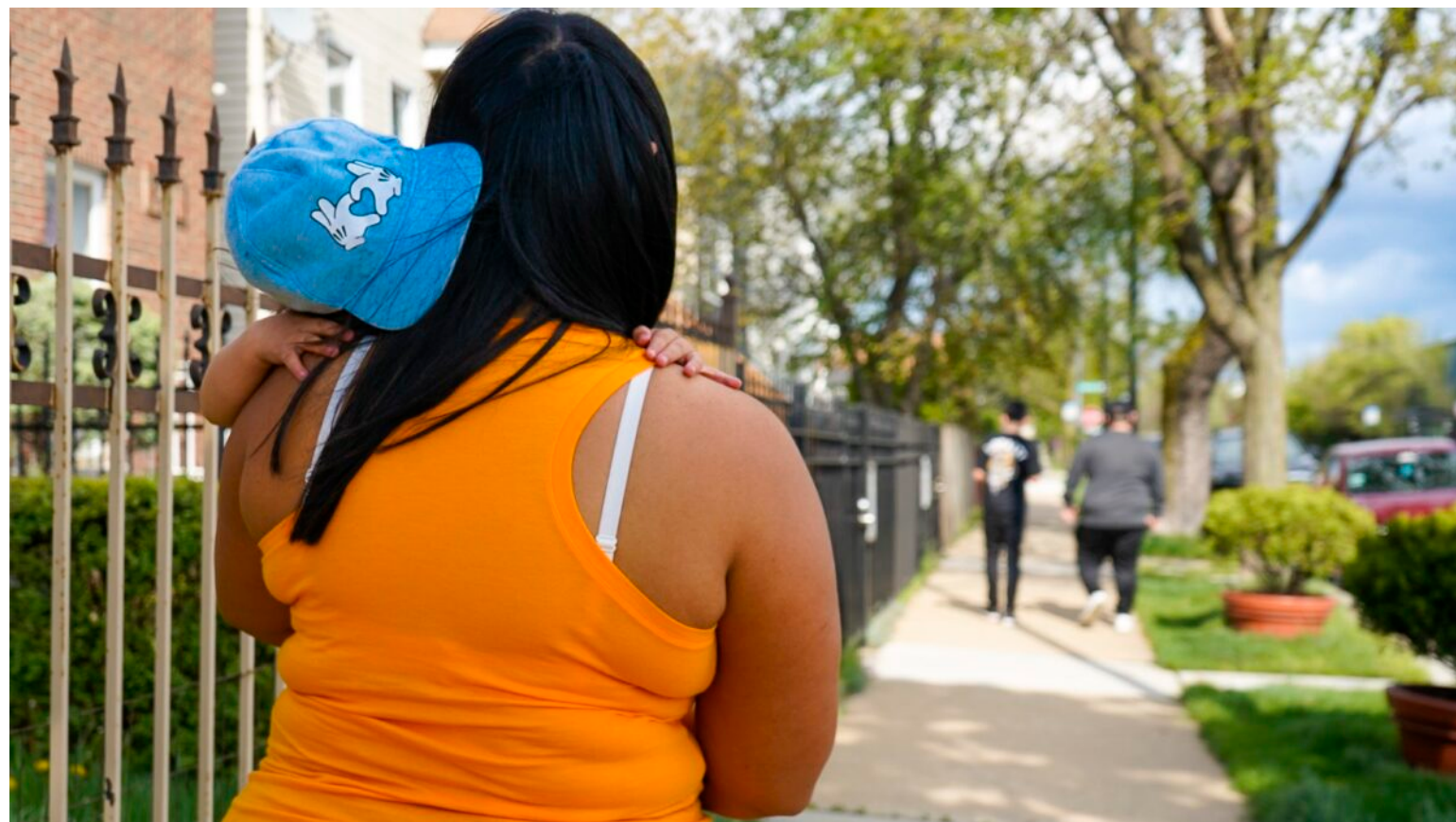


# 'Everyone Is Mad at the Wrong People': Black Organizers Call for Focus and Nuance in the Affordable Housing Blame Game

*Amidst Chicago's migrant humanitarian crisis, organizers and housing justice advocates point our focus to the larger problem of affordable housing for all.*

by **Wendy Wei** and **Leslie Hurtado**

April 29, 2024



Wendy Benitez and her daughter walk down the sidewalk. (Photos: Diego Garcia)

**W**hile anti-migrant sentiments have been expressed by many Chicagoans of different backgrounds, much media focus has been on the Black community's historical tension with Latinx communities. However, lifelong Black housing advocates say that the energy spent on anti-migrant protests could be more productively used if it was channeled toward addressing the root causes of housing instability in the city.

