OUR HOMES, OUR FUTURE

Building the Power to Win Rent Control for Stable Communities

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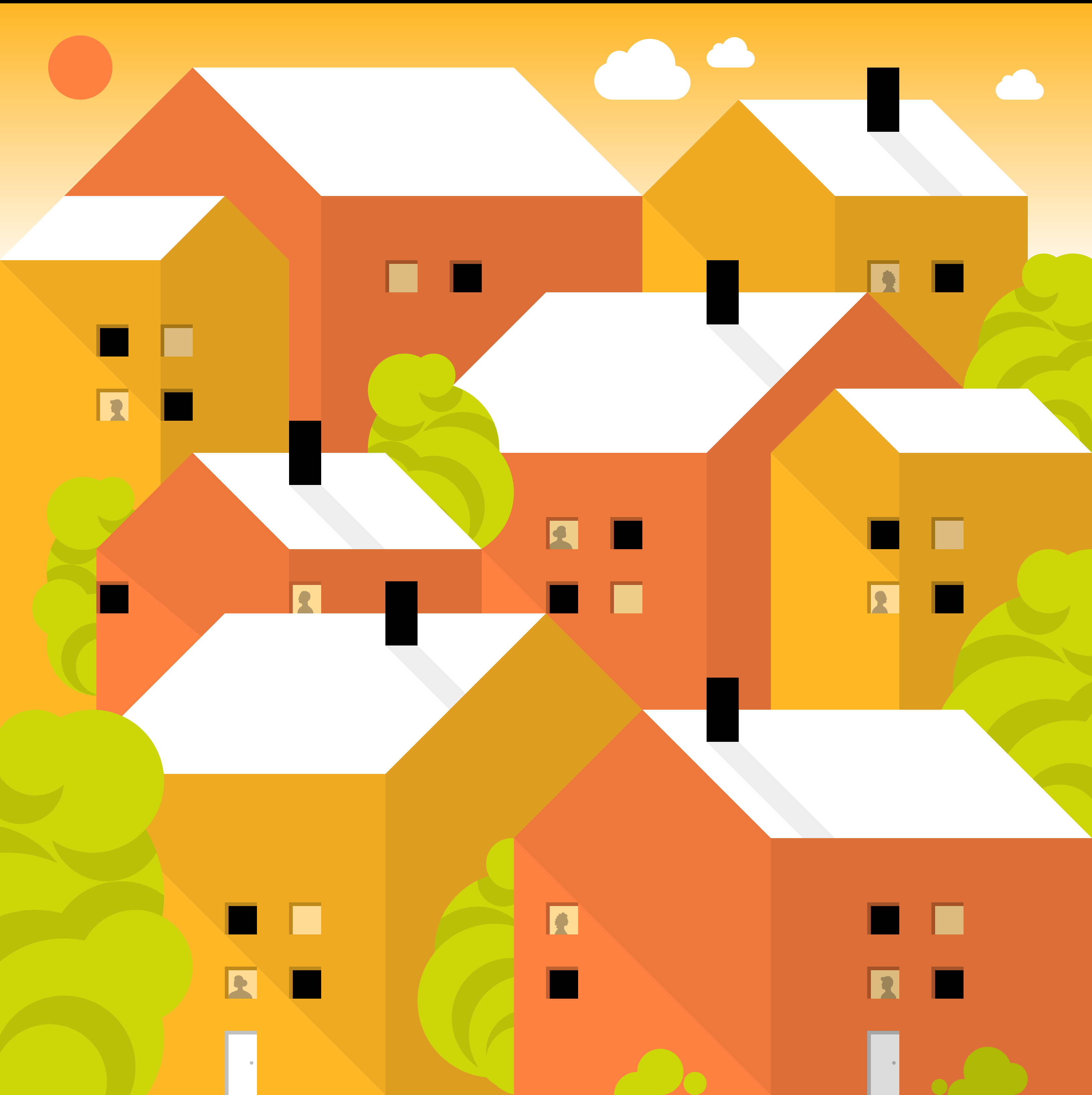

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was produced as a collaboration between PolicyLink, Popular Democracy in Action, and the Right to the City Alliance.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 million[4] on federal lobbying between Fiscal Year 2020–2023 while amassing $1.86 billion[5] 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.
Winning Rent Control	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.
	Make the Road Connecticut	Statewide rent control	State legislation through legislature	Centering the importance of language justice; canvassing districts strategically.
Protecting and Strengthening Rent Control	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.
	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.
Implementing and Enforcing Rent Control	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.
	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.

ABBREVIATIONS SHEET

ACCE: Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment

ACRE: Action Center on Race and the Economy

AFREF: Americans for Financial Reform Education Fund

AMI: Area Median Income

BCG: Bargaining for the Common Good

CAA: California Apartment Association

CAR: California Association of Realtors

COHFA: Colorado Homes for All

COPA: Community Opportunity to Purchase Act

CPI: Consumer Price Index

ELI: Extremely Low Income

FRC: Fair Rent Commission

HJ4A: Housing Justice 4 All New York

HJC: Housing Justice Center

HSTPA: Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act

LIHTC: Low Income Housing Tax Credit

LSSC: Local Solutions Support Center

NAA: National Apartment Association

NAHB: National Association of Home Builders

NAR: National Association of Realtors

NMHC: National Multifamily Housing Council

NRHC: National Rental Home Council

PAC: Political Action Committee

PTU: Pasadena Tenants Union

REIT: Real Estate Investment Trust

RER: Real Estate Roundtable

RTTC: Right to the City Alliance

TOPA: Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act

TRTC: Tenant Right to Counsel

INTRODUCTION

We are in an unprecedented moment in American history. The deliberate dismantling of our federal infrastructure for governance and accountability is sowing chaos and fear that are deeply felt in every corner of our communities. And yet, amid this uncertainty, the housing justice movement gives us hope.

Less than 10 years ago, organizers reignited momentum for rent control through powerful wins to pass and expand statewide rent control and just cause in California, New York, and Oregon. Within the last five years, voters in Portland, Maine, and Saint Paul, Minnesota, passed some of the strongest rent control ordinances in the country—and other cities with preexisting laws (Richmond and Santa Monica, California) have strengthened them. Organizers led the fight to pass a tenant's right to counsel in Boulder, Colorado, just cause evictions for the entire state of Colorado, and the right to counsel, just cause, *and* rent stabilization in Washington State.

These much-needed protections fill the gap created by an absence of federal action. What is equally noteworthy, however, is that the organizing vehicle that achieved these wins is both a stopgap to federal failure of duty and a core strategy for building state and local power for the future, regardless of administration. Housing justice organizers can leverage this moment to build multiracial working-class coalitions that bring people together under a robust tenant movement.

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Ultimately, organizers and housing justice advocates share the desire to liberate us from the power that for-profit property owners hold over our livelihoods. They have taken action by successfully creating pathways to support tenants facing eviction and limiting the ways landlords can uproot people from their homes. In doing so, organizers have demonstrated to elected leaders that we have the collective power to realize a different future—one in which, regardless of public health crises, climate disasters, or political landscapes, tenants are *always* protected.

Together, we call for a change that is both simple and sensible—something the federal government has guaranteed to homeowners for decades through fixed-rate mortgages and that nearly 200 jurisdictions across the nation have already adopted: rent control. Rent control is a cornerstone of housing policy in our predominantly for-profit market, protecting and stabilizing individual households and entire communities. If rent control were to become a reality in 45 more states, 31.5 million renter households would be stabilized.

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Today's movement for housing justice came of age during the global foreclosure crisis in the decade following Hurricane Katrina. Led by tenants and unhoused people, this movement has shown us that a housing system based on market-driven and racially structured disinvestment, speculation, and displacement erodes democracy for all.

Soaring rents affect tenants far beyond coastal cities and high-demand Airbnb destinations. In 2024 there was not a single metropolitan area or county in the United States where a worker earning the federal minimum wage, or a higher state or local minimum wage, could afford a modest two-bedroom unregulated rental.[7] Unaffordable rent does not spare upper middle-income renter households either, 45 percent of whom are now considered rent-burdened (spending between 30–50% of their income on rent). This increase represents a doubling of the proportion of rent-burdened upper middle-income households in the two decades since 2001.[8]

Without meaningful tenant protections, the impacts of the unjust housing system carry into the next generation. Housing insecurity takes a toll on physical health and mental health, children's learning, elder care, access and mobility for people with disabilities, worker organizing, the independence of young adults, commute times, and overall civic life.[9] Black women and children disproportionately face the threat of eviction, and contend with the direct impacts of eviction on stress, employment, birth outcomes, and lifespans.[10]

Financialization extends the crisis system. Historically, large institutional investors in real estate have anticipated returns over decades of steady appreciation. The financialization of housing refers to how politicians have increasingly deregulated the financial sector to allow money managers, banks, pension funds, university endowments, international sovereign funds, as well as individual investors to make short-term profits off the leveraging of brick-and-mortar homes.[11] Investment groups such as Limited Liability Companies (LLCs), private equity funds, and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REIT) obscure investor-owners from the renters and wider communities. Housing units thus serve the finance sector as vehicles for moving capital, rather than as homes that hold essential social value for people's everyday lives.[12]

