



## Housing Solutions Lab

Building and sharing knowledge to advance equitable local housing policy.

NYU  
Furman  
Center

# Local Housing Policy: Why It Matters

**Claudia Aiken, Director of New Research Partnerships**

**June 2023**

## Introduction

The Housing Solutions Lab at the NYU Furman Center is [dedicated to helping small and midsize cities](#) plan, launch, and evaluate local housing policies. This brief takes a closer look at empirical evidence to answer two questions: Why focus on housing, and can local housing policy really create meaningful change? First, we review the evidence that housing is fundamental to health, racial equity, and many other individual and societal outcomes. Second, we explore whether and how local policy levers can affect the supply and quality of housing as well as equitable access to it. In doing so, this brief aims to equip local stakeholders to take action to improve housing and housing outcomes, and to provide a starting point for future research to understand the efficacy of local housing interventions.

## Why Housing Matters

### A. Quality

Of all the aspects of housing that might matter for long-term health and well-being, housing quality may be the most intuitive. As early as the 1850s, poor conditions in U.S. tenements were linked with “sickness and premature mortality” and thought to contribute to “wretchedness, pauperism, and crime.”<sup>1</sup> Today, empirical research has substantiated many links between housing quality and physical health, especially for children, who spend more time indoors than adults and are closer to the floor.<sup>2</sup> We know that lead-based paint causes childhood lead poisoning, resulting in significantly worse academic outcomes and higher odds of juvenile delinquency, and incarceration and homelessness later in life.<sup>3</sup> Excess moisture attracts cockroaches, rodents, dust mites, and fungi, all of which increase the risk of and exacerbate asthma.<sup>4</sup> Other pathways between housing quality and health include overcrowding, which facilitates the spread of infectious disease;

1. New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP). 1847. *Fourth Annual Report*. New York: Leavitt, Trow, and Company. p.23. Cited in Alexander von Hoffman. 1998. “The Origins of American Housing Reform.” Working Paper W98-2. Harvard University Joint Center for Housing Studies. [https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/von\\_hoffman\\_w98-2.pdf](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/von_hoffman_w98-2.pdf)

2. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). *Exposure Factors Handbook: 2011 Edition*. National Center for Environmental Assessment, Washington, DC; EPA/600/R-09/052F.

3. Coulton, Claudia, Francisca García-Cobián Richter, Youngmin Cho, Jiho Park, and Robert Fischer. 2020. “Downstream Consequences of Childhood Lead Poisoning: A Longitudinal Study of Cleveland Children from Birth to Early Adulthood.” Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development.

4. Northridge, Jennifer, Olivia F. Ramirez, Jeanette A. Stingone, and Luz Claudio. 2010. “The Role of Housing Type and Housing Quality in Urban Children with Asthma.” *Journal of Urban Health* 82(2): 211-224.

noise exposure, which can produce cognitive impairments; structural deficiencies, which can lead to unintentional deaths and injuries; and exposure to prolonged heat or cold, which increases the risks of hypertension and child morbidity.<sup>5</sup>

Researchers have begun to prove connections between housing quality and the well-being of the broader community as well. Foreclosed properties, which are often in poor condition, appear to elevate crime rates in the surrounding block. The effects are especially dire in high-crime neighborhoods and when foreclosures are concentrated.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, Schwartz et al. find that investments in subsidized housing in New York City had substantial spillover effects, including raising the value of nearby properties and attracting additional investment. They theorize that these effects may occur because subsidized housing “often replaces a disamenity, such as an abandoned boarded-up building or littered vacant lot” or because “the new buildings are clean, new, and attractively designed.”<sup>7</sup> A team of researchers in Philadelphia found that housing repair grants to low-income homeowners were associated with reduced neighborhood crime. The more homes were repaired on a given block, the further crime rates fell.<sup>8</sup>

Today, empirical research has substantiated many links between housing quality and physical health, especially for children, who spend more time indoors than adults and are closer to the floor.

Zooming out even further, housing quality—good insulation and energy-efficient systems—affects energy use, climate-warming emissions, and thus our long-term well-being as a human species. Energy use in homes accounts for 19 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. These emissions are equivalent to that of the sixth-largest emitting country on Earth.<sup>9</sup> Housing quality can thus make a substantial difference in slowing the pace of climate change.

## B. Affordability

The affordable housing crisis affects every metropolitan area in the U.S. (the [Housing Needs Assessment Tool](#) can show you housing cost burdens in your community).<sup>10</sup> The toll that unaffordable housing can take on our well-being became glaringly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many households lost their income and reported taking on debt and cutting back on food, utilities, and educational expenses in the struggle to pay rent.<sup>11</sup> Empirical research shows that higher housing cost burdens do, in fact, contribute to food insecurity, failure to pay bills, and choosing to forgo medical care.<sup>12</sup> Physical health consequences

5. Weitzman, Michael, Ahmaren Baten, David G. Rosenthal, Risa Hoshino, Ellen Tohn, and David E. Jacobs. 2013. “Housing and Child Health.” *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care* 43(8):187-224; Ellen, Ingrid Gould, Kacie L. Dragan, and Sherry Glied. 2019. “Renovating Subsidized Housing: The Impact on Tenants’ Health.” *Health Affairs* 39(2): 224-232.

