

U.S.

# Coronavirus Heightens Housing Insecurity for Black and Hispanic Populations

With little or no savings, a loss of income leaves many families on the brink of homelessness

By [Gwynn Guilford](#) and [Luis Melgar](#)

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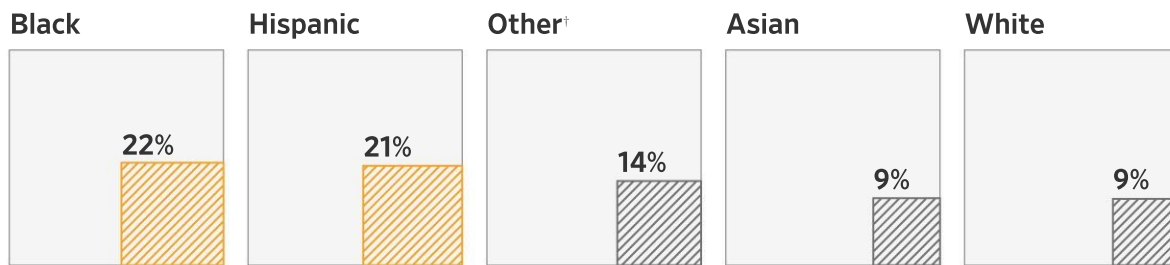
Priscilla Williams has been luckier than many. Her job as public housing program coordinator pays a decent salary and can be done from home. But the coronavirus pandemic has still strained her finances—so much so that Ms. Williams, a 39-year-old Black woman, has exhausted her savings and is now about 2½ months behind on the rent for her two-bedroom apartment in Boston.

“People don’t understand how you can’t make your ends meet when you have a job,” she said. “I’m above accessing benefits, but I’m not wealthy enough to sustain my family on my own right now.”

The coronavirus is proving to be a great unequalizer, causing joblessness, sickness and even death at higher rates among nonwhite populations. As Ms. Williams’s story illustrates, housing is another key dimension of pandemic-induced inequality—amplifying longstanding racial gaps in financial stability.

New Census Bureau data reveal the scale of these differences, framing what is at stake as lawmakers in Washington debate whether, and to what degree, to renew financial support measures for families and workers that expired last month. Among adults living in households that rent or pay a monthly mortgage, more than one-fifth of Black and Hispanic/Latino adults said their household either missed June rent or mortgage payment or paid late as of the week ending July 21, more than twice that of whites.

**Percentage of adults, by race and ethnicity, living in households where the rent was paid late\***



\*Paid the previous month's rent late (June) †Includes American Indians, Alaska natives, native Hawaiians, other Pacific Islanders and people of two or more races, non-Hispanics

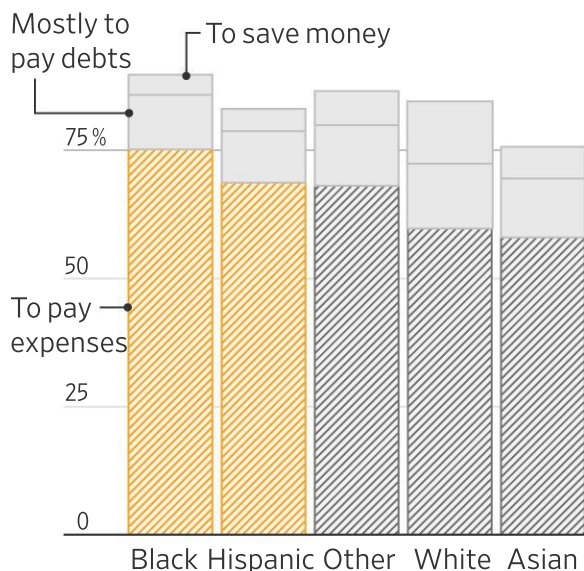
Notes: Data as of week July 16-21. Excludes owners without mortgages or loans (including home equity loans) and those who don't pay rent for occupied units.

Source: Census Bureau

“We had a pretty clear picture of disparities particularly among Black and Latino households, in terms of cost burden, in terms of income, in terms of savings they had to weather economic shocks like the pandemic,” said Solomon Greene, senior fellow at the Urban Institute, an economic and social policy think tank. “We’re now starting to see how those disparities are playing out.”

