

OUR HOMES, OUR FUTURE

Building the Power to Win Rent Control for Stable Communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tram Hoang and Ameer Chew | July 2025



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In recent months, deliberate attacks on democracy have reduced federal agencies' capacity to enforce laws critical to housing and human rights, and the repeal of hard-fought consumer protections has made everyone increasingly vulnerable to predatory and profit-seeking corporate tendencies. Yet in rural communities and cities in every corner of the country, organizers are calling for rent control to protect tenants from skyrocketing rents and combat the unchecked profiteering taking over communities.

Leveraging this powerful yet underutilized tool could have tremendous impact: if rent control were to become a reality in the 45 states without existing policies, 31.5 million additional renter households would be stabilized. Of the households who stand to benefit from expanding rent control, 19.7 million (or 60 percent) would be low-income, and 14.7 million (or 47 percent) would be households of color. Expanding rent control would not only empower tenants but lift up communities and help advance racial and economic justice.

Written by a team of tenant organizers, policy advocates, lawyers, and researchers, this report serves as a toolkit for any group of organizers or advocates who are starting—or continuing—campaigns for rent control. It affirms what the housing justice movement has argued for decades: that reliance on the private market alone—and, more importantly, deregulation—will not solve our growing affordable housing needs or even help replace the rapid loss of lower-rent housing. Furthermore, it offers robust data, policy guidance, strategic thinking, and on-the-ground learnings to support campaigns seeking pathways to build power for rent control and beyond. The report consists of five sections:

Section 1.0

What is Rent Control?

Rent control is a cornerstone of housing policy in our predominantly for-profit market, protecting and stabilizing households and entire communities. This section outlines the principles for designing the strongest policy possible and offers readers a brief history of rent control, situating this moment in the context of American housing policy and real estate history. Highlights:

- Organizers should aim for vacancy control, maximum coverage, minimal loopholes and exemptions, and tenant-centered program design that incorporates strong implementation and enforcement mechanisms.
- The US has a century-long history of rent control. This is paired with an even longer history of associations seeking to protect the racial-capitalist functions of US property rights and reject tenants as deserving participants in the country's political and social systems.

Section 2.0

Understanding the Battleground

As organizers and advocates plan and implement campaigns, it is necessary to understand the conditions under which renters and workers live, the forces that exacerbate inequalities, and the entities fighting to weaken the housing justice movement. This section strives to complement the knowledge gained from the lived experience of renters with data and opposition research.

Highlights:

- 15 million—or 82 percent—of renter households making less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level were forced to pay more than 30 percent of their income on rent, with 55 percent of low-income renters forced to pay more than half of their income.¹
- Since 2013, the US has lost over 2.5 million lower-priced homes, renting at below \$600 per month—in large part due to landlords' rent increases.²
- Institutional investors now own a majority of the rental units in the US, and they show no signs of slowing down.³ These private equity firms impact not only the renters in their units, but they also influence the broader housing landscape, providing cover for smaller landlords to increase rents.
- The six corporate landlord associations examined in this report spent a staggering \$326 million⁴ on federal lobbying between Fiscal Year 2020–2023 while amassing \$1.86 billion⁵ in combined revenues.

Section 3.0

Why Rent Control

Rent control works: it is effective at immediately improving housing stability and affordability for current tenants on a scale unrivaled by other policy options. Housing stability, in turn, promotes a cascade of economic, health, education, civic, and climate benefits for whole communities. And rent control is popular with voters—both homeowner and renter. This section equips organizers and advocates with powerful talking points, robust data, and compelling evidence to inform the base and move policymakers towards alignment on rent control. Highlights:

- Rent control disproportionately benefits low-income renters, people of color, and other marginalized groups. Its broad reach and swift impact make it a critical guardrail against displacement and preserver of existing affordable and lower-rent housing. Along with strategies to increase the supply of housing that is affordable to low-income earners, rent control is necessary to keep those units permanently affordable.
- Rent control is more effective at preserving affordability and stability when it includes vacancy control—which limits rent increases even after tenants move out.
- If housing is affordable, everyone wins. In 2020, if all renters in the country had not experienced rent burden, renters would have seen an additional \$141 billion in disposable income.⁶ This missed opportunity represents billions of dollars that could have been reinvested into local communities and economies.

- From Arizona to Pennsylvania and New York to Washington, overwhelming majorities of renters and homeowners are in favor of rent control—and 78 percent of renters registered to vote in swing states said they were more likely to vote for politicians who support it. At the local and state levels, politicians who back rent control are winning their elections.

