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Attn: Gil Cedillo  
Housing Committee Chair  
Los Angeles City Council  
200 N. Spring Street, Room 460  
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Dear Councilmember Cedillo,

My name is Matthew Desmond, and I am a professor at Princeton University, specializing in public policy, law, housing insecurity, and inequality. I am the Principal Investigator for Princeton University's Eviction Lab, and my book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (2016), describes the myriad ways that eviction exacerbates poverty in greater detail. I am submitting this letter to share the results of my research in shorter form and to urge the Los Angeles City Council to take this research into account as they consider a motion to create a right to counsel for tenants facing eviction.

This letter draws largely from a report for the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and recent Eviction Lab findings. The central message of this correspondence is that eviction creates serious consequences for families, consequences that are not only caused by poverty but that also lock families more firmly and deeply into poverty. Residential instability often brings about other forms of instability—in families, schools, communities—compromising the life chances of adults and children. An effective way to decrease residential instability among poor families would be to lower the incidence of eviction, and research has shown legal representation is key to helping people avoid eviction and homelessness.

### **Eviction in America and Los Angeles**

An estimated 2.3 million people were evicted in 2016, many of them children. That amounts to 6,349 people evicted every day in America. To give a sense of the magnitude of the eviction crisis: the number of eviction cases in 2016 was roughly equal to the number of foreclosure starts in 2009. And the problem is even bigger than Eviction Lab data show; these data only include court processed, formal evictions, and we are not able to access every eviction record. Given the scope of this problem, and its consequences for communities, policy interventions like right to counsel are an important step toward improving outcomes for renting families. The Judicial Council reported 51,203 eviction filings in LA county and 10,816 in Orange County for FY 2015-16. These numbers represent a significant degree of residential instability in the LA metropolitan area.

### **Right to Counsel**

In some housing courts, 85 to 90 percent of landlords are represented by an attorney. According to research presented in the *Fordham Law Review*, “where landlord representation is high, the typical case pits a represented landlord against an unrepresented tenant. The demographics of the tenants reveal a vulnerable group of litigants, typically poor, often women, and disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities.” Right to Counsel programs have been shown to dramatically affect case outcomes, helping tenants remain in their homes. A 2017 report on the Sargent Shriver Civil Counsel Act, a

pilot program providing legal assistance to low income people in California, emphasized the program's effect on eviction cases in particular. With representation, tenants were able to successfully settle cases almost twice as often as those without (67 percent compared to 34 percent); further, "while all Shriver clients received eviction notices, only 6% were ultimately evicted." Likewise, a *Harvard Law Review* study found that two-thirds of tenants given access to legal representation were able to remain in their homes after receiving an eviction notice, as compared to only one-third of unrepresented tenants.

Right to counsel programs are effective; and helping tenants stay in their homes benefits both individuals and communities. Although the consequences of eviction are many and multidimensional, this remainder of this letter focuses on eviction's consequences for employment, physical health, mental health, material hardship, and neighborhood disadvantage to emphasize the importance of reducing eviction rates for the broader welfare of Los Angeles.

### **Employment**

Many people think that job loss leads to eviction, but eviction can also lead to job loss. An eviction not only can consume renters' time, causing them to miss work, but it also can consume their thoughts and cause them to make mistakes on the job, and also result in their relocating farther away from their worksite, increasing their likelihood of tardiness and absenteeism. Results from the Milwaukee Area Renters Study found that workers who involuntarily lost their housing were roughly 20 percent more likely subsequently lose their jobs, compared to similar workers who did not. These results imply that initiatives promoting housing stability would promote employment stability.

### **Physical Health**

Involuntary housing displacement is linked to substandard housing conditions. One explanation for why some poor families live in substandard housing conditions—which among other things harms children's health—is that they are compelled to do so in the aftermath of an eviction. The *American Journal of Public Health* recently called inadequate housing "a public health crisis." A significant body of research has linked poor housing conditions to a wide array of health problems, from asthma, lead poisoning, and respiratory complications to developmental delays, heart disease, severe skin diseases, and neurological disorders. These facts are not lost on low-income families. A survey of families on the list for rent assistance found that almost half believed their children's health had suffered on account of the expense or quality of their apartments.

### **Mental Health**

Eviction is also negatively associated with mental health. Drawing on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study—a national, longitudinal survey that follows a birth cohort of about 4,900 new parents and their children living in 20 large cities—one study found that the year following an eviction, mothers were 20 percent more likely to report depression than their peers. Moreover, at least two years after their eviction, mothers still experienced significantly higher rates of depression than their peers.

The mental health consequences of what might seem like run-of-the-mill evictions can be fatal. A 2015 study in the *American Journal of Public Health* examined nearly 1,000 suicides in which eviction or foreclosure were key causal stressors leading to untimely deaths. Most of those deaths occurred

before the home was actually lost but occurred within two weeks of a court proceeding related to the foreclosure of eviction. Eviction- or foreclosure-related suicides accounted for 10 to 16 percent of all financial-related suicides recorded in a national database between 2005 and 2010.

### **Material Hardship**

The Fragile Families study also documented a large and robust relationship between a recent eviction and increased material hardship, defined as the inability to meet basic food, clothing, and medical needs. Mothers who experienced an eviction in the last year report around one standard deviation higher rates of material hardship than mothers who were matched along many other characteristics but had not experienced eviction. As with depression, mothers' material hardship may also be affected in the long-term, as significant differences were detected at least two years after the eviction. If material hardship is a measure of the lived experience of scarcity—assessing, say, hunger or sickness because food or medical care was financially out of reach—then these findings suggest that eviction is a driver of poverty.

### **Neighborhood Disadvantage**

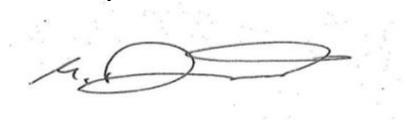
Experiencing an eviction is associated with a significant increase in neighborhood poverty and crime rates, relative to voluntary moves. Families involuntarily displaced from their homes often end up in worse neighborhoods, neighborhoods that diminish children's life chances. An eviction judgment makes it difficult to secure decent housing in a safe neighborhood, as many landlords reject anyone with a recent eviction, even if they do not know why the eviction occurred.

On an aggregate level, eviction may contribute to neighborhood crime and violence. Preliminary unpublished findings from Milwaukee, Boston, and Chicago show that neighborhoods with higher eviction rates have higher violent crime rates the following year, even controlling for the previous year's violent crime rate. In these ways, the pains of eviction are felt by more than the individuals who lose their homes. These consequences are borne by entire communities, and they tend to play out along unequal race and gender lines.

### **Conclusion**

Forced moves are both prevalent and consequential. This letter has covered some of the consequences of eviction for families, especially mothers and children. I encourage the Council to take these consequences into account as it considers motions on a Right to Counsel and other measures that protect renting families. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,



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