6. Ellen, Ingrid Gould, Johanna Laco, and Claudia Ayanna Sharygin. 2013. “Do Foreclosures Cause Crime?” *Journal of Urban Economics* 74 (March): 59-70.

7. Schwartz, Amy Ellen, Ingrid Gould Ellen, Michael H. Schill, and Ioan Voicu. 2005. “The External Effects of Place-Based Subsidized Housing.” Working Paper 05-02. New York: New York University Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. [https://furmancenter.org/files/publications/External\\_Effects\\_of\\_Place\\_Based\\_Subsidized\\_Housing\\_1.pdf](https://furmancenter.org/files/publications/External_Effects_of_Place_Based_Subsidized_Housing_1.pdf)

8. South, Eugenia C., John MacDonald, and Vincent Reina. 2021. “Association Between Structural Housing Repairs for Low-Income Homeowners and Neighborhood Crime.” *JAMA Network Open* 4(7): e2117067

9. Martín, Carlos. 2022. “Exploring Climate Change in U.S. Housing Policy.” *Housing Policy Debate* 32(1): 1.

10. National Low Income Housing Coalition. 2023. *The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Rental Homes*. <https://nlihc.org/gap>

11. Reina, Vincent, Claudia Aiken, and Sydney Goldstein. 2021. “The Need for Rental Assistance in Los Angeles City and County.” *Research Brief*. Philadelphia: Housing Initiative at Penn. [https://www.housinginitiative.org/uploads/1/3/2/9/132946414/hip\\_la\\_tenant\\_brief\\_final.pdf](https://www.housinginitiative.org/uploads/1/3/2/9/132946414/hip_la_tenant_brief_final.pdf)

12. Shamsuddin, Shomon, and Colin Campbell. 2022. “Housing Cost Burden, Material Hardship, and Well-Being.” *Housing Policy Debate* 32(3): 413-432.

are likely: people living in unaffordable housing, especially renters, have higher odds of hypertension and arthritis, not filling their prescriptions, and rating their own health as “poor.”<sup>13</sup> Prolonged exposure to unaffordable housing also negatively impacts mental health.<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, when we make housing affordable, the benefits are demonstrable. Among adults, receiving rental assistance has large and highly significant effects on housing quality, stability, autonomy, and affordability.<sup>15</sup> It is also associated with lower odds of psychological distress.<sup>16</sup> The benefits for children may be even larger.

The toll that unaffordable housing can take on our well-being became glaringly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many households lost their income and reported taking on debt and cutting back on food, utilities, and educational expenses in the struggle to pay rent.

Housing assistance is associated with better school achievement (test scores, grades, and attendance).<sup>17</sup> And parents receiving housing assistance invest more in their child’s enrichment, which leads to better cognitive achievement and overall health.<sup>18</sup>

Affordable housing is also good for communities. There is a severe shortage of affordable homes for low-income renters, who make up the workforce for many essential occupations, including home health aides, janitors, teachers, nurses, and food service workers.<sup>19</sup> Case studies show that such shortages harm local economies; increase economic and racial segregation; lengthen commutes, which increases traffic, emissions, and costs; and contribute to overcrowding, informality, and homelessness.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, the

development and rehabilitation of affordable housing creates short- and long-term job opportunities, generates local tax revenue, and can increase an employer’s ability to attract and retain employees.<sup>21</sup> And in neighborhoods facing gentrification, investments in affordable homes protect the community fabric, vitality, and diversity.<sup>22</sup>

13. Pollack, Craig Evan, Beth Ann Griffin, and Julia Lynch. 2010. “Housing Affordability and Health Among Homeowners and Renters.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 39(6): 515-521.

14. Baker, Emma, Laurence Lester, Kate Mason, and Rebecca Bentley. 2020. “Mental Health and Prolonged Exposure to Unaffordable Housing: A Longitudinal Analysis.” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 55: 715-721.

15. Schapiro, Rebecca, Kim Blankenship, Alana Rosenberg, and Danya Keene. 2022. “The Effects of Rental Assistance on Housing Stability, Quality, Autonomy, and Affordability.” *Housing Policy Debate* 32(3): 456-472.

16. Denary, Whitney, Andrew Fenelon, Penelope Schlesinger, Jonathan Purtle, Kim Blankenship, and Danya Keene. 2021. “Does Rental Assistance Improve Mental Health? Insights from a Longitudinal Cohort Study.” *Social Science and Medicine* 282: Article 114100.

17. Schwartz, Amy Ellen, Keren Mertens Horn, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Sarah Cordes. 2020. “Do Housing Vouchers Improve Academic Performance? Evidence from New York City.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 39(1): 131-158; Fenelon, Andrew, Michael Boudreaux, Natalie Slopen, and Sandra Newman. 2021. “The Benefits of Rental Assistance for Children’s Health and School Attendance in the United States.” *Demography* 58(4): 1171-1195.

18. Newman, Sandra, and C. Scott Holupka. 2023. “Effects of Assisted Housing on Children’s Healthy Development.” *Housing Policy Debate* 33(1): 306-330.