Before the foreclosure crisis subsided, private equity firms such as Blackstone pooled enormous sums of investor capital to create portfolios of rentals to profit from people's losses of their homes.[13] The ongoing encroachment of private equity financing and corporate landlords on manufactured housing, multifamily, and single-family rentals contributes to upward pressures on unregulated rents for everyone.[14] Small landlords are increasingly adopting the investor mindset to extract whatever short-term profits the market allows.[15]

When our homes and entire communities are pooled into large portfolios, they can become leveraged for investors to access additional credit or investments. These obligations to the finance sector translate into tenants' rent burden and, often, household debt. In the month before the 2024 presidential election, five million of the nation's renters were behind on their rent and living under greater risk of eviction; in Mississippi, that number was a staggering one in four renters.[16] If tenant income and credit cannot stretch to cover costs, higher rents can induce poverty conditions; in other words, the "rent eats first."[17]

Housing is a basic need; it is a public and social good that is to be protected and regulated. Policies like rent control bring us closer to realizing housing as a human right for everyone, regardless of income or background. Rent control is a universalist demand that delivers immediate and disproportionate benefits to large populations of those most in need. Moderate and low-income tenants across generations organize not just for themselves but for their neighbors, winning shared protections that stabilize entire communities. By securing the right to renew leases and limiting rent increases, rent control empowers tenants with the right to organize in their homes, activating community ties and strengthening networks of mutual support. Building by building, and district by district, tenants are growing their power as a voting bloc, often running for office themselves and bringing the tenant movement into governance.

Transforming the housing system status quo into dignified homes for all requires neighbor-to-neighbor base-building, forming coalitions, and utilizing governing power strategically to win universal rent control—and beyond. Out of hard-fought campaigns grows a forward-looking vision for social housing, firmly grounded in rent regulation. Movement-led proposals for social housing proposals center on principles of equity, repair, and the widely held conviction that housing should be designed and controlled by the people who call it home.

Rent control with just cause protections help to maximize public dollars for deep affordability measures, such as Section 8 and public housing, as well as for the production of social housing. A commonsense approach to the housing crisis is to create immediate relief through rent control while implementing, strengthening, and safeguarding these programs in tandem. When implemented together, these strategies position government to play a crucial role in building a viable alternative to the current crisis system—one rooted in *permanent* affordability, *democratic* decision-making, climate resiliency and responsibility, and *protection for the most vulnerable*, delivering *universal benefits* for entire communities.

To win a future where housing is a human right, rent control is a necessary step for the housing justice movement. To protect one another in the storms ahead, this movement is a home for putting values of democracy, equity, and mutuality into practice, where multiracial communities can strengthen tenant power to both win immediate relief and lay the groundwork for thriving and just futures.

1.0

WHAT IS RENT CONTROL?

Rent control protects tenants from excessive rent increases by creating a schedule for reasonable and gradual rent increases, while allowing for landlords to receive a fair return on their investment. As with any multidimensional systemic issue, there is no silver bullet to solving the housing crisis, but rent control has been proven to be key to protecting tenants from economic displacement. Thus, it belongs as a cornerstone to any effective housing policy framework and provides a necessary protection to enable organizers and advocates to pursue additional tools to eliminate housing discrimination, build permanently affordable housing, and other essential strategies.

1.1 Defining Key Terms

- **Rent control:** Though the term is sometimes used to refer to "first-generation rent regulation" policies (e.g., rent ceilings, rent freezes) implemented by the US Office of Price Administration during World War II, "rent control" is now often used interchangeably with "rent stabilization" to describe rent regulations more broadly.[18]
- **Rent stabilization:** Often used to describe "second-generation rent regulation" or "moderate rent control" policies that limit rent increases by implementing a predictable schedule restricting the maximum rent increase each year. To be effective, rent stabilization must be paired with "just cause" eviction laws and other tenant protections.
- **Rent regulations:** A general term for policies that aim to make rental housing affordable and accessible for tenants, whether by limiting rent increases, setting maximum rent caps, or establishing rules for determining fair rents.
- **Rent cap or rent adjustment:** The maximum percentage or amount that rent can be increased in a 12-month period.
- **Just cause (or "good cause") eviction laws:** Tenant protections designed to prevent arbitrary, retaliatory, or discriminatory evictions by requiring that landlords can only evict renters for a "just cause," such as nonpayment of rent, repeated lease violations, illegal activity (provable in a court of law), or plans for immediate owner-occupancy. Some just or good cause laws, such as in New York State, also aim to prevent evictions via unreasonable rent increases.
- **Vacancy control:** An element of policy design that ties rent control to the unit, so that even when tenants change, the maximum annual rent increase applies to that unit between tenancies.

Throughout this report, the authors use the term "rent control" due to its broad recognition. It does not refer to a specific policy, but rather, rent regulation policies more broadly.

1.2 Principles for Strong Rent Control

Designing the most effective rent control policy requires aiming for the North Star goal of universal protections. Whether communities are looking to adopt rent control or strengthen preexisting ordinances, a policy that offers the strongest protections for the maximum coverage of renters is characterized by:

1. The lowest possible annual rent cap to promote long-term housing affordability.
2. Maximum coverage of homes with a minimal number of policy exemptions allowed based on building-type and new construction status.
3. Vacancy control to protect tenants across tenancies, with a ban on setting market-rate increases whenever tenants move out.
4. Minimizing loopholes that allow property owners to remove their units from the rent-controlled housing stock, such as condominium conversions and Ellis Act–type evictions (which permits landlords to evict tenants in order to withdraw their units from the rental market).
5. Minimizing capital improvement charges and other pass-through costs that can push tenants' total rent-burden above the annual legal caps.
6. Just cause eviction to prevent landlords from evicting tenants in order to raise rents. When combined with rent control, just cause protections offer tenants the strongest possible defense from economic displacement and no cause evictions.
7. Tenant-centered program design and implementation.
8. Strong enforcement and implementation mechanisms that do not depend on underresourced tenants initiating legal action to assert their rights.

FIGURE 2

A timeline of rent control in the US

1919–1920
Washington, DC and New York City pass first, proto-rent control laws in the US, partially in response to rising rents in the wake of WWI.

1921
Block v. Hirsh, first unsuccessful Supreme Court challenge to local rent controls.

1942
During WWII, Congress passes the Emergency Price Control Act, authorizing rent caps in war production areas, among other types of price controls which are coordinated and enforced by the Office of Price Administration.

1947–1949
Federal government devolves rent laws to states. Amid the Second Red Scare, most states—except New York—end rent control.

1970s
Organized tenants in California, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York push legislatures to pass new rent control laws while localities with hostile legislatures—including New Orleans—attempt to do the same, but are preempted.

1971–1973
President Nixon implements temporary price and rent controls nationally in an attempt to cool a hyperinflated market shaped by the Vietnam War.

1973
The Conservative Caucus of State Legislators forms in Illinois to oppose the Nixon price and rent controls. The organization, which grew to become the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) later developed model state legislation to preempt local rent control ordinances. By 1986, over 30 states had adopted some form of rent control preemption.

1986
The constitutionality of rent control is once again affirmed by the Supreme Court in *Fisher v. City of Berkeley*.

1988
Tenants resist President Reagan's effort to cut the flow of federal housing funding to localities with rent control.

1990s
Real estate lobby, bolstered by a conservative turn in statehouses across the US, pushes for additional rent control preemption laws (including in Massachusetts), and a weakening of rent controls in California and New York.

2019
As a result of a resurgence in tenant organizing across the US, Oregon passes the first statewide rent control law in many years. California and New York expand their rent control laws.

2020
Tenants push for eviction moratoriums and rent freezes to mitigate the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening the organizing infrastructure for another resurgence in rent control campaigns in California, Maryland, New Jersey, and other jurisdictions.

2024
The Supreme Court once again affirms rent control's constitutionality in *G-Max Management, Inc. v. New York*.

1910 1920 1930 1940 1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 2010 2020 2030

1.3 A Short History of US Rent Control

In the United States, the economic impact of World War I, paired with the growing strength of the labor movement, paved the way for the country's first local rent laws. In 1920, New York City established a court-based rent arbitration process in response to radical agitation by workers over worsening living conditions.[19] Around the same time, Washington DC created a judicial body to determine fair rents and resolve tenant-landlord conflicts. DC's law survived a Supreme Court challenge;[20] however, both systems were dismantled within a few years due to pressure from landlords, alongside the broader wave of conservative efforts to roll back hard-won progress toward housing, health, labor, and environmental regulations.[21]

Two decades later, as World War II spurred economic expansion, the federal government took an interventionist approach, instituting wide-ranging price controls, including a national rent control standard to address soaring rents. Congress passed the Emergency Price Control Act, which created the Office of Price Administration (OPA). The OPA was authorized to enforce rent and price caps in "designated war production areas," which spanned across the US.[22] Military production led to substantial increases in urban populations, and the government was concerned that sharp increases in rents would impact "the home front."[23] Prices were fixed at 1942 levels and no cause evictions were prohibited, marking the first time the US enacted rent control nationwide.