Section 4.0

Inoculation Toolkit: Responses to Common Arguments Against Rent Control

The real estate industry has invested time and resources into misinformation campaigns and fearmongering. This section is designed to provide organizers with answers and analyses to help counter common myths and misconceptions, while centering the narratives of the people most impacted. Highlights:

- Rent control does not decrease housing production or necessarily lead to declines in maintenance. It allows landlords fair returns on their investments.
- Supply alone cannot solve our affordable housing crisis, and the for-profit market will not—and cannot—build affordable housing at the scale our communities need.
- All landlords, regardless of size, operate their business in a regulated market. The purpose of rent control is to prevent predatory profit-seeking behavior, and no business entity, regardless of its size, should be allowed to disregard reasonable regulations.
- When we examine the realities of our unfair housing system, rent control is a logical response to regulate the outsized power wielded by landlords. By taming landlords' market power, rent control reduces the economic rent landlords can extract from tenants.

Section 5.0

Guide to Winning Rent Control

All rent control campaigns follow different paths, and this section is a tactical guide for organizers and advocates in any campaign phase. It begins with a detailed guide to designing rent control policies, an introduction to the legal basis for rent control in federal and state law, and an overview of the complexities of state preemption. It includes case studies of lessons learned from campaigns across the country, discussing how they have advanced policies that lay the foundation for rent control, won rent control itself, protected and strengthened preexisting rent control, and fought for robust implementation and enforcement. Highlights:

- Constructing the right rent control policy requires centering renters of color and low-income renters, developing a strong analysis of the political and legal landscape, and creating a plan to build the power necessary to win.
- To date, it is well-established that rent control does not violate federal law. The US Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld rent control laws and rejected attempts to get the Court to revisit its past decisions in 2024.
- States can abuse preemption power—exercising the ability for a higher level of government to limit or remove the authority of a lower level—to reinforce oppressive systems and undermine local democracy. Corporate-driven rent control preemption legislation blocks or interferes with over 30 states' ability to regulate the price of rental housing.

FIGURE 1

Guide to case studies in Section 5.0

Campaign Stage	Organization	Policy	Campaign Pathway	Key Strategies
Winning Policies That Build the Foundation for Rent Control	Colorado Homes for All (COHFA)	Statewide for cause eviction	State legislation through legislature	Practicing narrative discipline; avoiding compromises that would undermine future wins.
	Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE)	Statewide just cause and rent control	State legislation through legislature	Building alliances with labor unions; leveraging influential public figures.
Winning Rent Control	Make the Road Connecticut	Statewide rent control	State legislation through legislature	Centering the importance of language justice; canvassing districts strategically.
	Housing Justice for All New York (HJ4A)	Statewide just cause and rent control	State legislation through legislature	Consistently escalating advocacy; moving from passage to implementation.
Protecting and Strengthening Rent Control	CASA	Countywide rent control in Prince George's and Montgomery counties	County legislation through county commissions	Setting the foundation with temporary measures; making rent control an election issue.
	Pasadena Tenants Union (PTU)	Citywide just cause and rent control	Ballot initiative in Pasadena, California	Negotiating rent board structure; building and staffing a new city department.
Implementing and Enforcing Rent Control	Housing Justice Center (HJC)	Citywide rent control	Ballot initiative in Saint Paul, Minnesota	Leveraging private right of action; advocating for administrative enforcement tools.

Action is more urgent than ever to prevent homelessness, protect renters, and ensure our communities thrive. Across the country, organizers and advocates are contending with what this precarious moment in the federal landscape means for state and local power. Together, the analyses and lessons from successful efforts provide organizers with the tools needed to coalesce and advance strategic campaigns for rent control.

Download the full report at: <https://www.policylink.org/resources/publications/our-homes-our-future>

NOTES

- 1 National Equity Atlas analysis of 2022 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA.
- 2 Whitney Airgood-Obrycki, Alexander Hermann, and Sophia Wedeen, “Deteriorating Rental Affordability: An Update on America’s Rental Housing 2024,” Research Brief. Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, December 2024, p. 9, https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/research/files/harvard_jchs_rental_affordability_airgood-obrycki_2024.pdf; Wedeen, “Low-Cost Rentals Have Decreased in Every State | Joint Center for Housing Studies,” Housing Perspectives, July 6, 2023, <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/low-cost-rentals-have-decreased-every-state>.
- 3 Lee, Hyojung. “Who Owns Rental Properties, and Is It Changing? | Joint Center for Housing Studies.” *Joint Center for Housing Studies*, August 18, 2017. <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/who-owns-rental-properties-and-is-it-changing>.
- 4 Lobbying data from Propublica’s Nonprofit Explorer tool.
- 5 Revenue data from Propublica’s Nonprofit Explorer tool.
- 6 National Equity Atlas analysis of 2020 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA.

PolicyLink

Headquarters

1438 Webster Street
Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94612
t (510) 663-2333

www.policylink.org

LinkedIn: /PolicyLink

Instagram: @policylink



Headquarters

449 Troutman Street
Suite A
Brooklyn, NY 11237
t (347) 985-2220

populardemocracyinaction.org

Facebook: /CPDAction

X: @popdemocaction

Instagram: @popdemocaction



Headquarters

388 Atlantic Ave
3rd Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11217
t (844) 788-2489

www.righttothecity.org

Facebook: /ourcityrttc

X: @ourcityRTTC

Instagram: @ourcityrttc