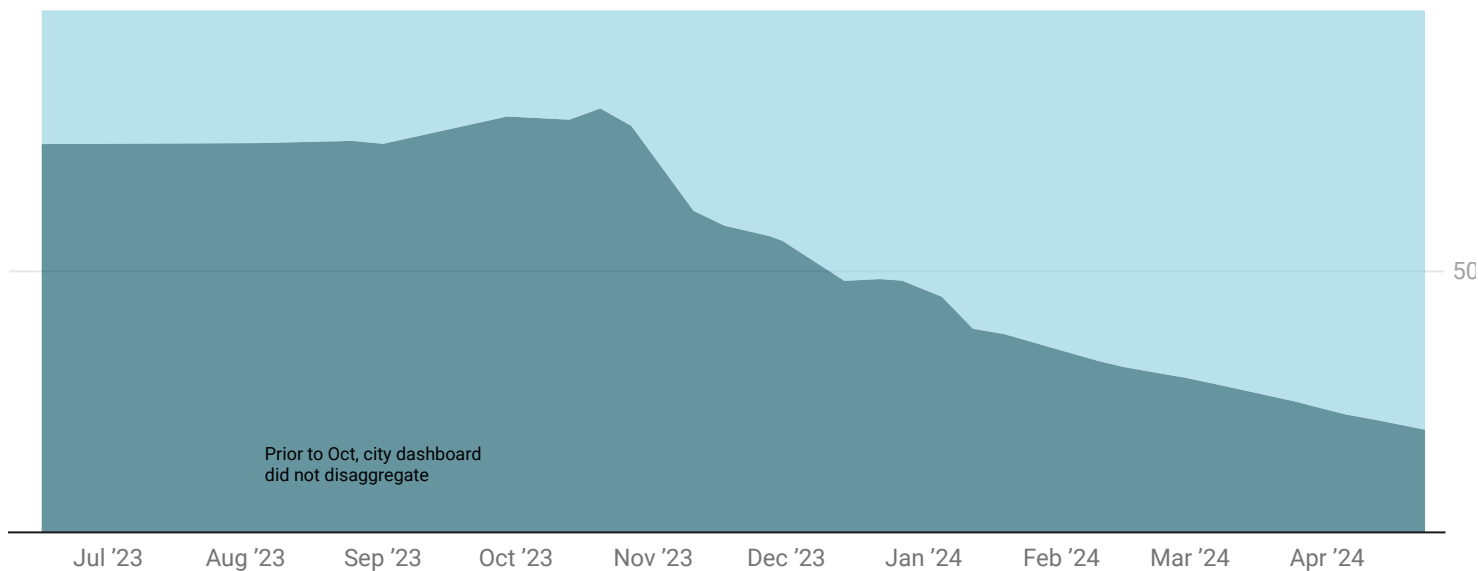
Since the first bus sent by Texas governor Greg Abbott arrived in August 2022, residents have vented their frustrations, including shouting matches at town halls, arguments in online forums, and a protest that ended with the physical assault of an alderwoman. The focus of ire is the city's allocation of over \$310 million, a mix of county, state, and federal funds, to support approximately 40,000 asylum-seekers, of which 8,695 are staying at city-run shelters.

Yet the vast majority of new arrivals from Texas are now living independently. As more new arrivals leave the shelter system, they are beginning to confront the severe deficits in Chicago's affordable housing market and myriad eviction practices—challenges that predate their arrival by decades and have plagued the Black community as well.