During WWII, rent control was patriotic.[24] However, by late 1945, "apartment owner associations were organizing rent decontrol campaigns and threatening to pull their rental units off the market."[25] The federal government first weakened the national rent control system in 1947 with the Housing and Rent Act of 1947. It then delegated rent control oversight to the states in 1949 while simultaneously codifying racist lending and development practices that subsidized damaging suburbanization and urban disinvestment.[26] With the second Red Scare underway, opponents quickly decried any local vestiges of the national rent control system as a communist conspiracy. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the majority of states phased it out while New York State maintained a localized rent control system.[27]

In the same period that Congress granted President Nixon the authority to institute rent and price controls aimed at managing hyperinflation, tenant organizers revived rent control advocacy in the 1970s, securing new local laws that permitted low increases and controlled rents at vacancy in California, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Jersey.[28] Organizers also fought for rent control in less accepting localities. For example, advocates in New Orleans tried to get rent control on the ballot in the early 1970s, but the courts struck it down.[29] Following this, in the 1980s, President Reagan cut public housing and government spending on affordable housing, causing homelessness to spike.[30] Capitalizing on this political climate, real estate groups scapegoated rent control as the culprit of declining housing conditions, increased homelessness, and even upticks in street crime.

Real estate interests reinforced this narrative, with groups like the California Association of Realtors spending $14.2 million to fight rent control in the mid-1980s.[31] While landlords were unable to fully preempt rent control in California, they did push through the Ellis Act, which allowed landlords to evict rent-controlled tenants under the pretense of removing a building from the rental market.

Still, in 1986, the US Supreme Court affirmed the policy's constitutionality, and a nationwide tenant mobilization successfully blocked a federal attempt to strip community development funds from states that allowed rent control.

Nonetheless, the Reagan era ushered in a revanchist attack against regulatory policies that benefited low-income tenants and people of color, including rent control. Over time, the majority of states passed rent control preemption laws (see page 81), many based on a model law crafted by the highly influential American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which was originally founded by Illinois state senate staffer to push back on Nixon-era rent and price controls in 1973.[32] Echoing past red-baiting rhetoric, ALEC successfully promoted rent control bans by invoking property rights and fearmongering about state overreach. Even seemingly pro-regulatory states, like Massachusetts, were not immune to this wave: in 1994, the real estate lobby led a successful campaign to ban local rent control through a statewide referendum.

In the 2010s, rising rents, stagnating wages, corporate bailouts, and ever-deeper cuts to social services laid the groundwork for a new wave of leftist organizing. By 2016, tenants organized to win rent control at the ballot in several California cities, including Mountain View and Richmond. In 2019, a coalition of labor, housing, and racial justice groups in Oregon helped pass the first statewide rent statute since World War II.[33] Later that year, California passed a similar statewide law, and, after decades of organizing to close anti-tenant loopholes, New York's tenant movement secured a major expansion of the state's rent stabilization system.[34]

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the largest racial justice mobilization in US history, further elevated housing as a political issue. Organizers won new, stronger rent control laws in Newark, New Jersey (expanded coverage), Portland, Maine (no new construction exemption), Prince George's County, Maryland (vacancy control), and Saint Paul, Minnesota (3 percent annual rent cap). Furthermore—for the first time in decades—rent control rose to the national discourse as an electoral priority that President Biden and Vice President Harris addressed during the 2024 presidential race.

2.0

UNDERSTANDING THE BATTLEGROUND

In this section, readers will find information and statistics on the impacts of the housing crisis on renter populations across the US, the forces creating worsening inequalities, and the entities fighting to weaken the housing justice movement. This section aims to complement the knowledge gained from the lived experience of renters with data and opposition research. Use it to justify the need for rent control and expose opposition forces.

2.1 Renter Nation

America is increasingly a renter nation, with nearly half of major cities having more renters than homeowners.[35] The nation saw a significant jump in rentership from 33.4 percent in 2010 to 35 percent in 2023, a trend that will likely continue as home prices rise and household budgets and savings are constrained by high costs of living.[36] The largest cities and metropolitan areas in the country are overwhelmingly comprised of renter households.

- In the largest 50 metro areas, 38 percent of households are renters.
- In 2023, renters made up 67 percent of the population in New York City, while renters in nearby Jersey City and Newark made up about 70 and 76 percent, respectively.
- Over 60 percent of households in Boston, Los Angeles, Miami, and San Francisco are renters.
- From 2010 to 2023, the 15 most populous metropolitan areas all experienced increases in their shares of renter households.[37]
- Renters are not just limited to urban areas; there are 6.3 million renters who live in rural America.[38]

Even with healthy wage growth in recent years, the cost of rent remains high and continues to rise, squeezing renters' ability to afford housing in addition to groceries, education, and child-care—all of which are likewise increasing in cost.[39] In a housing market that continues to favor the production of high-rent apartments instead of affordable rentals, there are fewer and fewer affordable options for renters. This trend is starkly evident in the data: between 2012 and 2022, the number of units in large multifamily buildings (over 20 units) explosively increased by 3.1 million to 12.3 million units—units which have the highest median rents. Meanwhile, the supply of rentals in two-four unit buildings, which have the lowest median rents, increased by just 14,000 units.[40]

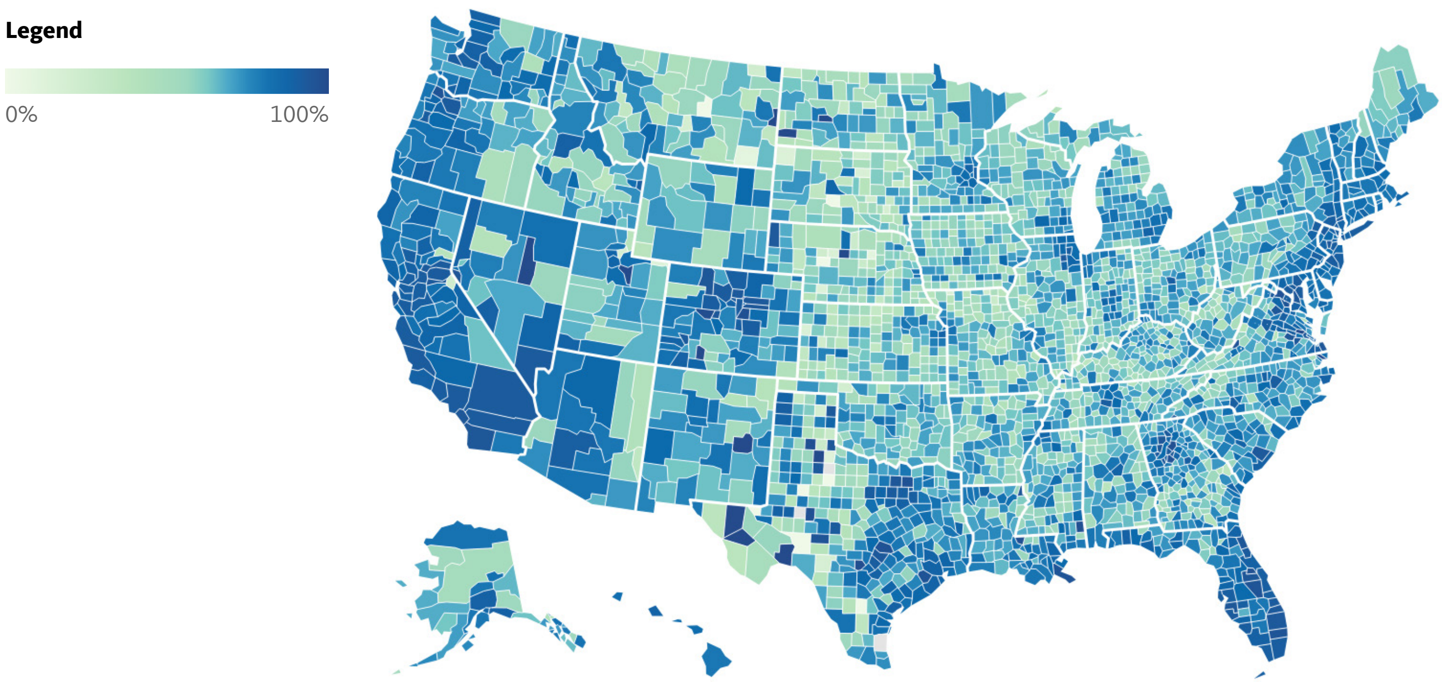
All people deserve stable and affordable housing—regardless of whether they rent or own their homes. But, for too long, policymakers have neglected protections and supports for our sizable—and growing—renter population. Their failure to act has bred a hostile environment for renters that particularly punishes renters who are of color, low-income, immigrants, women, living with a disability, and have children.

All over the country, renters are paying too much of their income on housing costs.