Federal economic relief measures enacted in March as part of the Cares Act have helped keep families afloat. Those included \$600-a-week to supplement state unemployment benefits, one-time \$1,200 stimulus checks and a moratorium on evictions from housing with government-backed mortgages. President Trump on Saturday signed several executive actions aimed at extending relief, including one authorizing \$400 a week in extra unemployment benefits and another directing federal agencies to prioritize protections against evictions and foreclosures.

**Percentage of adults in households that received or will receive the stimulus check and how it was used or will be used**



Note: Data as of week July 16-21  
Source: Census Bureau

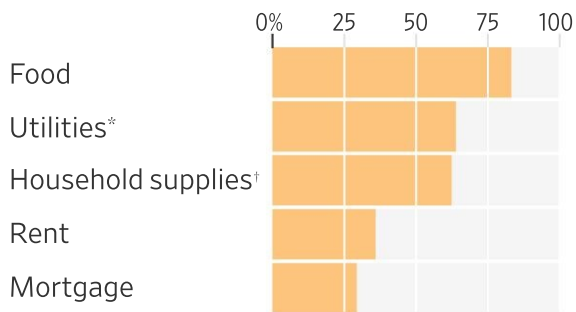
Despite federal relief, the pandemic still exacerbated longstanding racial gaps in financial security. The typical Black household’s net worth was just 10% of the typical white family’s in 2016, according to Federal Reserve data, including illiquid assets like home equity. The corresponding figure for Hispanics was 12%. Less wealth meant a thinner cushion to soften the blow of unexpected expenses.

Ms. Williams, the housing program coordinator in Boston, spent four years living in homeless shelters in the mid-2000s. She now earns \$62,000 a year, before taxes, more than the national median wage of \$48,500 in 2019. “To get

where I’m at right now—I had to claw to get there,” she said.

The pandemic threatens to send her sliding back. Unexpected outlays in 2019 due to her father’s death and a car accident had depleted Ms. Williams’s savings. Then in mid-March, she and her 20-year-old daughter, who lives with her, were stuck at home after Ms. Williams’s office closed and her daughter’s classes at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, went virtual. That left her swallowing costs for things normally procured from the office supply closet and the university computer lab. The federal stimulus check helped some, covering the costs of a printer and a laptop after her daughter’s broke. But extra expenses kept piling up:

**Most of those who spent or will spend the stimulus check to cover expenses said they used it, or plan to use it, to buy food**



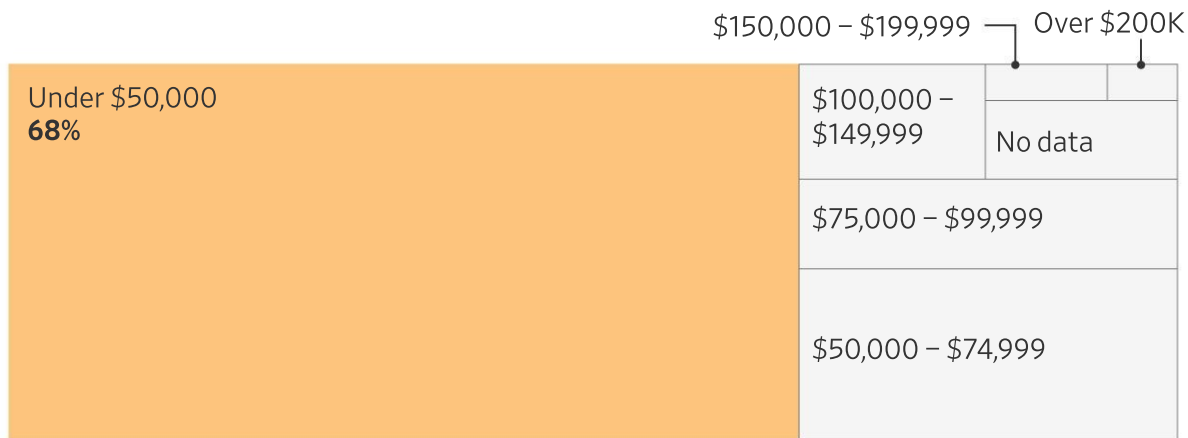
\*Includes telecommunications †Includes personal care products  
 Notes: Data as of week July 16-21. Respondents could pick more than one option.  
 Source: Census Bureau

printer cartridges, paper, an Adobe Acrobat subscription. Utility bills soared. Food costs, too. Hoping that more government assistance will come, Ms. Williams opted to pay these expenses instead of rent and is now about \$3,200 behind.