## Since December 2023, the majority of asylum seekers were not housed in city-run shelters



Resettled, reunited or unaccounted Shelter or waiting



Data prior to April 23, 2024 is pulled from internet archives of the Dashboard using Wayback Machine.

Chart: Wendy Wei • Source: [New Arrivals Situational Awareness Dashboard](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

The *Weekly* spoke with people experiencing housing insecurity, including Black residents and Black and Latinx asylum seekers who face similar barriers to permanent housing in Chicago and systemic policies that favor the interests of landlords over tenants across the board.



### Federal problems need federal solutions

The majority of arrivals are from Latin America, and were bussed or flown in from Texas under Operation Lone Star, which started in March 2021. Abbott maintains that his motivation for sending migrants to sanctuary cities is to protest the toll of President Joe Biden's federal policies on the US-Mexico border.

As of January 2024, Texas has spent **\$148 million** bussing and flying over 100,000 asylum-seekers to predominantly Democratic cities.

► Note: Why might we use the term "asylum-seeker" instead of migrant?

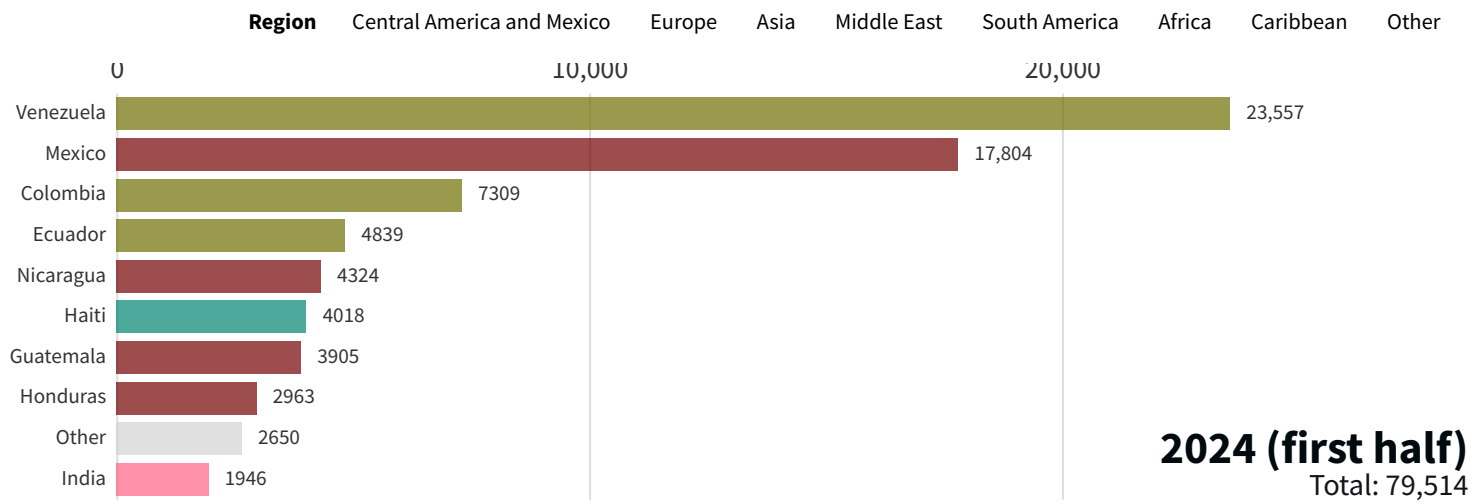
Don Washington, the executive director of the Chicago Housing Initiative Coalition, said that the number of asylum seekers is a federally determined issue and so should be solved by the federal government, not by city governments like Chicago.

Washington pointed to the direct federal government assistance available to certain groups of migrants, such as Ukrainian refugees.

From 2022 to date, Chicago has absorbed more than 30,000 Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Washington says Ukrainians are just one of many nationalities who have been integrated without causing a citywide financial crisis or social upheaval.