- In 2022, 21.3 million renter households, or half of all renter households, were forced to pay unaffordable rent.[41]
- Among low-income renter households, housing insecurity skyrockets. Fifteen million or 82 percent of renter households making below 200 percent of the federal poverty level were forced to pay over 30 percent of their income on rent. A staggering 55 percent of low-income renters were forced to dedicate the majority of their income to rent alone.[42]
- In 2021, 44 percent of rural renters were considered rent-burdened.[43]

FIGURE 3

Share of renter households earning < $50,000/year that are rent-burdened (paying more than 30% of income on housing costs) by counties, 2023

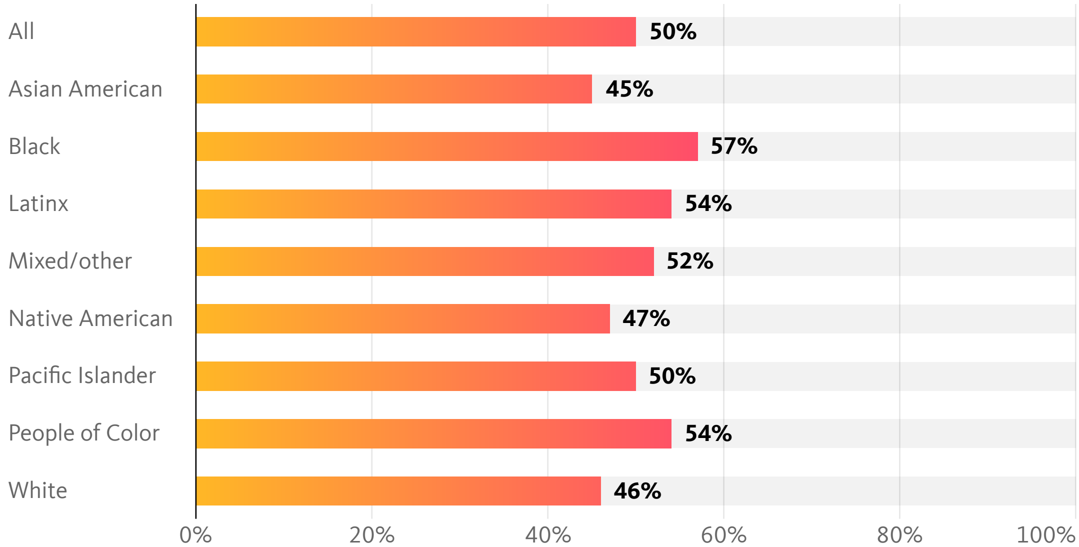


Source: PolicyLink analysis of 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA; Created with Datawrapper.
Note: Data for 2023 represent a 2019 through 2023 average.

Historically, institutions such as the federal and local governments, banks, lenders, and developers have implemented discriminatory policies and practices that barred people of color from home-ownership. Alongside the US's profound legacies of racist employment practices that concentrated people of color, immigrants, and women in low-wage, low-quality jobs, a clear picture of today's racial disparities in rent burden emerges. Compared to white renter households, Black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander renter households are more likely to be paying an excessive portion of their income on rent. Fifty-seven percent of Black renter households pay unaffordable rent compared to 46 percent of white households.[44]

FIGURE 4

Share of renter households paying more than 30% of income on housing costs by race/ethnicity, United States, 2022



Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. **Note**: Data for 2022 represent a 2018 through 2022 average.

Renter households that are home to children under 18 are also more likely to be rent-burdened. Fifty percent of renter households with children—6.5 million homes—pay unaffordable rent, making them slightly more likely to be rent-burdened compared to households without children.[45] Studies have found that housing instability negatively affects the development and well-being of children. At the other end of the age spectrum, there are 4.6 million rent-burdened households with at least one adult 65 years or older—an alarming trend especially as homelessness rates are rising the fastest among older adults.[46]

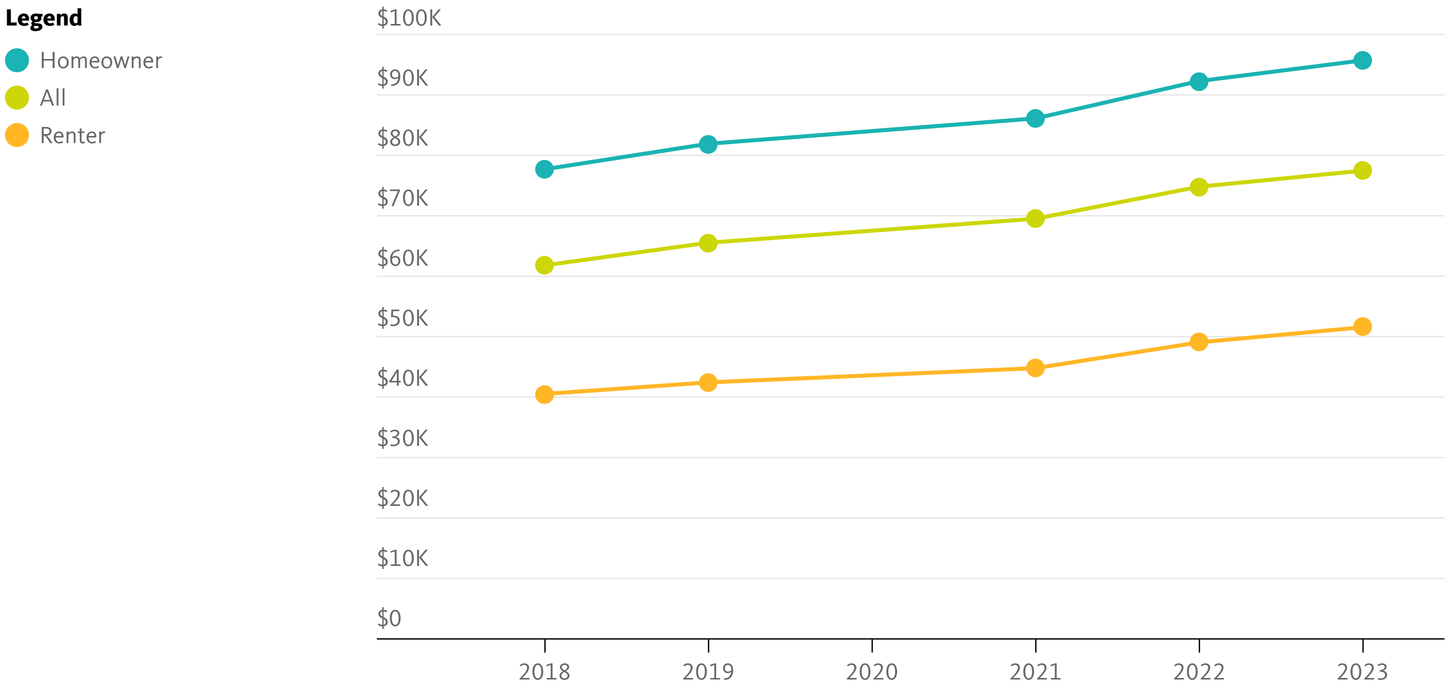
Since 2018, the median household income has steadily increased but not at a sufficient rate for many households to keep pace with rising rent.

- In 2023, renter households earned a median household income of $51,700 which was just over half the income earned by their homeowner counterparts ($95,900).
- From 2018 to 2023, renter household income increased by just 28 percent while the median rent climbed 33 percent.[47]
- In 2023, the median gross rent in the US was $1,400. Meanwhile, the federal minimum wage has remained at $7.25 since 2009 and is used today in 20 states.[48] [49]
- In half of all US states, the median wage is not sufficient to afford a two-bedroom rental apartment.[50] For example, to afford a two-bedroom home in California, a household must make an hourly wage of $47.38, the highest in the nation. But the state's median hourly wage in 2022 was $30.11, a gap of $17.27.

As rents rise and wages stagnate, renter households are left with increasingly limited disposable income to cover essential needs such as transportation and health care.

FIGURE 5

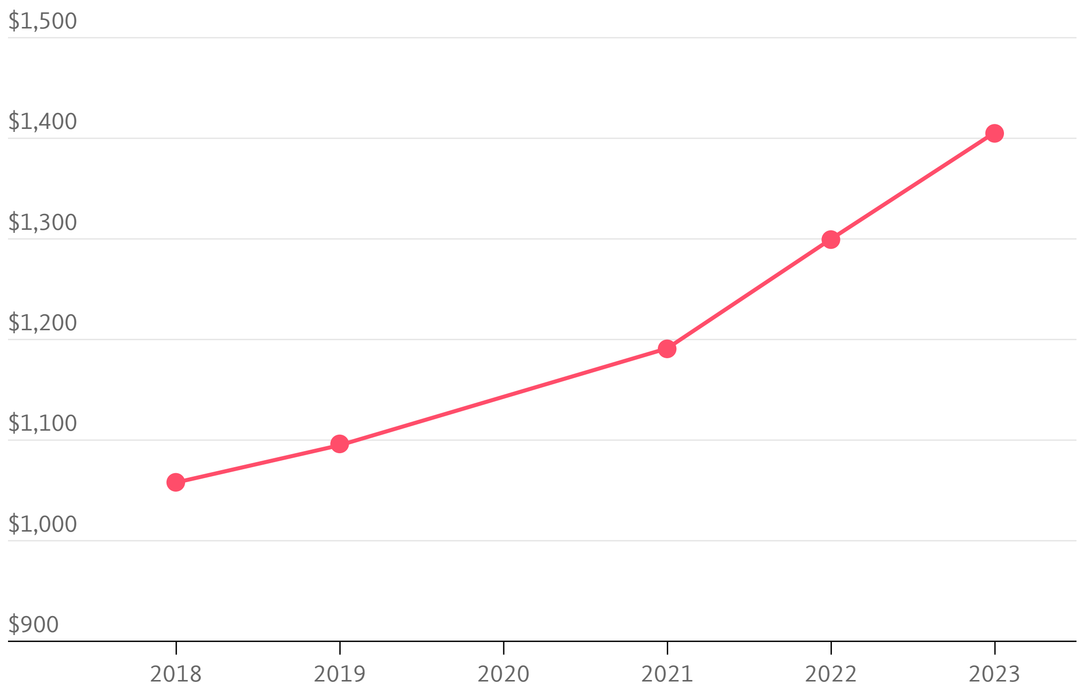
Median household income by tenure, United States, 2018–2023



Source: PolicyLink analysis of 1-year American Community Survey. **Note:** Amounts are expressed in contemporary dollars (i.e., 2023 income reported in 2023 dollars).