19. Aurand, Andrew, Dan Emmanuel, Emma Foley, Matt Clarke, Ikra Rafi, and Diane Yentel. 2023. *The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes*. Washington, D.C.: National Low Income Housing Coalition. [https://www.nlihc.org/sites/default/files/gap/Gap-Report\\_2023.pdf](https://www.nlihc.org/sites/default/files/gap/Gap-Report_2023.pdf)

20. McKenzie, Fiona Haslam, Rhonda Phillips, Steven Rowley, David Brereton, and Christina Birdsall-Jones. 2009. *Housing Market Dynamics in Resource Boom Towns*. Final Report no. 135. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2009-08/apo-nid18446.pdf>

21. Wardrip, Keith, Laura Williams, and Suzanne Hague. 2011. “The Role of Affordable Housing in Creating Jobs and Stimulating Local Economic Development: A Review of the Literature.” Washington, D.C.: Center for Housing Policy. <https://ebho.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Housing-and-Economic-Development-Report-2011.pdf>

22. Lawrence, Deliah D. 2002. “Community Development: Can Communities Effectively Fight Displacement Caused by Gentrification?” *Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development* 11(4): 357-373.

## C. Stability

There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating that housing instability harms households, especially children. Families living in poverty are prone to more frequent moves, and these moves are more likely to be involuntary and constrained, resulting in relocation to worse homes and neighborhoods.<sup>23</sup> Among adults, residential mobility has been shown to increase anxiety and loneliness in the short term and to have negative consequences for well-being and mortality risk in the long term.<sup>24</sup> There is economic fallout as well: eviction depresses earnings and reduces employment, especially in the two years after filing, and most severely for female and Black tenants.<sup>25</sup>



The evidence for children is even more compelling. High levels of mobility are strongly associated with childhood behavioral and emotional problems.<sup>26</sup> Partly because a residential move may trigger a change in schools, more frequent moves are also linked with worse academic

There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating that housing instability harms households, especially children. Families living in poverty are prone to more frequent moves, and these moves are more likely to be involuntary and constrained, resulting in relocation to worse homes and neighborhoods.

outcomes, including a higher likelihood of repeating a grade or dropping out of school.<sup>27</sup> Forced moves have particularly adverse outcomes for parents and children. Compared to matched mothers who were not evicted, mothers who were evicted in the previous year experienced more material hardship, were more likely to suffer from depression, reported worse health for themselves and their children, and reported more parenting stress.<sup>28</sup> Other research directly links housing insecurity with maternal stress, child neglect, and abuse.<sup>29</sup>

23. Cooke, Thomas J. 2010. "Residential Mobility of the Poor and the Growth of Poverty in Inner-Ring Suburbs." *Urban Geography* 31(2): 179-193; Rosenblatt, Peter, and Stefanie DeLuca. 2012. "We Don't Live Outside, We Live in Here: Neighborhood and Residential Mobility Decisions among Low-Income Families." *City & Community* 11(3): 254-284.; Skobba, Kimberly and Edward Goetz. 2013. "Mobility Decisions of Very Low-Income Households." *Cityscape* 15(2): 155-171; Desmond, Matthew, and Tracey Shollenberger. 2015. "Forced Displacement from Rental Housing: Prevalence and Neighborhood Consequences." *Demography* 52:1751-1772.

24. Oishi, Shigehiro, and Thomas Talhelm. 2012. "Residential mobility: What psychological research reveals." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 21 (6): 425-430.

25. Collinson, Robert, John Eric Humphries, Nicholas Mader, Davin Reed, Daniel Tannenbaum, and Winnie van Dijk. 2022. "Eviction and Poverty in American Cities." National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper 30382. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w30382>

26. Jelleyman, Tim, and Nick Spencer. 2008. "Residential mobility in childhood and health outcomes: a systematic review." *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 62 (7): 584-592.

27. Reynolds, Arthur J., Chin-Chi Chen, and Janette E. Herbers. 2009. "School mobility and educational success: A research synthesis and evidence on prevention." Paper prepared for the Workshop on the Impact of Mobility and Change on the Lives of Young Children, Schools, and Neighborhoods. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies, June 29-30; Gasper, Joseph, Stefanie DeLuca, and Angela Epstein. 2012. "Switching Schools: Reconsidering the Relationship between School Mobility and High School Dropout." *American Journal of Educational Research* 49(3): 487-519.

28. Desmond, Matthew, and Rachel Tolbert Kimbro. 2015. "Eviction's Fallout: Housing, Hardship, and Health." *Social Forces* 94(1): 295-324.

29. Warren, Emily, and Sarah Font. 2015. "Housing Insecurity, Maternal Stress, and Child Maltreatment: An Application of the Family Stress Model." *Social Service Review* 89(1): 9-39.

