



# HOUSING JUSTICE IS THE CURE:

Evictions in Boston's Communities of Color During COVID-19



**CITY LIFE  
VIDA URBANA**

Stand Up, Fight Back.

**City Life/Vida Urbana is a grassroots community organization committed to fighting for racial, social and economic justice and gender equality by building working class power. We promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders and build collective power to effect systemic change and transform society.**

## **Acknowledgements**

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“We’re still in this pandemic and we’re still trying to recover.  
But we can exercise our rights...  
You can fight for the place you call home.” — FRANCES AMADOR







Tenants of SoMa Apartments in Mattapan, who are fight displacement in their housing complex, rally for the passage of the COVID Housing Equity Bill, June 2021.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic lays bare what we've always known: Black and Brown communities need and deserve safe, stable housing. Yet the pandemic is far from over, and its initial shocks have hardened into an enduring crisis for Black and Brown tenants in Boston and across Massachusetts. As of July 2021, an estimated 78,000 renter households in Suffolk County say that they still can't pay rent. Of the 144,000 renter households behind on rent in Massachusetts, nearly three in five identify as people of color.<sup>1</sup>

**This was no natural disaster. COVID-19's staggering repercussions for tenants of color are the predictable outcomes of racial hierarchy: one that exploits Black and Brown people to replenish white wealth, health, and security.**

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate that strategies to manage pandemic transmission failed Boston's Black, Brown, and immigrant communities. When COVID-19 first broke out in Massachusetts, state policy aimed to protect public health via stay at home orders. Without a vaccine, reliable housing became a critical preventative tool to mitigate COVID-19 transmission and mortality.<sup>2</sup> Yet public health tactics without sufficient public financial support—stay at home orders, sheltering in place—triggered an uneven economic collapse that undermined tenant stability. The hasty withdrawal of vigorous tenant protections such as the Massachusetts eviction moratorium further jeopardized the health and safety of renters across the state. More than 16 months since the pandemic began, a mismanaged crisis for tenants still threatens to escalate into a wave of eviction likely to hit communities of color hardest.

In what follows, we examine eviction filing records in Boston from the pandemic's first year, lasting roughly from March 2020 to March 2021. We find that:

## 1/ Boston's communities of color bore the brunt of the COVID-19 eviction crisis.

- › 70% of all eviction filings occurred in census tracts where the majority of renters are people of color, even though less than half of all Boston rental housing (47%) is located in these neighborhoods.
- › By contrast, 30% of eviction filings occurred in tracts with majority white renter populations, even though 43% of all occupied Boston rental units are in these neighborhoods.

## 2/ Landlords aggressively pursued eviction against Black communities in particular.

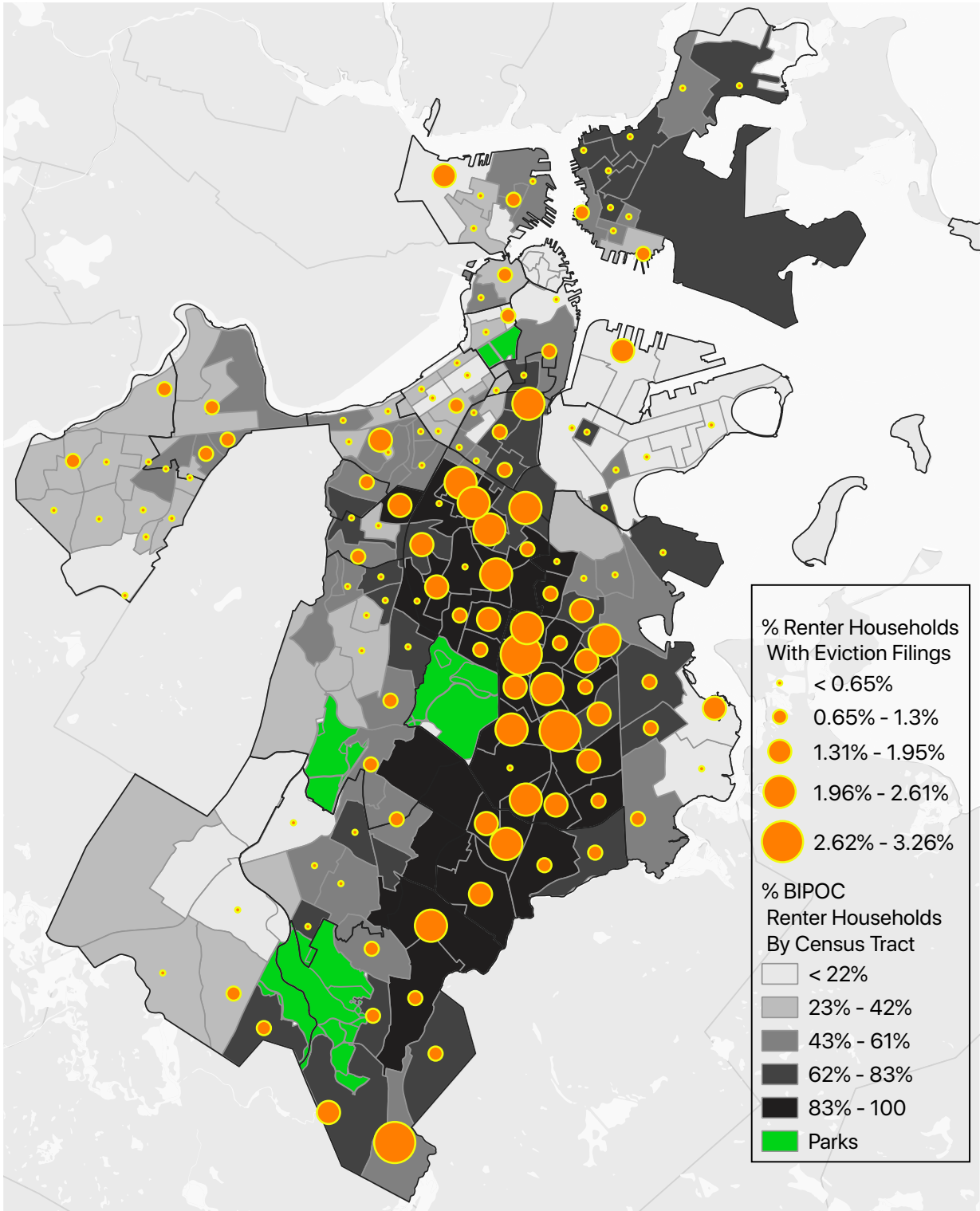
- › In the first year of COVID-19, the eviction filing rate was **nearly five times greater** in Boston census tracts where the share of Black residents is especially high than in tracts with high concentrations of white residents.
- › In these Black communities, 14 eviction filings occurred for every 1,000 occupied rental units. In communities with high concentrations of white residents, just 3 filings occurred for every 1,000 occupied rental units.