FIGURE 6

Median gross rent, United States, 2018–2023



Source: PolicyLink analysis of 1-year American Community Survey. **Note:** Amounts are expressed in contemporary dollars (i.e., 2023 income reported in 2023 dollars).

2.2 Crisis Drivers

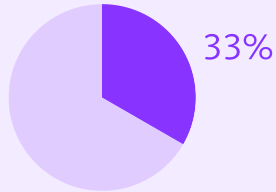
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In recent years, politicians have made it easier for **private equity firms** to acquire a much larger share of the nation's housing—and use homes as a means to build wealth for investors. This "financialization" of housing means investors are trying to **extract maximum profit from tenants' homes**, through tactics like rent increases, predatory fees and practices, and refusing to make repairs.
- Institutional investors now **own a majority of the rental units** in the US, and they show no signs of slowing down. Private equity firms influence not only the renters in their units but also the wider housing landscape by providing cover for smaller landlords to increase rents.
- Opponents of rent control argue that simply building more housing will create sufficient affordable housing, but research indicates this is not the case. And because most rental housing in the US is not subject to rent control, thousands of **affordable housing units are lost** every year to rent increases, tenure conversions, building condemnations, and demolitions.
- Rent control is **necessary to preserve and increase** the nation's existing affordable housing by reducing the ability of investors, corporations, and landlords to extract profit and accumulate wealth from the nation's growing number of renters.

Wall Street Owns a Growing Share of American Homes

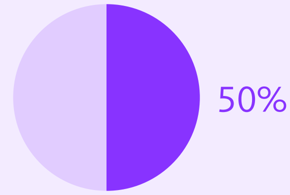
One of the primary factors contributing to the recent rise in rents is the rapid financialization of housing—in other words, the increased integration between Wall Street and real estate markets. The surge in treating housing as a financial asset—through increased trading, investment for profit potential, and the broader extractive commodification of homes—undermines the fundamental purpose of housing as a human right meant to benefit its inhabitants. Speculators find ways to capitalize on market conditions and turn a profit at every stage of a typical market cycle, even the devastating collapses and ensuing perilous upswings. For example, this was the case in the post-foreclosure and post-pandemic years, during which cash-flush corporate investors and private equity firms swooped in and bought up single- and multifamily housing.

2011:



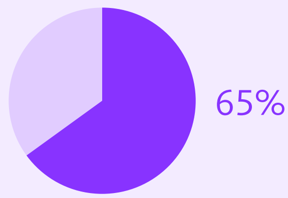
1/3 of apartment units owned by corporate landlords backed by private equity.

2021:



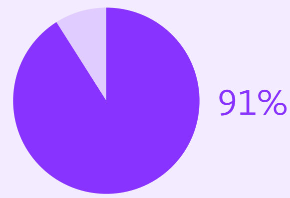
1/2 of apartment units owned by corporate landlords backed by private equity.

5–99 unit buildings:



65% of buildings owned by business structures that have partners.

100+ unit buildings:

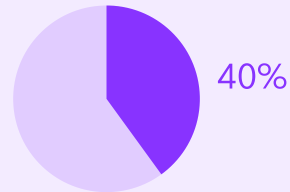


91% of buildings owned by business structures that have partners.

This process of financialization has resulted in private equity rising to become the dominant form of financial backing among the 35 largest multifamily landlords in the US. In 2011, only one-third of apartment units owned by corporate landlords were backed by private equity. By 2021, half of them were—demonstrating the growing entanglement of private equity in the livelihoods of millions of households.[51] Breaking ownership down by building size, 65 percent of 5–99 unit buildings are owned by business structures that have partners (such as limited liability partnerships, real estate investment trusts, and real estate corporations). That number jumps to 91 percent when looking at buildings with 100 or more units.[52] What may come as a surprise to many is that the federal government has been complicit in this shift. Between 2013 and 2021, private equity firms were behind 85 percent of Freddie Mac's biggest apartment deals, meaning the federal government backed the loans that made these real estate transactions possible.[53] (The Tenant Union Federation successfully advocated for the Federal Housing Finance Agency to require minimal tenant protections in multifamily buildings with federally backed loans[54] but this was rescinded in March 2025.[55])

Institutional investors now own a majority of the rental units in the US, and they are not slowing down.[56] Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada saw the highest percentage of investor purchases in 2021, with numbers at or over 30 percent.[57] In December 2023, 29 percent of single-family home purchases were made by investors, surpassing 2022 numbers despite the high interest rates.[58] MetLife Investment Management estimates that institutional investors will increase their ownership to 40 percent of all single-family rentals by 2030.[59] Targeting single-family and large multifamily rentals is a profit-driven strategy, as properties with one unit and over 50 units yield the highest average monthly rental revenue compared to other building sizes.[60]

By 2030:



Estimated ownership of single-family rentals by institutional investors will be 40%.

Single-family corporate landlords accumulate more profits to scale up their vast portfolios through imposing outsized rent hikes and new fees on tenants.[61] These rent increases are not only egregious, but can be illegal. In California, Invitation Homes, the country's largest landlord of single-family homes, was caught violating the Tenant Protection Act by unlawfully increasing the rents on 1,900 renter households. As a result, they were forced to pay over $2 million in civil penalties and refund their tenants over $1.68 million.[62] In 2024, the Federal Trade Commission also penalized Invitation Homes for its unlawful actions, including charging undisclosed junk fees. Consequently, Invitation Homes agreed to refund consumers over $48 million.[63] A congressional study found that the five largest single-family owners (Invitation Homes, American Homes 4 Rent, FirstKey Homes, Progress Residential, and Amherst Residential) tended to purchase homes in neighborhoods with significantly larger Black populations and higher percentage of households headed by single women with children compared to the national average. In Atlanta, this has had disastrous consequences. Between 2007 and 2016, investors stripped Black households in Atlanta of more than $4 billion in home equity, targeting areas of disinvestment—where residents have already endured generations of racist real estate practices and exploiting the resulting rent gap.[64]

Between 2007 and 2016, investors stripped Black households in Atlanta of more than $4 billion in home equity, targeting areas of disinvestment—where residents have already endured generations of racist real estate practices and exploiting the resulting rent gap.

The increased concentration of corporate ownership is not only a danger to tenants but entire communities. Another profit-seeking strategy employed by these owners is to intentionally decrease the provision of maintenance services related to habitability.[65] One instance of this practice is exemplified in a Starwood Waypoint tenant's lease, which states that major repairs are not a landlord's obligation and that tenants are ultimately responsible for the cost of routine maintenance and minor repairs—even essentials like smoke detectors.[66]

While financialization makes it easier for investors to rent gouge, it also makes wealth extraction more feasible for owners of any size. **A lack of regulation, oversight, and tenant protections creates the opportunity for smaller landlords to imitate the profit-seeking behavior of large corporate landlords.** In the last five years, three important housing finance and operating trends have created pressure on all landlords, regardless of size, to increase rent:

1. During the pandemic, many landlords took out low-interest loans that had high loan-to-value ratios (high levels of debt relative to the value of the building). Some even refinanced to leverage more debt to acquire even more property.[67] As these loans mature (or reach their final payment dates), landlords react to the pressures of mortgage payments by increasing rents.[68]
2. Landlords are experiencing higher operating costs, such as rising insurance rates and deferred maintenance from the pandemic rearing its head.[69] These costs, or perceived future costs (if landlords increase rents in anticipation of rising operating costs) also lead landlords to squeeze tenants for higher rents.
3. The increased and prolific use of algorithmic rent-setting tools, such as RealPage, to maximize profits across the multifamily housing sector has led to rising rents. A federal analysis found that anti-competitive pricing cost renters at least $3.8 billion in 2023.[70] Read more about RealPage here (see page 91).

Given the lack of transparency in the housing market and inability to confirm which landlords are impacted by specific conditions, the increased media coverage of higher operating costs creates cover for all landlords to raise rents—similar to the across-the-board rise in grocery costs being attributed to record inflation.