Housing stability, on the other hand, may have positive spillovers for the community. More stable residents appear to be more able to engage civically and build social capital.<sup>30</sup> There is some evidence suggesting that, by enhancing trust and promoting social cohesion, increased residential stability in the form of homeownership can also lead to safer neighborhoods and higher rates of neighborhood satisfaction.<sup>31</sup>

## D. Neighborhood Access

Perhaps even more important than the housing unit itself is the neighborhood it allows us to access. In the U.S., poverty, race, and amenities like transit, good schools, and high-quality parks are highly segregated at the neighborhood level.<sup>32</sup> In a series of papers, researchers Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence Katz showed that neighborhoods shape intergenerational mobility, i.e., the likelihood that someone will reach a higher socioeconomic status than their parents did. Specifically, growing up in a neighborhood that is more racially and economically integrated, and which has better schools, a lower rate of violent crime, and a larger share of two-parent households will increase upward mobility. This is especially true for low-income children, particularly for boys.<sup>33</sup> Not only that—using an experimental housing program that gave low-income families vouchers to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods (the Moving to Opportunity demonstration), Raj, Hendren, and Katz showed that children who moved before age 13 would be more likely to attend college and to earn more income, and be less likely to become single parents, as a result.<sup>34</sup>

...growing up in a neighborhood that is more racially and economically integrated, and which has better schools, a lower rate of violent crime, and a larger share of two-parent households will increase upward mobility.

A quasi-experimental study in Denver similarly showed that neighborhood socioeconomic status and crime have significant effects on youth educational and employment outcomes.<sup>35</sup> Thus, housing matters enormously because of where it is located, and making housing in high-opportunity neighborhoods more accessible can change the course of children's lives.

30. Leviten-Reid, Catherine, and Rebecca A. Matthew. 2018. "Housing Tenure and Neighborhood Social Capital." *Housing, Theory and Society* 35(3): 300-328; McCabe, Brian J. 2013. "Are Homeowners Better Citizens? Homeownership and Community Participation in the United States." *Social Forces* 91(3): 929-954.

31. Brounen, Dirk, Ruben Cox, and Peter Neuteboom. 2012. "Safe and Satisfied? External Effects of Homeownership in Rotterdam." *Urban Studies* 49 (12): 2669-2691.; Manturuk, Kim, Mark Lindblad, and Robert Quercia. 2010. "Friends and Neighbors: Homeownership and Social Capital among Low- to Moderate-Income Families." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 32(4): 471-488.

32. Sampson, Robert J. 2009. "Racial stratification and the durable tangle of neighborhood inequality." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 621(1), pp.260-280; Hess, Chris. 2021. "Residential Segregation by Race and Ethnicity and the Changing Geography of Neighborhood Poverty." *Spatial Demography* 9: 57-106.

33. Chetty, Raj and Nathaniel Hendren. 2016-2022. "Neighborhoods." *Opportunity Insights*. <https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/neighborhoodsi/>

34. Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence F. Katz. 2016. "The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment." *American Economic Review* 106(4): 855-902.

35. Galster, George and Anna Maria Santiago. 2017. "Do Neighborhood Effects on Low-Income Minority Children Depend on their Age? Evidence from a Public Housing Natural Experiment." *Housing Policy Debate* 27(4): 584-610.

## Why Local Housing Policy Matters

It is true that the forces shaping America's housing affordability crisis are bigger than any single city or county, and that state and federal housing agencies can bring larger pots of money to these problems. Yet local governments also have a crucial role to play. They are better positioned than state and federal agencies to understand the on-the-ground nuances of housing challenges and to coordinate and target federal, state, and community resources. They are best equipped to seek out and engage local stakeholders in housing

...local governments also have a crucial role to play. They are better positioned than state and federal agencies to understand the on-the-ground nuances of housing challenges and to coordinate and target federal, state, and community resources.

efforts. And they are the governing body that residents are most able to access and hold accountable for their housing needs.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, there are [hundreds of actions](#) communities can take to address local housing challenges, many of which are not available to other levels of government. The Local Housing Solutions' [housing policy framework](#) identifies four pillars of a comprehensive, balanced, and equitable local housing strategy, and each pillar encompasses an array of possible policies and programs. Some policies lend themselves especially to “affirmatively furthering fair housing” or increasing access to opportunity-rich neighborhoods (see this [policy toolkit](#) for more information). In

addition, complementary policies link housing to health, education, public transit, economic development, and climate-warming emissions. In this section, we take a closer look at six key levers and review the evidence that they can reshape local housing ecosystems for the better.

### A. Land Use Regulation

One of the most visible and most hotly debated ways that local governments can influence housing is through zoning laws (which govern how land can be used and developed) and development approval processes (public hearings for rezonings and variances, architectural review, proffers and concessions, and permit review). Research using the Wharton Residential Land Use Regulatory Index, which measures the stringency of land use laws for localities across the country, generally finds that strict regulations raise home prices, reduce construction, and increase spatial inequality.<sup>37</sup> They also impede the kind of dense development that produces lower greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>38</sup> A case study of Ramapo, New York, suggests that the gradual loosening of development rules over the course of nearly 40 years allowed for a great deal of new housing, even in supposedly “built out” suburban neighborhoods.<sup>39</sup> Yet some argue that relaxing zoning is more likely to increase gentrification than create affordable housing.<sup>40</sup> Analyzing the evidence on all sides, Vicki Been, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Katherine O'Regan conclude that “the preponderance of

36. Ellen, Ingrid Gould, Jeffrey Lubell, and Mark A. Willis. 2021. *Through the Roof: What Communities Can Do About the High Cost of Rental Housing in America*. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. <https://www.lincolninst.edu/publications/policy-focus-reports/through-roof-what-communities-can-do-high-cost-rental-housing>

37. Gyourko, Joseph, and Raven Molloy. 2015. “Regulation and Housing Supply.” *Handbook of Regional and Urban Economics* 5: 1289-1337; Lens, Michael, and Paavo Monkkonen. 2015. “Do Strict Land Use Regulations Make Metropolitan Areas More Segregated by Income?” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 82(1): 6-21.

