

A Texas bill targeting squatters would also hurt renters, leaving some homeless | Opinion

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Texas legislators [wanting to get tough on squatters](#) may, in the process, negatively impact some of the millions of legitimate renters in the Lone Star State.

More than 11 million Texans are renters. Renters and their families comprise more than 37% of the population. In 2023, approximately 400,000 families, or 3.5% of Texas renters, faced eviction.

According to [the Eviction Lab at Princeton University](#), there are approximately 291,290 renter households in Travis County. Of those, [approximately 13,384](#), or 4.6%, were the subject of an eviction filing in the last year. Similar Texas statistics illustrate possible renter peril statewide.

Texas rules require that an eviction hearing or trial be held in as little as six days after the tenant is served with a petition. Two bills making their way through the Texas Legislature would cut that time *to just four days* in an expedited process and allow a landlord to ask a judge to award back rent without evidence of the debt.

Proponents of [House Bill 32](#) and its companion bill, [SB 38](#), claim the bills target squatters. The Texas Apartment Association, a trade association of the rental housing industry, maintains the bill would close loopholes exploited by squatters and make removing them easier and less expensive.

But squatters are not tenants. [They are trespassers](#) — people who occupy dwellings without permission of the owner. The number of Texas squatters is unknown, but according to the National Rental Home Council, in 2024 there were [just 475 in the Dallas-Fort-Worth area](#), or less than 0.1% of occupants in rental housing.

Yet the so-called anti-squatters bill would also apply to the 99.9% of people in rental housing who occupy their homes by virtue of a written or oral lease. It would almost certainly increase evictions across the state, cause housing instability and negatively impact tenants' physical and mental health.

Current Texas law already provides a fast track for landlords, requiring a tenant to appear before a judge more quickly than in any other type of civil matter. Typical response time in justice courts is 14 days. The law already gives tenants only six to 10 days to respond after being served with the petition, enabling a judge to quickly determine who is entitled to the premises and how much money, if any, a tenant may owe.

Reducing response time to four days means a tenant served with eviction papers on a Thursday night would have to respond in writing to the court by the following Monday.

Even when alternative housing can be found, tenants who are unable to respond in time are likely to find that the court has entered a judgment for back rent that is just like any other court judgment to collect a debt.

We understand Texas landlords face [a growing problem with squatters](#), and we believe the Texas Legislature should explore all available options. Any relief should be targeted to address the harm caused by the 0.1% of occupants of rental housing characterized as squatters. The Legislature could easily limit the bills' expedited process to squatters and even provide more stringent criminal penalties.

Regardless of what course the Legislature chooses, it should not come at the expense of the due process rights of 11 million Texas tenants by giving them only four days to respond to an eviction suit.

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