Thousands of Affordable Housing Units Are Lost Every Year

Most rental housing in the US is not subject to rent control of any kind, meaning households living in homes that are affordable to them are vulnerable to rent hikes resulting in increased housing cost burden. Every year, thousands of subsidized and unsubsidized (or "naturally occurring"[71]) affordable housing units are lost to rent increases, tenure conversions, building condemnations, and demolitions. Between 2012 and 2022, the number of rental units affordable to a household earning 30 percent AMI decreased by 2.1 million units, in large part due to rent increases, leaving only 7.2 million units available to 11 million extremely low-income households. The US housing stock also lost 4 million units of rental housing that had rents of $600–$999.[72] Rent control is necessary to preserve the nation's existing affordable housing.

The private market alone—and more importantly, deregulation—cannot be relied upon to meet growing housing needs, or even to replace the aforementioned loss of lower-rent housing. Economists have found evidence challenging the assumption that relaxing regulatory constraints would substantially lower housing prices and meaningfully expand housing supply. Examining local housing markets over a 40-year period using a general demand-and-supply framework, they found that constrained housing supply is relatively unimportant in explaining differences in rising housing prices among US cities.[73] Instead, high and rising incomes are more predictive of higher home prices.

Further evidence of the failures of deregulation as a housing strategy is demonstrated by private equity firms' aggressive targeting of rent-regulated and subsidized housing. Between 2005 and 2009, private equity firms purchased an estimated 100,000 units (or 10 percent) of rent-regulated housing in New York City, aiming to reduce maintenance expenses and use rent control loopholes to extract untapped value.[74] Since 2016, Blackstone and Starwood Capital have accumulated over a quarter of a million apartment units backed by Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) in California, Colorado, Texas, and Virginia, bought with the intention of increasing rents to market-rate at the end of the affordability period to extract profits.[75]

The same decline is taking place in the publicly subsidized affordable housing stock. Since 1996, the number of public housing units has decreased by more than a quarter of a million units as a result of demolition or removal from the housing stock.[76] In 1996, over 1.3 million units of public housing were available in the US. This number dropped to 958,000 in 2021.[77]

The National Housing Preservation Database indicates that nearly 375,000 federally assisted homes could be lost in the next five years, through expiration of LIHTC affordability covenants or other means.[78] Many of the subsidies associated with this assisted housing stock are nonrenewable, meaning local and state governments will need to deploy acquisition and preservation strategies to maintain affordability—or risk losing these valuable units to thirsting private actors waiting to flip expiring buildings for profit. To address this pattern, rent control implements checks on rent increases both during and after affordability periods.

Now more than ever, we need rent control to protect the lower-cost housing that already exists in the private market while we expand our public and community-owned affordable housing stock in the longer term. Accompanied by the development of permanently and deeply affordable housing, rent control is a clear pathway to preventing the further loss of housing while simultaneously closing the affordability gap for renters across the country.

2.3 The Power and Reach of the Corporate Real Estate Lobby

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- With multimillion-dollar coffers and control over millions of renters' homes, real estate industry groups and the landlord lobby exert enormous influence over housing policy—and stopping rent control is one of their primary objectives.
- Powerful corporate landlord associations spent a staggering $326 million in lobbying between Fiscal Year 2020–2023 while amassing $1.86 billion in combined revenue.
- With overlapping leadership, these corporations and associations have created an interconnected, reinforcing network of misinformation to protect their ability to extract unlimited profits at the expense of renters.

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US Landlord Lobby's Power, Reach in the Fight Against Rent Regulation

Many of the largest US landlords lead a network of powerful trade associations. While they use these organizations to pool their resources, the companies and the billionaires that lead them remain largely behind the scenes. With multimillion-dollar coffers and control over millions of renters' homes, these industry groups exert enormous influence over housing policy, prioritizing company profits above all else. Rent control has been arguably their biggest target. They have leveraged their extensive geographic footprints, vast wealth, relationships and capacity to undermine and vilify any efforts to regulate rent increases at the local, state and national levels in the US.

Read the "Inoculation Toolkit" (see page 60) for messages that successfully counter these industry groups' favorite talking points.

The key US housing industry associations we will focus on here are the National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC), the National Apartment Association (NAA), the National Rental Housing Council (NRHC), the National Association of Realtors (NAR), the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), and the Real Estate Roundtable (RER). This analysis examines these associations given how they have centered efforts to fight rent control within their organizations. Most of these groups have local affiliates across the country that establish their own leadership while receiving resources from the national organization, including talking points, research, and funding. It is important to note that these organizations often marshal a far-reaching web to oppose rent control, encompassing offices, mortgage, private equity, financial services, business, and other allies that also may have counterparts across localities.

FIGURE 7

Key US housing industry associations

	National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC)	National Apartment Association (NAA)	National Rental Home Council (NRHC)	National Association of Realtors (NAR)	National Association of Home Builders (NAHB)	Real Estate Roundtable (RER)
Founding/ History	Founded in 1978,[79] the NMHC brings together industry representatives from some of the largest companies in the apartment sector. The Council's self-reported largest 50 owners control over 2.4 million apartment units where 40 million people live.[80]	Founded in 1939, the NAA comprises 141 member groups encompassing 95,000 members that own or manage over 12 million apartment units.[81]	Since its founding in 2014, the National Rental Home Council (NRHC) has almost exclusively been led by four companies: American Homes 4 Rent, Invitation Homes, Progress Residential, and Tricon Resident, some of the country's largest corporate landlords that collectively control hundreds of thousands of homes.[82] [83]	Founded in 1908, NAR represents over 1.5 million members from over a thousand local subgroups. With over $1 billion in assets under its control, NAR is the largest real estate industry group in the country. Even the term "realtor" is trademarked by the organization.[84]	Founded in the 1940s, NAHB is made up of state and local groups, a third of which are home builders and remodelers.[85]	Founded in 1997, the RER brings together powerful industry actors and other trade associations, serving as a nexus between the groups and individual companies.
Membership	2,000 companies[86]	141 affiliates	Approximately 80 companies	1.5 million individuals[87]	700 state and local associations[88]	1,000,000+ members across 18 national associations
Leadership	340 members	48 members	8 members	900+ members	1,700+ members	24 members
Prominent Real Estate Corporations Represented in Leadership	American Campus Communities (owned by Blackstone), Bozzuto, Equity Residential, Greystar, Lincoln Property Company, Mid-America Apartment Communities (MAA), Related, Tramell Crow[89]	Berkshire Residential Investments, Greystar Real Estate, Weidner Apartment Homes[90]	AMH (formerly American Homes 4 Rent), FirstKey Homes, Invitation Homes, Pretium Partners/Progress Residential, Tricon Residential, and VineBrook Homes[91]	Berkshire Hathaway Homeservice, Century 21, Coldwell Banker, Landmark Properties Realty ONE Group, RE/MAX	Campbell Communities Konter Quality Homes	Blackstone, Brookfield, Equity Residential, Related, Starwood, Trammell Crow[92]
Revenue (Fiscal Years 2020–2023)	$76.1 million[93]	$160.6 million[94]	$8.3 million[95]	$1.3 billion[96]	$273.9 million[97]	$28.1 million[98]
Federal Lobbying (Fiscal Years 2020–2023)	$24.3 million[99]	$5.4 million[100]	No information provided	$260.8 million[101]	$17.6 million[102]	$18.6 million[103]
PAC Raising (2020, 2022 and 2024 Cycles)	$53.6 million[104]	$5.8 million[105]	$0.056 million[106]	$53.6 million[107]	$9.5 million[108]	$2.2 million[109]
Anti-Rent Control	"As communities across the nation continue to face real housing affordability challenges, too many lawmakers are considering policies to regulate rents instead of those that will increase the supply of housing"[110]	"Across the country, NAA and our state and local partners are sounding the alarm and steadfastly working to protect the industry against the growing risk of rent control."[111]	"When you talk about what I consider bad ideas... rent control is at the top of that list. It never seems to go away. It's been proven over and over again not to be effective. And yet, here we are talking about it in the context of national housing policy." —David Howard, NRHC CEO[112]	"Property owners have the right to set rents at market-rate. Property owners have the right to own property free of unreasonable controls. Rent control and rent stabilization put unreasonable costs and burdens upon property owners without compensation."[113]	"NAHB is unequivocally opposed to rent control in any form at any level of government. NAHB will actively oppose residential rent control at the national level, in state legislatures, in voter ballot initiatives, and in local communities where it may be introduced, and seek to educate policymakers and all other people of our nation regarding the very harmful effects and negative unintended consequences of rent control."[114]	"We support specific measures to expand the supply of housing ... [and] oppose misguided restrictions such as rent control, rent stabilization, and other restrictions on tenant engagement."[115]

Six Industry Associations Combined

1. **Revenue** (Fiscal Years 2020–2023)**:** $1.86 billion[116]
2. **Lobbying** (Fiscal Years 2020–2023): $326.7 million[117]
3. **PAC Raising** (2020, 2022, and 2024 cycles): $124.76 million[118]

Finances and Leadership

From Fiscal Years 2020 to 2023, the housing industry associations we examine here reported raising a combined **$1.86 billion** in revenue and spending **$326.7** million on lobbying.[119] At the leadership level, these associations often share both individual and corporate members who hold influential positions across multiple organizations. One example of this membership and leadership crossover: Equity Residential serves on the Executive Committee at the NMHC and the Board of Directors at the RER, while Equity's CEO also acts as the Second Vice Chair at the National Association of Real Estate Investment Trusts, an allied association representing real estate investment trusts.[120] It also has representatives in leadership of at least four state associations.[121] Equity is a powerful corporate landlord that owns over 80,000 apartment units in dozens of US states; it was also a named defendant in 2023 and 2024 litigation filed by tenants and the Washington, DC Attorney General for its alleged participation in a price-fixing cartel that illegally charged high rents.[122] Large corporate landlords like Equity are frequently holding leadership roles at multiple national associations, as well as at state-level groups.