38. Berrill, Peter, Kenneth Gillingham, and Edgar Hertwich. 2021. “Linking Housing Policy, Housing Typology, and Residential Energy Demand in the United States.” *Environmental Science and Technology* 55(4): 2224-2233.

39. Huennekens, Joseph Weill. 2023. “Learning from Land Use Reforms: The Case of Ramapo, New York.” NYU Furman Center. [https://furmancenter.org/files/The\\_Case\\_of\\_Ramapo\\_New\\_York\\_508.pdf](https://furmancenter.org/files/The_Case_of_Ramapo_New_York_508.pdf)

40. Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés, and Michael Storper. 2020. “Housing, Urban Growth and Inequalities: The Limits to Deregulation and Upzoning in Reducing Economic and Spatial Inequality.” *Urban Studies* 57(2): 223-248.

evidence suggests that easing barriers to new construction will moderate price increases and therefore make housing more affordable.” (emphasis added). But they add that additional interventions are needed to ensure new housing is developed at a range of price points.<sup>41</sup>

[Inclusionary zoning](#) is one way of intervening to increase the supply of affordable housing, especially in desirable neighborhoods. Studies suggest that inclusionary zoning policies around the country have collectively produced more than 100,000 housing units affordable to residents with moderately low incomes and that many of these units have relatively long or even perpetual affordability terms.<sup>42</sup> Another option is to reform zoning and housing codes in ways that [encourage lower-cost housing types](#), such as accessory dwelling units (ADUs; sometimes called granny flats), manufactured homes, tiny homes, and [“missing middle” housing](#). There is insufficient evidence that ADUs are effectively housing truly vulnerable households in California, which has passed a series of laws to legalize them, but research from New York City suggests that micro-units with shared kitchen facilities would be cheaper to build and would result in lower rents than currently allowable apartment types.<sup>43</sup> Manufactured housing can expand access to affordable homeownership but faces unique challenges related to durability, depreciation, financing, and investor purchases.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, small and medium multi-family housing types (such as duplexes and triplexes, courtyard clusters, and mid-rise apartment buildings) are a time-tested but increasingly endangered source of naturally occurring affordable housing in the U.S.<sup>45</sup>



Localities can also promote housing construction by streamlining the development approval process (especially by reducing the need for a public body to vote on the proposed development, which in Los Angeles sped up permitting by nearly a third, and also led to a more consistent timeline across projects).<sup>46</sup> Finally, jurisdictions can specifically incentivize the development of affordable or sustainable housing by providing incentives, such as [expediting permitting](#), [waiving fees](#), or [reducing parking requirements](#). Evidence shows that developers prefer to provide less parking, and that parking requirements increase vehicle density at the expense of population and housing density.<sup>47</sup>

41. Been, Vicki, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Katherine O'Regan. 2018. "Supply Skepticism: Housing Supply and Affordability." New York City: NYU Furman Center. [https://furmancenter.org/files/Supply\\_Skepticism\\_-\\_Final.pdf](https://furmancenter.org/files/Supply_Skepticism_-_Final.pdf)

42. Ramakrishnan, Mark Treskon, and Solomon Greene. 2019. "Inclusionary Zoning: What Does Research Tell Us about the Effectiveness of Local Action?" Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute. [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99647/inclusionary\\_zoning\\_what\\_does\\_the\\_research\\_tell\\_us\\_about\\_the\\_effectiveness\\_of\\_local\\_action\\_2.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99647/inclusionary_zoning_what_does_the_research_tell_us_about_the_effectiveness_of_local_action_2.pdf)

43. Week, Lauren Ashley. 2021. "Less is Not More: The False Promise of Accessory Dwelling Units for San Francisco's Lowest-Income Communities." *American Bar Association Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development* 30(2): 281-303; NYU Furman Center. 2018. *21st Century SROs: Can Small Housing Units Help Meet the Need for Affordable Housing in New York City?* [https://furmancenter.org/files/NYUFurmanCenter\\_SRObrief\\_31JAN2018.pdf](https://furmancenter.org/files/NYUFurmanCenter_SRObrief_31JAN2018.pdf)

44. Layton, Donald H. 2023. "Manufactured Housing is a Good Source of Unsubsidized Affordable Housing—Except When It's Not: Q&A on Eight Key Policy Topics (Part 2)." *The Stoop*. NYU Furman Center. <https://furmancenter.org/thestoop/entry/manufactured-housing-is-a-good-source-of-unsubsidized-affordable-housing-except-when-its-not-qa-on-eight-key-policy-topics-part-2>

45. Parolek, Daniel, and Arthur C. Nelson. 2020. *Missing Middle Housing: Thinking Big and Building Small to Respond to Today's Housing Crisis*. Island Press.

