

# **#CancelRent And Eviction Blockades in Brooklyn: Black Queer Women and Femmes Fight for the Right to Housing**

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## **Abstract:**

This autoethnography is centered around the eviction defense of 1214 Dean Street in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. This research serves as a vessel to explore the growing calls for “Cancel Rent” as a response to the COVID pandemic and people losing forms of income and unemployment. This project highlights the amplification of these demands as a result of COVID as a call that has not integrated the history of housing for Black queer women and femmes. While unemployment and income instability is new for many, Black queer women and femmes have faced structural issues that have always limited housing options, which often leads to a situation like 1214 Dean St..

## **Methods:**

This autoethnography incorporates research from housing reports and homelessness reports to support the lived experiences, and to contextualize the span of housing issues for Black queer people. I also look at articles that talk about the “#CancelRent” movement housing movement. Of course, my own experiences from tenant organizing largely will mainly inform this autoethnography, as well as my work with 1214 Dean Street.



Dean St. tenants Venmo payment fund to support their move out.

### **1214 Dean Street. Eviction Blockade synopsis:**

The morning of July 7th, slumlord Gennaro Brooks- Church and Loretta Gendville The slumlords came with their family and entered rooms in the home where tenants of 1214 Dean st. stayed, demanding previous months rent and later attempting to illegally evict them. They cut off the tenants wifi, they paid for a Uhaul and removed their possessions from the home without their consent. The tenants reached out to Equality for Flatbush, a local grassroots community organization, to support them with eviction defense and mobilization. An hour or two later, there were dozens of people gathered on the sidewalk in front of their home, defending the tenants.

When I arrived to help with on the ground organizing, I didn't recognize the faces of any of the leaders that night except two, who I had met through mutual friends a few days prior. I later spoke to them, asking how they started to lead. They told me they saw the Instagram post and ran down here to protect the tenants. The led fiercely the first night. I couldn't express my gratitude for them, as regular concerned neighbors, but also as Black life long residents of NYC who told me "this could soon be me with my landlord". Later that night, two unknown men pulled up to the house in a car, and attempted to rush into the home. Luckily, the door was locked before they could try to enter. People created a chain without bodies in front of the door to stop the men from entering. After a small group of people followed the car down the block, we realized that they stopped to talk to someone in a familiar small black car, Loretta Gendville's car. The men later left, everyone was unharmed.



Gennaro Brooke- Church, slumlord, sitting on steps while tenants things are removed from the home without their consent.

For the next week, we organized shifts for people and stay in the front yard of the tenants. We stayed every day all day from Tuesday until Friday morning. People stayed in shifts and slept in the living room, as well as outside. There was a surplus of food and PPE. Many people just ordered food from local restaurants and it delivered to the home. People came with masks, gloves, toilet paper, folding chairs, and much more to donate to our efforts. Even after people who supported and tenants took what they wanted, there was a huge surplus to be donated and redistributed. Eventually, there was so much food that even local community fridges were full, and food had to be given away on the street to people and donated to other places, like a shelter that was nearby.

This eviction blockade is an example of the response to evictions of Black queer residents of the city. Because of the pandemic and the ruthlessness of the landlord during this time, people are mobilizing intensely to stop evictions and support residents. However, what we're seeing now is a new wave of people organizing solely around eviction defense because of COVID.

While this organizing is not completely new and necessary, there are some gaps that need to be acknowledged within the growing movement. The centering of the Black queer, Trans, Femme, Disabled and low-income experience should be mandatory for this movement because they are the people who have been and continue to be most heavily impacted by evictions. For insight, we can look at 1214 Dean St.. While 7 tenants lived in the home, at the time of the illegal eviction only 4 tenants remained. Within the next few days, only two tenants remained, who were both Black, queer, and women/ Femmes. They did not have the financial ability to move immediately, they did not have resources that could've helped them escape that living situation at that time. The living situation at firsthand is a result of structural and systematic limitations of living in NYC when you're Black, queer, and femme or a woman.