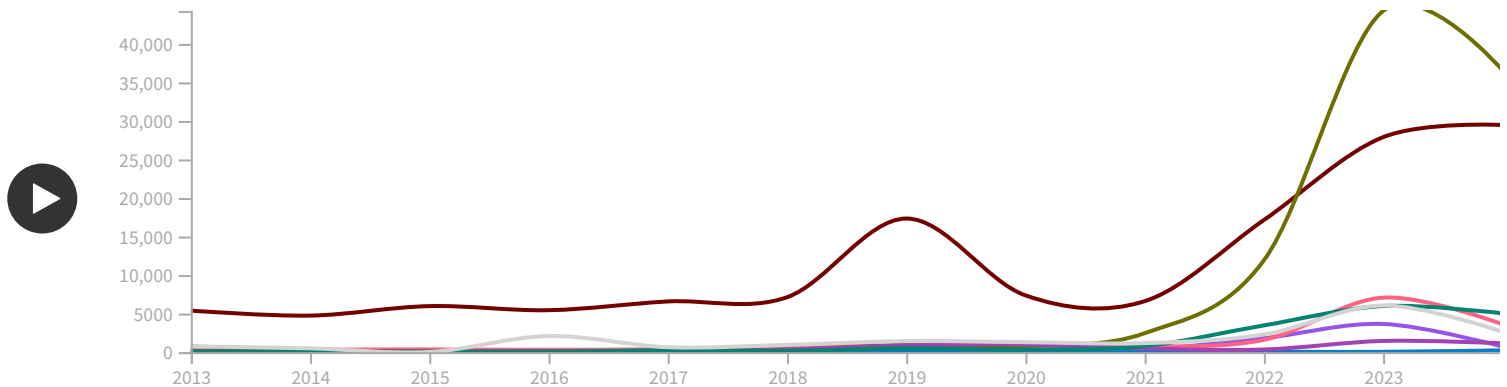
"We're still moving Afghans, Ethiopians, Sudanese, Somalis," he said. "We're still absorbing them and no one's saying boo about it. They're Black and Brown folks."

He added that it is the different levels of federal support to different nationalities that is the root cause of the disparities and tensions.



### More migrants arriving in Chicago from Asia, Caribbean, Africa, Europe

In fiscal year 2023, a growing number of new cases filed in Chicago immigration courts were by migrants from regions outside Latin America, with notable increases from Russia, Senegal, and Mauritania.



Source: Syracuse University Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse • Created by: Wendy Wei  
The "other" category includes individuals from countries that were not in the top ten origin countries, including individuals from North America, Oceania, former countries, and those who are stateless, and those with unknown nationalities. This data does not include Ukrainians who arrive through the Uniting Ukraine program.

A Flourish bar chart race

The federal system privileges asylum-seekers of certain nationalities over others. Uniting for Ukraine, for example, is a federal program that allows **an unlimited number** of Ukrainians to enter the US as long as they are sponsored by Americans. The federal government also created a humanitarian sponsorship program for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans in early 2023, though the government caps the number of approvals at 30,000 a month for these countries.

Ukrainians with American sponsors are given the right to work as soon as they set foot on U.S. soil, without having to go through the lengthy process of applying for a permit, and the first wave of Ukrainians were eligible for refugee resettlement benefits such as food stamps. Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and

Venezuelans, who also arrive under a sponsor, have to apply for a work permit.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, 236,000 cases have been approved under Uniting for Ukraine, and 350,000 Ukrainians have arrived in addition to that program.

Even within the refugee resettlement benefits program for some groups, there are differences.



Rose Michelle Samedi, a migrant from Haiti, is seen at Instituto del Progreso Latino, where she is taking a computer class. (Photo: Max Herman)

Rose Michelle Samedi is a Haitian migrant and single mother living in Chicago with her three-year-old daughter. After walking to Mexico from Chile, Samedi and her daughter ended up at the Texas border. In Texas, a Catholic organization offered to pay for their flights to Chicago, where a distant relative said they could stay with his family. Samedi and her daughter arrived in Chicago on August 22, 2022, but was never able to reach her relative. They spent two weeks sleeping at O'Hare International Airport's receiving center until her daughter became sick and they were moved to the Piotrowski Park shelter in Little Village.