46. Manville, Michael, Paavo Monkkonen, Nolan Gray, and Shane Phillips. 2022. "Does Discretion Delay Development? The Impact of Approval Pathways on Multifamily Housing's Time to Permit." *Journal of the American Planning Association*.

47. McDonnell, Simon, Josiah Madar, and Vicki Been. 2011. "Minimum Parking Requirements and Housing Affordability in New York City." *Housing Policy Debate* 21(1): 45-68; Manville, Michael, Alex Beata, and Donald Shoup. 2013. "Turning Housing into Driving: Parking Requirements and Density in Los Angeles and New York." *Housing Policy Debate* 23(2): 350-375.

## B. Code Enforcement

Another way that localities can directly impact housing is through their building codes. Unfortunately, there has been limited research on how [codes](#) and [enforcement strategies](#) (such as proactive inspections) affect housing quality and health in the U.S. But a study of children hospitalized for asthma in Cincinnati between 2009 and 2012 showed that hospitalization rates were associated with the density of housing code violations in the children’s neighborhoods, indicating the importance of identifying and mitigating such violations.<sup>48</sup> Another study used experiments in New Orleans, Louisville, and Chattanooga to demonstrate how enforcement techniques such as contacting property owners sooner, redesigning first notices, and proactively communicating with those who have previously incurred code violations led to higher compliance and cost savings for the cities.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the most powerful research has focused on Rochester, New York, which has regularly inspected rental units for two decades on three- and six-year cycles, depending on the building type.<sup>50</sup> In 2005, the city [mandated lead inspection](#) as part of this existing inspection program and saw the rate of childhood lead poisoning—which causes lifelong cognitive impairments—decline precipitously. From 2000 to 2016, the number of children with elevated blood lead levels in Monroe County (where Rochester is located) fell by 85 percent.<sup>51</sup>

## C. Property Taxes and Fees

One of the principal ways that localities generate revenue is by levying taxes on real property, or homes and land.<sup>52</sup> Because taxes form an important part of the cost of owning and developing housing, localities can use tax policy to affect housing supply and affordability. For example, they can provide [tax incentives](#) and [abatements](#) to encourage new housing development. New York City’s 421a program is a well-known example; it exempted new multifamily developments in certain areas of the city from property taxes for 15 years, and up to 25 years if some of the new units are reserved for low-income families. Before the program expired in 2022, more than 4,000 dedicated affordable units and more than 12,000 market-rate units were produced in buildings receiving 421-a tax abatements.<sup>53</sup> But much smaller cities have implemented tax exemptions for affordable housing. In Provincetown, Massachusetts, an exemption in place since 2004 is currently keeping rents affordable in 132 units—an important supply in a small community facing a severe housing shortage.<sup>54</sup>

48. Beck, Andrew, Bin Huang, Raj Chundur, and Robert Kahn. 2014. “Housing Code Violation Density Associated with Emergency Department and Hospital Use by Children with Asthma.” *Health Affairs* 33(11): 1993-2002.

49. Linos, Elizabeth, Lisa Quan, and Elspeth Kirkman. 2020. “Nudging Early Reduces Administrative Burden: Three Experiments to Improve Code Enforcement.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 39(1): 243-265.

50. Korfmacher, Katrina Smith and Kathleen D. Holt. 2018. “The Potential for Proactive Housing Inspections to Inform Public Health Interventions.” *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 25(4): 444-447.

51. McDade, Elizabeth. 2018. “The Mission: End Childhood Lead Poisoning in Rochester.” *Shelterforce*. November 13, 2018. <https://shelterforce.org/2018/11/13/the-mission-end-childhood-lead-poisoning-in-rochester/>

52. Urban Institute. “Property Taxes.” *State and Local Backgrounders*. Washington, D.C. <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/projects/state-and-local-backgrounders/property-taxes>

53. New York City Independent Budget Office. 2022. “How Many Units of Affordable Housing Were Built or Are Underway through the 421-a Affordable New York Tax Exemption Program?” *New York City by the Numbers*. <https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/how-many-units-of-affordable-housing-were-built-or-are-underway-through-the-421-a-affordable-new-york-tax-exemption-program-nycbtn-june-2022.html>

54. Bellow, Heather. 2023. “Great Barrington is Looking at Tax Breaks for Those Who Rent at Affordable Rates. Provincetown Is Already Doing It.” *The Berkshire Eagle*, January 26, 2023. [https://www.berkshireeagle.com/news/southern\\_berkshires/great-barrington-affordable-housing-rental-exemption-provincetown-tax-break/article\\_b017f20e-9cfb-11ed-8444-8b1057e384f6.html](https://www.berkshireeagle.com/news/southern_berkshires/great-barrington-affordable-housing-rental-exemption-provincetown-tax-break/article_b017f20e-9cfb-11ed-8444-8b1057e384f6.html)