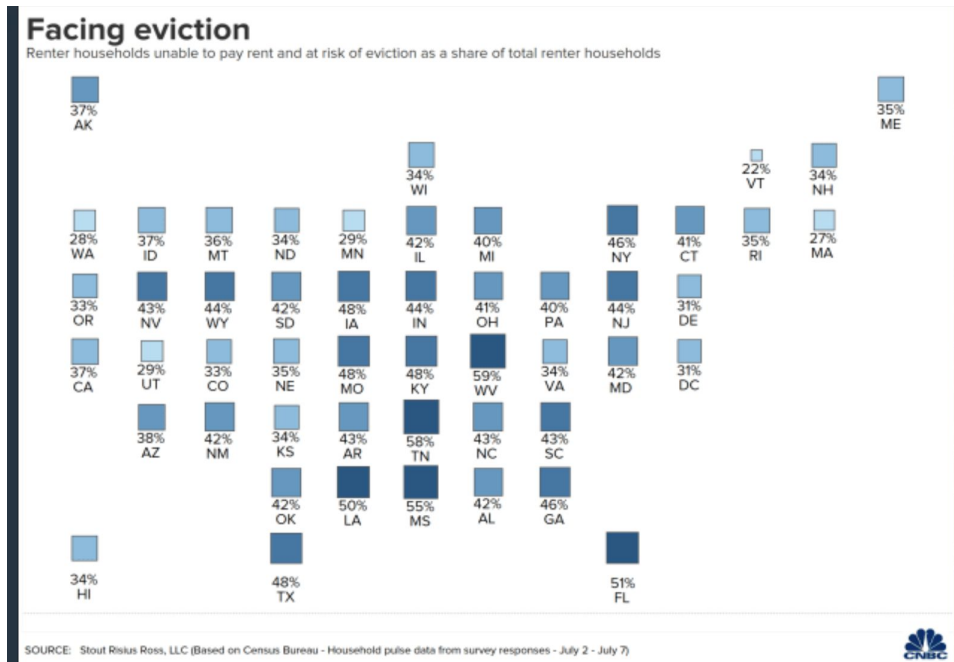
### **Cancel Rent:**

#CancelRent is a growing movement pressuring the government to stop rent payments from tenants to landlords. Since people have already stopped paying rent because they literally cannot pay, there have been massive rent strikes, both organized and unorganized. It only makes sense that people are not punished for not being able to afford rent after losing their jobs because a global pandemic broke out. However, what the people received was an eviction moratorium from Governor Cuomo and NY state chief administrative Judge Marks, which was originally until August 1st, but has now been extended to October. This moratorium has put a hold on the housing court, which means that landlords cannot start a legal eviction process for tenants; this all means that it should be completely illegal to evict tenants during the COVID pandemic. While this movement is calling for a change that would require legislative change, what the movement is really striving for is organizing and mobilizing in a "take the street" style. The bottom line for tenants and tenant organizers is not paying rent, period. This escalated approach is reflected in eviction defense responses, where people are refusing to allow harassment and eviction to go unnoticed. But as we know, this is a new movement that was jump started because of the pandemic. While people have incorporated the history of evictions and landlord harassment, because this movement started in a new, different place, the pandemic is centered versus housing issues of folks who are most impacted by landlord violence every day.

### **Data:**

As of May 1st, the unemployment rate in NYC was 18.1%, although it is probably higher, as the city doesn't recognize forms of employment outside of their official definition of unemployment. The chart beneath this text from the Gothamist shows the percentage of people who are unable to pay rent and risk eviction. In New York, 46% of people face that risk. In the "LGBT Youth Crisis" report from the Ali Forney Center, studies have shown that LGBT youth make up to 40% of the already homeless youth in NYC. The study also shows that LGBTQ street

youth experience greater levels of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking violence, trauma, HIV infection, mental health issues, and substance abuse than their heterosexual counterparts in the homeless youth population.



According to another study from the Willaims Institue “At the national level, on average, approximately 1 to 5 complaints per 100,000 protected adults are filed per year: 3 complaints of sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination are filed for every 100,000 LGBT adults each year; 5 complaints of race discrimination are filed for every 100,000 adults of color; and 1 complaint of sex discrimination filed for every 100,000 women. Additionally “In 16 states (all states except DC and Maryland), sexual orientation and gender identity complaints were filed at a slightly higher rate than sex discrimination complaints”. This data helps us understand the history of housing discrimination, which provides insight into homelessness and housing. Housing discrimination is a systematic problem that withholds Black queer femmes from access and opportunities to find safe, stable housing.

This next section will focus on Crown Heights, particularly the zip code (11216) where 1214 Dean st. resides. The racial demographic of Crown Heights is: Black: 57%, Hispanic: 17% and White: 15%. 34.5% of households are nonfamily households. The average income of NYC is at about \$60,000. In the 11216 zip code, about 49% of people make less than \$60,000. The average rent of a Brooklyn apartment is \$2,951. Most landlords require you to make 40 times your rent, so at that rate, the income that must be made to rent an apartment at the average rent is \$118,040. In 11216, about 30% of people would be able to afford an apartment at that rate. This data supports our understanding of the financial inaccessibility to safe and stable housing options.

**Conclusion:**

This project is necessary because we obviously are still going through the pandemic despite the nonchalance from the government. We know that people will still be evicted, and we fear what will happen when the moratorium is lifted. The housing justice movement is vital at all times, but especially now. However, the movement will not be able to grow and efficiently serve its purpose if it is not centered around those who have faced the brunt of this violence for years. We need to expand the barriers of space and time to understand how to mobilize a unified movement that advocates for helping the most discriminated and underserved, because without it, it's a movement based in self-interest and not one that fights against what it claims to.

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