“It’s like I forgot everything I’d learned,” said Samedi, who arrived not speaking much English or Spanish. “I [couldn’t] even use my cell phone to find a map or directions. My Spanish was minimal compared to now. And at this shelter I was the only Haitian, my daughter too.”

As a Haitian individual who was granted entry to the U.S., Samedi **qualifies for additional assistance** such as Medicaid, food stamps, and cash assistance through the Office of Refugee Resettlement. These benefits are only extended to Cubans and Haitians.

Samedi found work as a school janitor, and supports her daughter with a work permit that Florez helped her obtain.

Juan Flores, who is Samedi’s case manager and lead of the Southern Border Arrivals Program at the Instituto del Progreso Latino, said via text message that he witnesses how different levels of government support can breed resentment amongst immigrants towards his organization and toward asylum seekers of certain nationalities.



Rose Michelle Samedi, a migrant from Haiti, is seen at Instituto del Progreso Latino, where she is taking a computer class. (Photo: Max Herman)

“Some other participants have expressed frustration upon seeing Rose receive almost all the benefits because she was from Haiti, assuming she received priority treatment,” he said. “But the reason was that people from Haiti get more benefits for the situation in their country. Rose stands out as one of our more successful cases, and her success can partly be attributed to her origin and definitely her desire to overcome barriers.”

Of the almost 40,000 asylum-seekers that have arrived since June 2022, city-run shelters are currently housing 8,695 (less than 9,000 or about 22 percent). The bulk of government spending has gone towards staffing and running the shelters, to the tune of \$310.3 million, with \$210.7 million going towards Favorite Healthcare Staffing, Inc., a private company.

## Since Nov 2022, 46% of Chicago's \$310 mil migrant response budget has been federally funded



The City's budget for the migrant response comes from four sources - the City Corporate Fund, State Asylum Seeker Grants, FEMA Asylum Seeker Grants, and the American Rescue Plan Act (specifically from the Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund). Both FEMA and ARPA are federally funded programs.