Another possible intervention is to provide [tax relief](#) for low-income, disabled, or senior homeowners to protect them from increasing property values. During the 2000-2005 U.S. housing market boom, which caused sharp increases in property taxes, relief programs measurably reduced residential mobility among elderly homeowners.<sup>55</sup> A cautionary note comes from Virginia, however, where a new tax relief measure for



seniors appeared to cause property values to rise. The promised relief increased demand for housing among seniors, especially in areas with high proportions of seniors, and so drove up costs for those whom the relief was intended to help.<sup>56</sup> More targeted relief that is tied primarily to income and long-time occupancy and structured as a circuit breaker (so that relief declines as income rises) may help prevent such problems.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond property taxes, localities also generate revenue through a wide variety of other taxes and fees, which can similarly become levers to promote housing quality, affordability, and stability. For example, [linkage fees](#) can harness new commercial and industrial development to finance the affordable housing needed for an expanding workforce. [Condominium conversion fees and](#)

[demolition taxes](#) can help replace affordable housing lost to these activities. Many communities establish [housing trust funds](#) using a [dedicated revenue source](#) such as a real estate transfer tax, document recording fee, or the abovementioned fees.

## D. Local Subsidies

Many cities have developed innovative ways to invest in housing access and quality at the local level. Examples include [providing loans and grants for home repairs](#), subsidizing [energy-efficient retrofits](#), providing [home purchase assistance](#) and [rental assistance](#) to low-income residents, and even [acquiring and operating](#) affordable housing. Localities can also create [land banks](#) to assemble land for housing projects or [prioritize the sale of their own underutilized land](#) for the creation of affordable housing. These local subsidies are increasingly important as federal support has failed to keep up with the growing need for affordable housing.<sup>58</sup> Local efforts are also critical for tapping and effectively using federal resources for housing, such as the competitive Low Income Housing Tax Credit program.<sup>59</sup> Research underlines that even public housing authorities, which are federally funded and implement federal programs, are local organizations that increasingly must embrace creative strategies to cope with local market conditions and federal devolution.<sup>60</sup>

55. Shan, Hui. 2010. "Property Taxes and Elderly Mobility." *Journal of Urban Economics* 67(2): 194-205.

56. Moulton, Jeremy, Bennie Waller, and Scott Wentland. 2018. "Who Benefits from Targeted Property Tax Relief? Evidence from Virginia Elections." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 37(2): 240-264.

57. Bowman, John. 2008. "Property Tax Relief: Why Virginia Should Adopt a State-Funded Income-Targeted Approach." *The Virginia News Letter* 84(6): 1-8. <https://joe4hou.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/property-tax-relief-why-virginia-should-adopt-a-state-funded-income-targeted-approach.pdf>

58. Fischer, Will, and Barbara Sard. 2017. *Chart Book: Federal Housing Spending Is Poorly Matched to Need*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/12-18-13hou.pdf>

59. Knappe, Elizabeth. 2018. "Local Government and Affordable Housing Tools." *SPNHA Review* 14(1), Article 7. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spnhareview/vol14/iss1/7>

60. Kleit, Rachel Garshick, and Stephen B. Page. 2014. "The Changing Role of Public Housing Authorities in the Affordable Housing Delivery System." *Housing Studies* 30(4): 621-644.

## E. Legal Protections

Localities are an important source of protection from housing discrimination and displacement, especially for renters, who have relatively few protections at the state and federal levels. Examples of local actions include enacting [just cause eviction laws](#), protecting subsidized households against [source of income discrimination](#), [regulating rents](#), creating [eviction prevention programs](#), and [providing legal assistance](#) to at-risk renters. Unlike actions to increase the housing supply, these strategies have the potential to directly and immediately prevent negative outcomes like displacement.<sup>61</sup> There is persuasive evidence, for example, that providing legal counsel to tenants in housing court helps prevent evictions.<sup>62</sup> And a 2019 study comparing four California cities (East Palo Alto, Glendale, Oakland, and San Diego) that passed just cause eviction laws to similar cities without such laws found a “quite powerful” effect of these laws on evictions and eviction filing rates.<sup>63</sup> Research has also found that state laws preempting these kinds of local protections constrained the crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic and hampered recovery.<sup>64</sup>

Localities are an important source of protection from housing discrimination and displacement, especially for renters, who have relatively few protections at the state and federal levels.

## F. Community Engagement

In order to effectively address housing challenges, localities must have strong community buy-in. Without decision-making that genuinely engages and represents the community, plans for social change are likely to become mired in controversy or lack the coalition necessary for implementation.<sup>65</sup> In the case of housing, efforts must often overcome “Not In My Backyard” (NIMBY) backlashes in which some residents resist zoning reform and use participatory local planning processes to reduce and delay what gets built in their neighborhoods.<sup>66</sup>

Research speaks to the challenges of engaging residents who haven’t previously participated in municipal politics. Barriers include fear among marginalized communities that their information will be misused or that their participation is tokenistic and will have no real reward; linguistic and cultural differences; and logistical hurdles that particularly affect low-income residents (e.g., unpredictable work schedules, limited transportation options, and the digital divide).<sup>67</sup> Local governing bodies are themselves unrepresentative.