A 2024 analysis of real estate industry associations at local, state, and national levels found that over 40 corporate landlords, including 22 of the largest 50 US landlords as tracked by NMHC itself, had representation on at least one national and one state board at real estate trade associations. Many companies were in leadership at multiple national associations, as well as having more than one representative on boards at a single association.[123] Another example: Greystar, one of the largest landlords in the US owning over 100,000 units, was represented in leadership at multiple national associations as well as eight state associations.[124] Landlords employ this network of associations and its resources as a powerful tool in their fight against housing justice policies, rent control in particular.[125]

Political Activity

These housing industry associations are particularly active in election seasons when they funnel millions of dollars to candidates and committees for various parties and initiatives at all levels of government. Across the past three election cycles since 2019, the six national associations profiled here reported spending a combined **$326.7 million** on lobbying, and the organizations' political action committees (PACs) reported raising **$124.8 million**.[126] While the associations' support is not limited to candidates from a particular party, they do tend to support the Republican party itself (i.e., its committees) more frequently. The National Multifamily Housing Council PAC, for example, distributed its contributions relatively evenly between individual Democrats and Republicans in the 2024 election cycle. The PAC tended to give more to Republican committees, however, including a contribution of $50,000 to Republican Steve Scalise's (R-LA) committee and $195,000 to the National Republican Senatorial Committee and National Republican Congressional Committee.[127] Similarly, the National Association of Realtors' PAC contributed evenly to individual Republicans and Democrats in the same period but gave more to Republican committees, such as a $1 million contribution to the House Majority PAC.[128]

Often, there appears to be a correlation between these donations and policymakers' activities related to housing policies, particularly rent control. In the 2024 election cycle, NMHC's PAC contributed $10,000 to Republican Jodey Arrington (R-TX), who was then the Chairman of the House Budget Committee.[129] Arrington has criticized rent control as a "disaster," and served as a member of a Congressional committee that commissioned a joint economic report suggesting that rent control could "reduce housing supply and worsen housing quality."[130] In California, the California Association of Realtors, an affiliate of NAR, contributed $23,200 to State Senator Toni Atkins in the 2024 cycle,[131] a Democrat who opposed a rent control ballot measure in 2024.[132]

Coordinated Attack on Rent Control

These trade associations frequently collaborate to fight rent regulations directly. The NAA, NAHB, NAR, and NMHC are all members of the Housing Solutions Coalition, an association-of-associations devoted to pushing back against rent control while purporting to promote housing affordability.[133] The coalition is dedicated to the industry's goals of increasing housing supply through the elimination of "excessive regulations." On its "About" page, the coalition blames rent control for the current housing crisis: "although viewed as the "quick-fix" to helping renters in need, rent control is stifling new housing and raising costs for those who can least afford it." The coalition's website goes on to claim that rent control "exacerbates [housing] shortages," "disproportionately benefits high-income households," and "ultimately drives up rents." They argue instead that "We need policies that address regressive zoning and other barriers to make it easier to build housing."[134] This stance is, unsurprisingly, identical to the central agenda and messaging of the extremely wealthy landlords and homebuilders who lead the industry.

These landlord trade associations are also constantly in communication with regulators and policymakers about rent control, asserting that rent regulation policies pose a threat to their profitability and investability. In July 2024, all but one of the organizations profiled here signed onto a letter addressed to former President Joseph Biden opposing his proposal to temporarily cap rent increases from large landlords at 5 percent for two years nationwide.[135] In the letter, the groups claimed that such a policy would "disincentivize housing investors" and instead advocated for the construction of more homes.[136] Two days later, the NAHB, one of the letter's signatories, sent its Chairman of the Board of Directors Carl Harris to testify before the House Financial Services Committee. At the Republican-led hearing on "Housing Solutions: Cutting Through Government Red Tape," Harris blamed regulation for landlords' increasing failure to "provide quality, well-maintained and well-managed apartment communities," citing their inability to raise rents beyond a reasonable cap as an "investment risk."[137] Earlier in July 2024, the NAA and NMHC responded to a Federal Housing Finance Agency announcement by referencing the Housing Solutions Coalition's arguments against rent control, including a statement that read, "There is no debate. Rent caps hurt renters and communities."[138] Both the NAHB testimony and NMHC/NAA statement made reference to research that purported to show that rent control is a "failed policy."[139]

The industry and its associations consistently cite research that their own representatives conducted or the corporate entities themselves funded to substantiate their claims about rent control. Under the guise of neutral research, these reports are nothing more than tools to validate untrue industry talking points. For example, the NMHC/NAA joint statement responding to former President Biden's comments on rent caps referenced two research reports, both of which the NMHC itself had commissioned. In 2018, the NMHC published a literature review that claimed that rent control was harmful to the housing market, landlords, and renters.[140] Yet the review was conducted with funding from the NMHC[141] by Lisa Sturtevant, the chief economist at multiple listing service firm Bright MLS and founder of the MIBOR REALTOR Association, a subsidiary of NAR.[142] In January 2024, the NMHC released a companion report it had commissioned from Dr. Arthur C. Nelson, which again asserted that rent control "disincentiviz[es] investment" and reduces property values.[143] Nelson has previously provided soundbites to other industry groups to advance their talking points,[144] and he is listed on the website of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, a conservative free-market think tank.[145] Another example of this tactic in action is the NAA's references to its own research to support its claim that rent control would limit the amount spent on repairs and maintenance.[146]

Despite the questionable integrity of the research holding up their claims, the messaging generated by these organizations is often prominently featured in the conversation about rent regulation at the national, state, and local levels. Their anti-tenant stances appear in advertisements as well as in mainstream media discourse through both direct placements, such as op-eds and indirect placements, such as being quoted as ostensibly "neutral" sources. During the 2024 election, the California Association of Realtors (a subsidiary of NAR) purchased advertising space across the state for a fact sheet that declared local Proposition 33 would expand extreme rent control and worsen the housing affordability crisis.[147] In August 2023, Sharon Wilson Géno, president of the National Multifamily Housing Council, published an opinion piece railing against rent control in *The Hill*, a news publication heavily read by policymakers, including US Congressional offices, that reaches more than 35 million people nationwide.[148] In the piece, among other industry talking points, Géno cited a study by Rebecca Diamond, Timothy James McQuade, and Franklin Qian at Stanford University, whose authors argue that a San Francisco rent control ordinance worsened conditions. Notably, tenant advocates have counter-asserted that the worsened conditions in fact resulted from landlords' exploitation of loopholes in the ordinance (such as allowing condo conversions) and that the study's findings actually support the evidence of the benefits of rent control for tenants.[149] Months earlier, an editorialized "explainer" by CNBC took a critical stance of rent control, citing the "expert" perspective of Géno as well as Franklin Qian, coauthor of the aforementioned Stanford study.[150] To counter this repeated misinformation, housing justice advocates have highlighted the many flaws with the study, including its use of skewed datasets, issues with the time frame, and manipulated mathematical models.[151]

State and Local Reach

This national network's strategies are duplicated and its impact is amplified at the state and local levels. Many organizations, such as NAA and NAR, maintain databases that track federal, state, and local bills, especially those related to rent control, and use this information to coordinate member action.[152] The national associations have a network of affiliated groups to which they provide substantial funding, research, and other resources, often for the explicit purpose of fighting rent control. With organizations in every state as well as dozens of regions and cities across the US, their reach is far. A 2024 analysis by Americans for Financial Reform, Bargaining for the Common Good, and the Private Equity Stakeholder Project examined the activities of the 97 state and local trade associations affiliated with the six organizations analyzed here, as well as their closest allies, across the 29 states with the largest tenant populations. Their findings revealed that state and local associations amassed **$1.02 billion** in revenue from 2020 to 2022, spent at least **$33 million** on lobbying in 2021 and 2022, and contributed **$111.5 million** to political campaigns in the 2020 and 2022 election cycles.[153]

FIGURE 8

National and state organizations' revenue and spending, 2020–2023

	Revenue	Lobbying	PAC contributions
National organizations	**$1.9 billion** 2020–2023	**$327 million** 2020–2023	**$125 million** 2020–2023
State organizations	**$1 billion** 2020–2022	**$33 million** 2021–2022	**$112 million** 2020 and 2022

Source: https://ourfinancialsecurity.org/2024/06/report-who-is-behind-the-curtain-breaking-down-trade-associations-that-fight-tenants-and-hurt-housing-affordability/.

These state and local groups—often in coordination with the national organizations—are consistently leading. and funding, efforts oppose the success of municipal and state rent control measures, including legislation, voter initiatives, and administrative regulations.