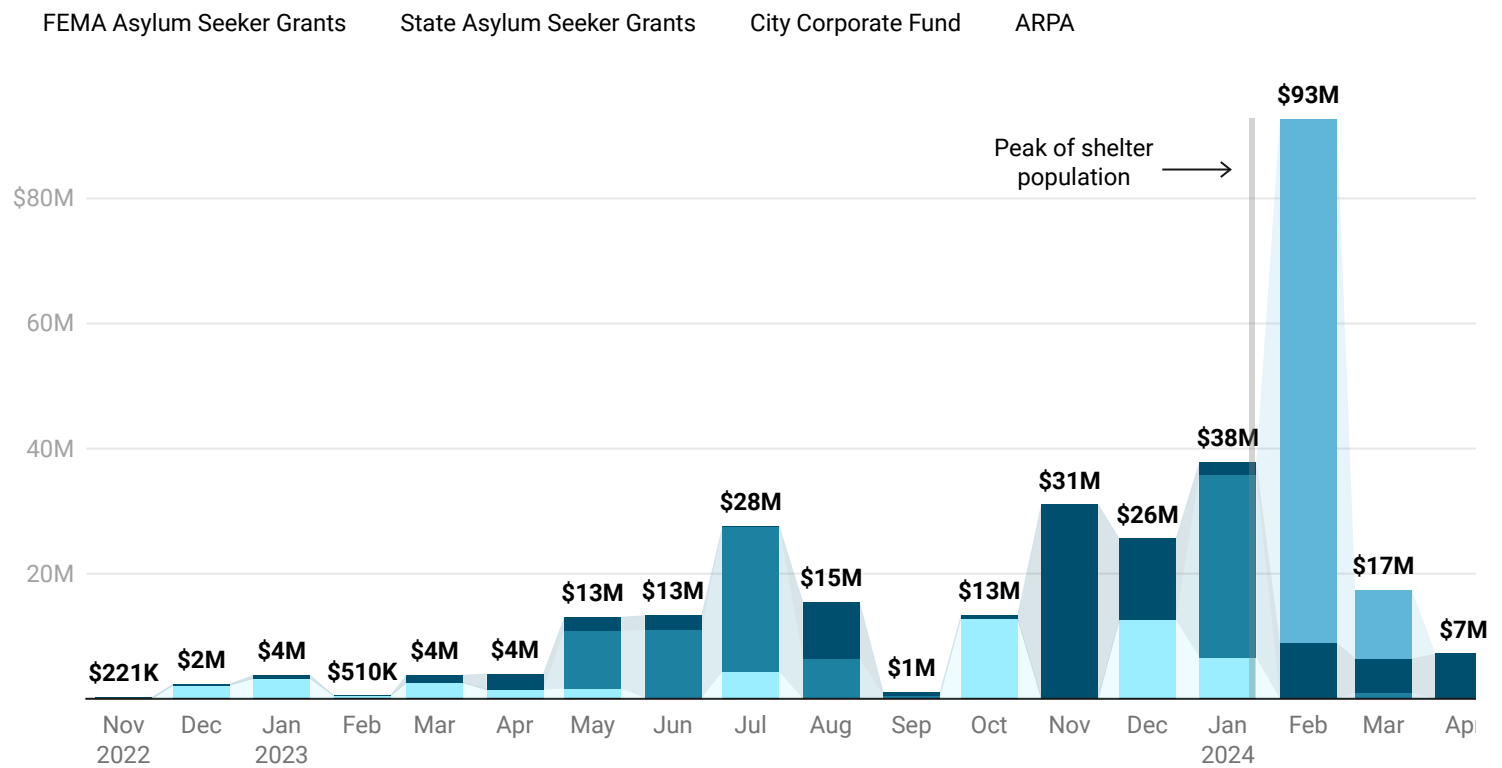


Chart: Wendy Wei • Source: [City of Chicago Department of Procurement Services](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Washington said that the money and resources allocated to operating shelters were not taken from money originally intended for the Black community. Rather, there was never enough money earmarked for Black Chicagoans in the first place.

“The problem is that...we don’t think that poor Black and Brown folks here who are [more established], we

don't think that those people are worthy of any additional resources," Washington said. He noted that the funded shelters for asylum-seekers are not providing them with long-term solutions, or even adequate short-term humane housing options.

"What's happening is that we're finding little pots of different money to warehouse—not house—warehouse these brown folks," he said.

Federal funding to Chicago for sheltering asylum-seekers has so far come through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and some allocations from the American Rescue Plan, the federal fund to help communities recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, for fiscal year 2024, Congress **cut** funding for the Shelter and Services program under FEMA **by 20 percent** to \$650 million. Biden signed that budget into law in March.



### **Finding and keeping affordable housing in Chicago**

In a small room in Englewood, Dominique, an immigrant from the Bahamas, shares a cramped space with her two children and a roommate. It's the only space available to her as she awaits approval for an apartment through **Family Focus**, an Illinois organization that provides migrant families with **rental assistance** using state funding.

Dominique moved to Chicago in 2021 to seek better opportunities. She arrived in June, just as the city was beginning to emerge from pandemic restrictions. She left the Caribbean during a difficult time, as the pandemic impacted jobs and wages. She was able to find someone to rent a room to her through a community Facebook group.

As more migrants have to find their own housing, they often face hurdles like **no-cause evictions**, discrimination based on race or income status and other **housing barriers** that have existed in Chicago for decades.

Dominique faced exploitation from a landlord who encouraged her to complete a housing application, even though the landlord knew that Dominique didn't have the required documents. She paid a \$75 fee only to have her application denied.



“I told [the landlord] I didn’t have it from the beginning,” she said. “[The landlord] just wanted that money for the application. That’s not nice.”

Rental application fees in Chicago can greatly impact migrants in the housing process. **Nonrefundable fees**, which can range from \$25 to more than \$350, may be required even when the application is denied. A *Sun-Times* **report** found that some landlords accept more applications than there are vacancies, collecting fees from each applicant without a real prospect of offering housing.

Application and move-in fees can discourage migrants from pursuing stable housing due to financial constraints and uncertainty. Such practices add extra hurdles for migrants (and all potential renters) who are seeking housing in an already challenging environment.