61. Chapple, Karen, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, et al. 2022. “The Role of Local Housing Policies in Preventing Displacement: A Literature Review.” *Journal of Planning Literature* 38(2): 200-214.

62. Cassidy, Mike, and Janet Currie. 2023. “The Effects of Legal Representation on Tenant Outcomes in Housing Court: Evidence from New York City’s Universal Access Program.” *Journal of Public Economics* 222: 104844; Ellen, Ingrid Gould, Katherine O’Regan, Sophia House, and Ryan Brenner. 2020. “Do Lawyers Matter? Early Evidence on Eviction Patterns After the Rollout of Universal Access to Counsel in New York City.” *Housing Policy Debate* 31(3-5): 540-561.

63. Cuellar, Julieta. 2019. “Effect of ‘Just Cause’ Eviction Ordinances on Eviction in Four California Cities.” *Princeton Journal of Public and International Affairs*. <https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/effect-just-cause-eviction-ordinances-eviction-four-california-cities>

64. Greene, Solomon, Kriti Ramakrishnan, and Jorge Morales-Burnett. 2020. “State Preemption of Local Housing Protections: Lessons from a Pandemic.” Research Brief. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/state-preemption-local-housing-protections>

65. Barnes, Melody, and Paul Schmitz. 2016. “Community Engagement Matters (Now More Than Ever).” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 14(2): 32-39. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community\\_engagement\\_matters\\_now\\_more\\_than\\_ever#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_engagement_matters_now_more_than_ever#)

66. Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M. Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2019. *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America’s Housing Crisis*. Cambridge University Press.

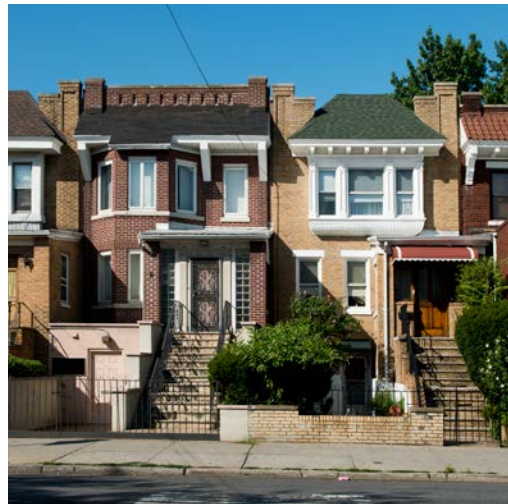
67. See, for example, Hastie, Chris. 2021. “The Perpetuation of Inequality: The Role of Community Engagement.” *Sociological Research Online* 26(3): 759-767; Karner, Alex, Keith Brower Brown, Richard Marcantonio, and Louis Alcorn. 2019. “The View from the Top of the Ladder: Participatory Budgeting and the Promise of Community Control.” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 85(3): 236-254.

A recent survey of more than 600 local land use decision-making bodies shows that they are strikingly imbalanced, systematically excluding women, people of color, and renters.<sup>68</sup> With key voices missing at the table, proposals for change may be distrusted or never put forward.

There is a lack of evidence about what strategies can effectively overcome these barriers. Case study research suggests that adopting data-driven approaches; taking time to organize and grow the capacity of community leaders; applying an equity lens; and using specific and relatable facts, stories, and examples about real people and places can help build trust and momentum.<sup>69</sup> But it remains challenging to get those who stand to benefit most from affordable housing to the table. Some hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic, by forcing planners to engage community members online, would revolutionize participatory planning; early evidence suggests that planners instead made modest adjustments in order to replicate face-to-face practices as much as possible.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

The importance of housing is hard to overstate. Our homes (and home addresses) play a pivotal role in our personal health, well-being, and life trajectories. The effects of housing spill over into our communities, shaping the health of our local economies, the safety and diversity of our neighborhoods, and how much we pollute the planet. Although housing exists in a market, its fundamental importance for human thriving has long motivated governments to intervene in its planning and regulation. In the U.S., local governments have a special role to play by virtue of their land use, taxing, and other powers. There is robust evidence that many local actions do impact housing quality and access, though others remain understudied. Future research should fill these gaps—particularly in the area of community engagement—to better inform and empower local stakeholders.



68. Lo, Lydia, Eleanor Noble, and Yonah Freemark. 2023. "Who Makes Planning Choices?" Research Report. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/who-makes-planning-choices>

69. Ibid, n.65; see also Machell, Erin, Troy Reinhalter, and Karen Chapple. 2009. "Building Support for Transit-Oriented Development: Do Community-Engagement Toolkits Work?" *UC Berkeley: University of California Transportation Center*. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/48q1v30c>

70. Milz, Dan, Atul Pokharel, and Curt D. Gervich. 2023. "Facilitating Online Participatory Planning During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of the American Planning Association*. <https://www.tandfonline-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2023.2185658>



**The Housing Solutions Lab at the NYU Furman Center** helps small and midsize cities plan, launch, and evaluate evidence-based local housing policies that advance racial equity, increase access to opportunity, and improve resident health and well-being. Support for the Housing Solutions Lab is provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.