND CLARIFY PROCEDURES REGARDING LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS WITH JUDGES.**

**The court doesn't appear to have lived up to its responsibility to ensure that people are able to fully understand the legal process and court outcomes.** The Circuit Court of Cook County should hire more interpreters to ensure that they are able to meet their responsibility to provide them in all cases. The Chief Judge should conduct training sessions with all judges regarding best practices and consistent procedures for language interpretation in courts. Furthermore, the Language Access Policy for the courts should be amended to prohibit the use of ad hoc unlicensed or unregistered interpreters and machine translators.

## **CREATE MORE AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND INCREASE GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR POOR CHICAGOANS.**

**Our findings point to a broader trend in Cook County: The number of people facing potential eviction from their homes is alarmingly high.** Though our data does not reflect the number of eviction cases, it is clear that there is a high volume of eviction cases across Cook County's six districts. Cook County and the City of Chicago should take greater measures to prevent eviction, using the policies effective during the COVID-19 pandemic as an example as well as increasing funding for rental assistance.

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