Wendy Benitez, a Venezuelan migrant, came to Chicago with her three children in May 2023 to be with her husband, who had already been in a shelter for nine months. Benitez and her children, aged fifteen, thirteen, and two, traveled from Venezuela to Brownsville, Texas. They were bussed to Chicago, and after a short stay in a Pilsen shelter, moved into an apartment with rental assistance covering the first six months.



(Photos: Diego Garcia)

In December 2023, the family started paying rent themselves. Benitez faced challenges searching for housing

because some landlords did not want to rent to her family due to her small children, with one landlord explicitly stating he preferred renting to adults only.

The **Fair Housing Act** has protections against lease clauses that discriminate based on familial status, including families with children under eighteen. This means landlords cannot refuse to rent to families with children or impose restrictions on the number of children in a unit. But they often discriminate anyway, and rarely face consequences for doing so.

Because there is no rent control in Chicago, landlords can also increase rent as long as they provide advanced notice.

“We’ve witnessed numerous families struggling to afford rent or bills post-program, and some landlords exploit the situation by raising rents, knowing the program will cover it, such as charging \$1,800 for a one-bedroom apartment,” Florez said.

Additionally, migrants face unique challenges that increase their vulnerability to abusive practices by landlords. Landlords often **take advantage** of migrants’ fear of involving authorities due to the risk of deportation or retaliation. Migrants with uncertain or unauthorized immigration statuses are **hesitant to report** abusive landlords, fearing repercussions.

Language barriers can be a significant obstacle for migrants during their housing search. When migrants only speak lesser-known languages (like Samedi, whose first language is Haitian Creole), it’s harder to understand rental agreements, communicate with landlords, and navigate legal processes and resources, leaving them at a higher risk of discrimination and abuse by landlords.

Michelle Gilbert, the legal and policy director at the Law Center for Better Housing (LCBH), draws upon anecdotal evidence from her decades-long career as a housing lawyer and said she believes that some landlords may take more egregiously illegal actions in evicting undocumented tenants than they would against U.S. citizens. Gilbert’s work at LCBH includes providing free legal aid to low-income renters.

“I hear about these cases, especially where people have little kids, and then the landlord turns the heat off in the middle of the winter,” she said. “I’m not talking about, the heater’s broken and they can’t fix it right away. I’m talking about turning the heat off, they turn the water off, so that they are making the place uninhabitable.”

Benitez reported that a migrant from her shelter said a landlord had hit him, possibly due to unpaid rent, and

tried to evict him.

“There’s a way that lawyers use the word [‘evicted’] and then there’s a way that we kind of use the word commonly,” she said.

Gilbert said that in the context of the law, the term “eviction” describes the [legal process](#) that must be followed in removing a non-paying resident from a rental unit, from the first eviction notice, to eviction court paperwork to the actual court date, and potentially an eviction order that can be enforced by the Sheriff’s Office.

When the term “eviction” is applied to shelters putting out migrants landlords locking out tenants, it doesn’t carry the same legal implications, but reflects unique housing challenges that undocumented immigrants face. It is common for evictions affecting undocumented immigrants to be informal affairs that do not go through the legal process, according [to researchers at the Eviction Lab](#). Because these informal or illegal evictions are not reflected in court records, it is difficult to track the how widespread they are.

What is widely documented, however, is that low-income Black renters, especially Black women, face a disproportionate share of evictions.

According to analysis by [American Civil Liberties Union of nation-wide eviction data from 2012-2016](#), landlords filed evictions against Black renters at nearly twice the rate of white renters. due to discriminatory practices where landlords give more leniency to white tenants but are less flexible with Black families.

“We know the rationale that people think,” Gilbert said. “A landlord is more likely to give a white family a longer chance, a payment agreement, and not extend the same sort of deal to Black women.”

Shay Jones, is currently staying at Sarah’s Circle, a women’s shelter in Uptown after being evicted from Edwin Berry Manor Apartments, an affordable senior rental property in Woodlawn. Jones, a Black American woman, said she believes her eviction was a retaliatory action after she began photographing and raising concerns over poor property conditions.