“When you understand it’s beyond your control, that’s why it’s more traumatic even than living in a shelter,” she said. “I can’t figure out what more I can do—I can’t fix this problem.”

More than two-thirds of adults in homes that were behind on rent or mortgage were in households that make \$50,000 a year or less

**Percentage of adults in households that paid their mortgage or rent late, by household income**



Notes: Data as of week July 16-21. Excludes owners without mortgages or loans (including home equity loans) and those who don’t pay rent for occupied units.  
 Source: Census Bureau

The census data, which are drawn from responses of around 90,000 respondents each week, show that jobs lost and hours cut due to the pandemic widened income gaps. Around 64% of Hispanics and 57% of Black respondents reported income losses since the pandemic began, compared with 45% of whites.

Ivanna, a 38-year-old Hispanic woman in Austin, Texas, had steady income before the pandemic, regularly working 12-hour days as a house painter (her surname is withheld here because she is an undocumented immigrant). After she lost her job in March, Ivanna scrambled to find odd jobs and lived mostly off bread and coffee. It wasn't enough. By April she had fallen behind on bills, her car payments, and the rent she owes the mobile home park where she lives. Because she is undocumented, Ivanna is ineligible for Cares Act relief and other government assistance.

"The whole Covid situation has really changed me," she said. "I used to be independent and be able to provide for myself, and now I'm constantly struggling to catch back up."

She paid back some of her rent after the subcontractor she works for called her back part-time in June. Ivanna has had to stop sending checks to help her 23-year-old daughter, who lives in Nicaragua, to pay for leukemia treatment, and she is now torn between paying her car loan and the back rent she owes. "Losing my car would be very scary" because she needs it to get to work, she said. "But my biggest fear is being evicted."

These strains disproportionately affect nonwhite households with children. More than 60% of Black and Hispanic adults in households behind on rent or mortgage payments live with children, compared with 52% of white respondents.

Marlena Williams (no relation to Priscilla Williams), a 29-year-old Black woman living in Chicago's South Side, was laid off from her job at Koch Foods chicken factory in March. A single parent of two children, ages 6 and 9, she didn't return to work when the plant reopened because she feared what might happen to her children if she became infected. Ms. Williams has focused on keeping her children engaged. "We do karaoke, take walks," she said. "For the most part, I've been keeping their minds busy."

She hasn't yet told them about the eviction notice she received on July 28. She is now three months behind on rent, since the stimulus check Ms. Williams received covered a little less than what she needed to pay April's rent. She said she has been unable to receive unemployment benefits due to an administrative mix-up.

“I had a pretty steady life before. It’s been a 360 in the worst way,” Ms. Williams said. “I’ve lost my faith in being comfortable ever again.”

The census data don’t show how late payment trends compare with pre-pandemic rates, because the survey began in April 2020. But other studies highlight existing differences in housing-cost burdens. Some 45% of Black households and 42% of Latino households are “cost burdened,” meaning they spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs, according to the Urban Institute—compared with 27% for white households.

Declining rates of homeownership also pose a burden for nonwhites. Rents are often more expensive than mortgages, and homeownership is a key way to build wealth. Homeownership rates for Black and Hispanic households are only about three-fifths that of whites. Black families in particular continue to suffer from the legacy of discriminatory practices limiting their access to credit and desirable real estate, as well as from predatory lending during the 2007-09 recession.

Covid’s blow to the financial stability and housing security of Black and Hispanic communities could reverberate for generations.

“We already know the economic fallout of Covid is disproportionately impacting communities of color,” said Julie Gugin, executive director of the Minnesota Home Ownership Center, a nonprofit that coordinates housing counseling agencies across the state. “If we don’t get out in front of those homeowners who are at risk, we’ll set homeownership in communities of color back a generation.”

*—Paul Overberg contributed to this article.*

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