

# the TRAUMA of INSTABILITY

*No-cause evictions and unstable housing can put people's psychological and physical health in jeopardy, an OHSU psychologist explains*

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Shea Lott has been reading up on the psychological impacts of evictions, homelessness and unstable housing. Lott is not a social worker. He's a clinical psychologist at the Avel Gordly Center for Healing, a multicultural treatment center at Oregon Health & Science University. But many of his patients – who aren't necessarily low-income – have faced evictions.

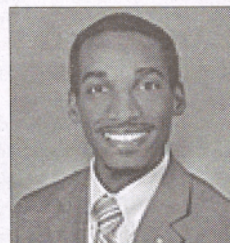
Lott testified about the traumatic effects of evictions and unstable housing during a January housing forum that included 17 state lawmakers who represent the Portland metropolitan region. Street Roots followed up with Lott to dive into how people can become traumatized and unhealthy when they face eviction, steep rent increases and unstable housing.

**Amanda Waldroupe:** You had said you first became aware of this issue because of the clients you see in private practice.

**Shea Lott:** I have had more and more individuals talking about no-cause evictions and evictions in general. I've realized that this is a multi-systemic issue. It affects not only people who are from lower socioeconomic strata, but those in the middle class as well. A no-cause eviction can happen to anybody. You might have children. You might be elderly. It doesn't spare a particular demographic.

**A.W.:** During your testimony at the housing forum, you said, "One thing we can't deny is that stable (secure) housing aids in the prevention of new psychological and physical health conditions and the worsening of existing ones."

**S.L.:** What we find is that if you don't have stable housing, it impacts the adult, it impacts the child, and we can only hypothesize how it impacts people in the long term. The literature



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**SHEA LOTT,**  
OHSU CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

on this topic is pretty scant.

Housing is something that we need in order to be healthy. Stable housing is one thing that most people usually don't even think about on a daily basis. We all know that chronic stress leads to physiological changes in the body, hypertension and diseases like diabetes given the kind of food that individuals have to eat when they can't prepare healthy foods. This is the person who is single. We're not even talking about what unstable housing means for a family and children who are moving from place to place – and potentially not being able to be in the school they've been attending.

**A.W.:** One thing you said during the forum is that "we fall into chaos" when we've been evicted or have to worry about how stable our housing is. What does that mean? What does chaos look like in these situations?

**S.L.:** Not being able to provide shelter for your kid causes internal chaos. So you may end up feeling guilty. You may have self-defeating thoughts, which, if you've already suffered from depression in the past, doesn't put you in a good place. If you've been evicted, you end up trying to find a new place to live, so you may have to take time off work. If you are able to do that, that's fine. But if you can't, because you're an hourly worker, it means your income will decrease. You may lose your job. That means when it is time to put money on the table for a new rental agreement, you may not have what you need because you've been out searching for new housing. Some of the studies indicate that if someone has been forcibly evicted, they are 11 percent to 15 percent more likely to be unemployed. That's the kind of chaos that can result.

**A.W.:** Having your life destabilize like that is an example of how poverty is caused and can become cyclical.

**S.L.:** Exactly. It's a snowball effect.

**A.W.:** How do you define trauma in the context of talking about housing instability?

**S.L.:** When the health and psychological well-being of a person is in jeopardy, it causes stress and trauma. Some of the ways people adjust to stress is that they avoid similar situations. Sometimes they have difficulty sleeping. When we don't have stable housing, it means that you're probably not getting adequate rest. You experience all of these other mood changes – irritability, depression, difficulty with eating, and those kinds of things. Your livelihood has been threatened. When we look at the trauma aspect of it, it has been shown that individuals who have been evicted forcibly tend to have residual impacts up to two years later.

**A.W.:** During the housing forum, you said, "The reality is that the impact of no-cause evictions on families is multi-systemic and devastating. How so?"

**S.L.:** We can only infer what the health implications could be because everyone is different and the literature is still new. We have the potential for individuals looking for housing not going to doctor's appointments, not being able to afford medications for sometimes severe health conditions, and sometimes severe psychological conditions. The literature is saying that individuals who have been forcibly evicted tend to be punitive in their parental style toward children. That struck me. That's a trauma response.

They have this hyper-vigilance. They have an inability to be comfortable. They're always on guard. They're afraid of getting evicted again. It affects the health of the children. It decreases (a person's) support network. Then we rely on ourselves, which oftentimes isn't enough. It could cause a person to lose their job.

**A.W.:** The sheer number of people affected by

no-cause evictions and the housing crisis in Portland makes me think that this could negatively affect being able to form neighborhoods and larger communities.

**S.L.:** I agree. If you have been evicted, the likelihood of walking on eggshells is high. You're not going to get comfortable in a neighborhood. You're not going to put roots down. You're not going to invest in the community.

**A.W.:** What sort of treatment do you provide? What do people need to heal from this sort of trauma?

**S.L.:** The treatment is the same as what we would do for depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. But what is unique about these cases is that sometimes they come in crisis. That means you have to go into containment mode. I ask; what can I do to alleviate your immediate concerns? If (a client is) having difficulties finding a place to live, we might spend time in session trying to connect them with resources in the community that can get them housing for the night or a few days. It's case management versus a true therapeutic, psychological therapy.

**A.W.:** In these situations, people often want to blame themselves, saying something like, "I don't make enough to pay the rent," rather than landlords who might charge more than they should. Why do you think that is?

**S.L.:** It's a classic human response. What we're just trying to do as humans, as something happens to us out of the norm, is that we look for answers. If we can't find an answer externally, we internalize whatever has happened to us. People will say, "I should have taken the extra precautions," "I should have saved money," "I

shouldn't have moved here in the first place." Those kinds of thoughts are the ones where we can spiral out of control.

We hope for the future. We go into a situation where we sign the lease hoping for future funds. It's hard not to say, "Well, I should not have tried to get this property. I should not have signed the lease. I should have gone somewhere else where the rent was lower."

**A.W.:** What sort of public policy can help with this?

**S.L.:** There need to be some checks and balances. The no-cause eviction process is basically unchecked evictions. If they can, just put a check on how it's being used, how the person is evicted and what the person is being evicted for. That warrants a level of consideration.

## EVICTION NOTICE