“They put me out February 21 in the rain and so I had no place to go,” she said. “I just walked around the front of the building and put my arms in the air and just started praying.”

Despite having the legal right to contest the eviction and seek help, Jones struggled to find support. “It’s really exhausting,” she said. “I went to so many agencies and everybody sends you everywhere else but nobody really helped.”



## ‘We have two crises - a migrant crisis and a housing crisis’

According to [DePaul’s Institute for Housing Studies](#), in 2021, before the first bus arrived from Texas, the city was already short 120,000 affordable housing units to accommodate Chicago’s low-income renter households.

That same year, the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services [counted 3,000 people](#) in shelters, and 702 sheltering on the street (though this number could be as high as 1,500). 73 percent of this population was Black.

Street homelessness is only part of the picture. In 2021, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless estimated that 68,440 people were experiencing homelessness in Chicago, with most temporarily staying with others, or “doubling up.” In their [report](#), Black Chicagoans made up more than half of the total population experiencing homelessness.

“There has been an egregious disrespect from the city [and] the state for not ...meeting the needs of low income Black folks,” said Consuela Hendricks, co-founder of People Matter, an interracial advocacy organization that frequently partners with Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) and Lugenia Burns Hope Center.

Hendricks says that frustrations have been brewing since the 2008 Great Recession, and were worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Black Chicagoans faced severe disparities. Despite constituting about 30 percent of the city's population, they accounted for 60 percent of its COVID-19 fatalities and a quarter of Illinois’ confirmed cases.

“Because poor people were under a lot of stress and pressure, when they see somebody getting a resource, and they know they've been denied some space, they blame those folks and they blame the people who are providing them with those resources. And it becomes a racial tension,” Washington said. “So that's a misunderstanding of the real situation. We have two crises. A migrant crisis and a housing [crisis].”

Washington and other Black organizers like Hendricks want communities to focus on the systemic root causes of both crises: housing shortages, widespread evictions, and housing discrimination, for example.

“Both Black and brown people who are in these situations right now are all suffering,” Hendricks said. “It’s so important to redirect our hatred or anger towards people who actually are causing us pain versus towards

people who have nothing to do with our suffering.”

She added that despite media portrayals of anti-migrant sentiments among Black Chicagoans, there are Black-led organizations like the Chicago Housing Initiative Coalition doing the long-term work behind the scenes of listening and acknowledging different community needs - material and emotional. "Divisiveness affirms things in people, but I think that solidarity can bring more hope out of people," Hendricks said, "because there is hope out there."

Building a broader coalition also has practical benefits. Both Hendricks and Washington said there are differences in power between different groups, and including those with certain privileges in a coalition can make it stronger.

Movements "also have to include people who claim relationships...and those that reap benefits and do the impact," Washington said.



(Photos: Diego Garcia)

Jones also finds strength in numbers. Since her eviction, Jones has been active in fighting to end no-fault evictions. She was recently in Springfield rallying for House Bill 5432, which would ban crime-free housing ordinances in Illinois. These ordinances require landlords to evict tenants for even minor contact with law

enforcement, including those experiencing domestic violence. She was alone in speaking up against the code violations in her former building, but today Jones finds power in working as part of a chorus calling for change.

“I have no problem alone, but being with other people, oh yeah it was great,” Jones said. “Squeaky wheel gets the grease, and if you get squeakers, you can get some stuff done.”



*Wendy Wei is the immigration editor at the Weekly. Leslie Hurtado is a contributing writer for the Weekly and has written for several newsrooms including WBEZ, WTTW, Telemundo, and City Bureau covering politics and immigration.*



*This article is part of the Migrant Crisis Reporting Project, made possible by a grant from Healing Illinois, an initiative of the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Field Foundation of Illinois that seeks to advance racial healing through storytelling and community collaborations.*

*The project is in response to the ongoing migrant crisis, which has seen over 37,000 migrants bussed or flown to Chicago since August 2022.*

*Managed by Public Narrative, this project enlisted two local media outlets to produce impactful news coverage on the disparities and tensions within and among Chicago's diverse communities while maintaining editorial independence.*