## 3/ Renters in Boston neighborhoods hardest-hit by eviction were more likely to risk COVID infection. Black and Brown neighborhoods that experienced the highest eviction filing rates also experienced among the highest rates of COVID-19 incidence.

- › On average, landlords filed evictions at **twice the rate** in neighborhoods with the highest rates of COVID-19 incidence than in neighborhoods with the lowest COVID-19 incidence rates.

# Eviction Filing Rate 2/28/2020 - 2/28/2021

## Underlaid with Renter Households of Color



Author: Ben Walker  
Sources: Massachusetts Trial Court Electronic Case Access, American Community Survey 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Boston's concentration of forced expulsion, illness, and financial wreckage is no accident. We know that race is the strongest predictor of eviction in Boston, over and above indicators of poverty.<sup>3</sup> We know that eviction exposes communities to COVID-19 infection. Across the country, we know that the more policy-makers weakened emergency eviction protections, the more people got sick and died.<sup>4</sup> The implication is clear: when Massachusetts politicians stripped away essential protections against eviction during the COVID-19 pandemic, this choice exposed Black and Brown people to needless precarity, illness, and death.

That's why City/Life Vida Urbana fights for the bold visionary ideas championed by the people of color on the frontlines of the displacement crisis. Following the powerful leadership of our tenant organizers, we join calls for the radical transformation of a profoundly racist system that patterns how we shelter our communities.

It's time our politicians listened. With incomplete vaccine coverage and new COVID variants on the rise, we need and demand swift legislative action to block a late wave of mass displacement likely to sweep across Black, Brown, and immigrant communities statewide.

**Right now, there are five key steps Massachusetts politicians must take to meet the urgency of the moment. Each is included in the COVID-19 Housing Equity Bill (H.1434/S.891) now under consideration in the state legislature:**

**1/** Require landlords to pursue and cooperate with rental assistance programs before attempting eviction.

**4/** Halt all no-fault evictions motivated by landlord greed or development pressures.

**2/** Guarantee the timely and equitable distribution of rental assistance funds.

**5/** Pause all residential foreclosures and require mortgage forbearance.

**3/** Deny all attempted evictions against vulnerable tenants, especially if eviction would force a renter household into homelessness or an increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

The pandemic has shown that our market-driven housing system runs against the survival of Black, Brown, and immigrant communities. But the last year and a half has also illuminated just how much we depend on each other for our shared flourishing. Shifting power to Black, Brown, and immigrant communities will take more than new laws. It will require a movement, led by the organized power of those closest to the pain of exploitation. We call on you to join City Life/Vida Urbana in the struggle to dismantle systems of a violent racial hierarchy and help build a just city where everyone can thrive.



Over the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in greater Boston,

# City Life/Vida Urbana

LED  
OVER  
**30**  
ACTIONS

WITH  
ALMOST  
**2000**  
RESIDENTS

& HELPED  
ORGANIZE  
**12+**  
TENANT UNIONS

■ Neighborhoods with Actions ■ Parks ● Action







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