Take California, the largest housing market in the country where 44 percent of the population rents (second in the US only to New York) and 28 percent of those renters—1.63 million people—pay half or more of their paychecks to landlords.[154] The California Association of Realtors (CAR) and the California Apartment Association (CAA) are two of the most powerful organizations in the state with $51.1 million and $10.3 million in 2022 revenue respectively.[155] CAR and CAA consistently raise millions to spend on lobbying, as well as through their PACs to donate to candidates.[156] The groups have led the fight against rent control, including against three statewide ballot initiatives in the last four election cycles (2018, 2020, and 2024) that lost by 19, 20, and 22 percentage points respectively.[157] In the most recent fight in 2024, those opposed to the initiative spent $124.66 million.[158] The leading donors against rent control were the CAA, which gave $88.8 million, CAR, which donated $22 million, and NAR itself, which contributed $5 million—by far the three largest donations.[159] Where do the associations get that much cash? Much of their funding comes from member organizations and companies, many of which are profiting from tenants. As just one example, in both 2018 and 2020, Blackstone—the largest private equity firm in the world with a $1 trillion in assets under management as well as the largest landlord in the US, contributed $6.2 million to the opposition in 2018 and another $7 million to defeat the 2020 initiative through various committees, including a few sponsored by the CAA.[160]

These efforts seen in California are not isolated incidents. Profit-driven groups and their affiliate networks have invested decades of effort into actively fighting any rent control efforts at the local level by using their outsized influence and financial resources to elect policymakers and sustain local anti-rent control groups, among other strategies. NAR has publicly celebrated electing of a member to the Washington, DC city council sympathetic to their cause,[161] blocking a rent control proposition from appearing on voters' ballots in Sacramento,[162] and defeating a ballot initiative in Asbury Park, New Jersey.[163] Furthermore, the group bragged about successfully campaigning to pressure Iowa lawmakers into killing a rent control bill[164] and touted a sizable grant its national counterpart made to an anti-rent control effort in Boston.[165] Similarly, the NAA provided a grant to the Chicagoland Apartment Association, one of its state-level affiliates,[166] which it used to block multiple rent control bills from reaching a floor vote in the legislature as part of the industry's SHAPE Illinois coalition.[167]

FIGURE 9

Largest corporate landlords pour money into fighting local rent control

	Blackstone	Greystar
Units Owned/ Managed	Owns and manages over 300,000 units—Largest landlord in the US.[168]	Owns over 108,000 homes and manages nearly 800,000 in the US.[169]
Net Worth of Key Leaders	$1 trillion in assets under management—Largest private equity firm in the world	CEO, Bob Faith, is worth $5 billion as of February 2025[170]
Connections to State and Local Organizations	In California, Blackstone contributed $6.2 million to the opposition in 2018 and another $7 million to defeat the 2020 ballot initiative through various committees, including some sponsored by the California Apartment Association.[171]	Greystar is one of the most influential landlords within the Colorado Apartment Association, with four representatives on the board. From 2018 to 2023, the Colorado Apartment Association paid lobbyists nearly $340,000 to pursue an agenda of higher rents and blocking protections for renters.[172]

Housing industry associations and the corporate landlords behind them have amassed incredible wealth. The landlord companies at the forefront of these associations make billions, and their top executives are among the richest people in the world. One of the largest landlords in the country, Greystar, owns over 108,000 homes and manages nearly 800,000 in the US, while its CEO, Bob Faith, is worth $5 billion as of February 2025.[173]

For decades, these companies and their associations have leveraged their power and resources to discredit and oppose rent control nationwide. They pay for research that parrots their narratives and saturate key platforms like TV, radio, smartphones, and social media—to make their message pervasive across the industry, the media, and among the general public. CalMatters estimated that industry groups spent over $125 million campaigning against Proposition 33 in California, with the Apartment Association and California Association of Realtors contributing tens of millions.[174] They make political donations to and build relationships with policymakers who rely on their financial support and information, often since the start of their political careers. Policymakers themselves often are or have been landlords as well. If, in spite of all this, tenants are able to get rent regulation considered, these associations and the landlords that lead them spend millions to fight and discredit their proposals opposing all limits on the amount rent landlords can charge tenants. While they make billions in profits, families in our communities are forced to choose between ensuring they have a roof over their head and other basic necessities like food and medicine.

INSIGHT

Proposition 33

In 2024, the real estate industry was able to again defeat a statewide California ballot measure, Proposition 33—which sought to give localities the option to strengthen rent control by repealing state-level preemptions that ban stronger rent stabilization.[175] The opposition spent nearly $125 million on a disinformation campaign, largely funded by the California Apartment Association, which falsely claimed Prop 33 would "roll back" renter protections.[176] The opposition took on misleading organizational names, such as "Californians to Protect Affordable Housing," and outspent those in favor of rent control by nearly double; Governor Gavin Newsom and other politicians came out against Prop 33.[177] On the eve of the election, voters were divided and confused as to which side was actually pro-renter protections, split roughly into thirds of those for, against, and undecided.[178] Prop 33 failed to pass with 60 percent of voters against.[179] Ultimately, the opposition was able to use the people's support of rent control to scare them into voting the measure down.

3.0

WHY RENT CONTROL

There are a multitude of benefits related to rent control, ranging from impacts on housing stability and health to local economies and civic engagement. This section is designed to equip organizers and advocates with powerful talking points, convenient data and research, and compelling evidence. Use it to inform your base and move stakeholders towards alignment on rent control.

3.1 Rent Control Interrupts the Cycle of Speculation and Expands the Collective Power of Renters

KEY TAKEAWAY

Rent control is a policy that both **defends tenants** against rent hikes and displacement and also **expands the power** of renters by disrupting the cycle of speculation and extraction on which profit-seeking landlords rely.

Rent Control is Needed to Intervene in the Speculative Cycle of Wealth Extraction

Federal deregulation of the financial industry in the 1980s, combined with decision makers' hostility and neglect toward fair housing laws, tenant protections, and building codes, has shaped today's housing market. We face a vast gulf between a real estate-rooted, asset-owning class and a growing population of precarious tenants, unhoused people, and underwater mortgage-holders.[180]

This gap has widened due to market consolidation by corporate landlords and property technology innovations that allow landlords to extract greater value from their properties more quickly, while pushing their tenants toward economic precarity, eviction, and homelessness.[181]

While the financial and tech products driving this speculative nature of the rental housing market are new, the underlying system of extraction is not—it is rooted in racial capitalism.[182] From the sanctification of private property rights to lending and development practices that perpetuate segregation and disinvestment, the real estate market has long prioritized wealth accumulation over housing security.[183]

Despite all of this, the primary process by which landlords and investors extract value from their properties in stable or growing markets is fairly straightforward:

- Exploit rent gaps, which are often a byproduct of a 20th century history of racist disinvestment in urban neighborhoods, in order to buy low and sell high.[184]

- Increase a building's net operating income (revenue minus operations costs) by hiking rents and withholding services.
- Profit off of the relationship between an increasing net operating income and growing property values by taking out increasingly larger mortgages on a building and pulling out equity to pay themselves and their investors—all while leaving the building in financial distress.[185] Under accelerated housing financialization, self-interest is often the most dominant, and profitable, motive.

Government intervention in this process is rare, largely due to the real estate industry's immense lobbying power. The sector has spent billions of dollars and immense political capital to shield its extraction practices from scrutiny at the federal, state, and local levels (see page 28).

For over a century, landlords have fought rent control laws in particular because they limit the speculative potential of rental properties. Under rent control, annual rent increases are capped, reducing the future profitability of each unit in a building. Stronger tenure protections further curb landlords' ability to boost net operating income through tactics like service cutbacks, deferred maintenance, and harassment.

In turn, rent control disrupts the financial mechanisms fueling speculation. Without the promise of soaring net operating incomes, banks are less likely to allow landlords to refinance their building's mortgage. And without larger—and often unmanageable—debt levels, a landlord's ability to extract equity is limited.

Beyond its impact on direct value extraction, a meaningful expansion of rent control—paired with other regulatory measures such as campaign finance reforms—could also weaken landlord influence on politics. The tenure protections associated with rent control help create a safer environment for tenant organizing and participation in the political process. Additionally, limiting real estate profits helps mitigate how much money landlords have available to spend on undercutting housing justice.

Rent Control is a Cornerstone of Housing Policy That Complements Other Strategies

Housing justice policies generally fall into two categories: defensive and expansionist. Defensive policies aim to protect people, programs, or laws from private or government action. On the other hand, expansionist policies shift power from landlords to those marginalized by the housing system (including tenants and unhoused people) or bring more resources under public and community control.

These categories complement each other, both through the process of organizing and during implementation. For example, defensive policies can lay the groundwork for expansionist ones: tenants who successfully push for improved living conditions may create the organizing infrastructure for claiming broader rights in the future. Policies can also evolve—what starts as a defensive measure can become expansionist or serve both roles simultaneously. For instance, rental assistance can either help people stay in their homes while enriching private landlords or support the operations of deeply affordable, tenant-run social housing.

Because of decades of austerity and deregulation, which has now entered a period of intense acceleration, housing justice organizers in the US have primarily focused on defensive policies. These include strategies for keeping tenants in their homes and protecting existing programs from funding cuts.

On the surface, rent control is a defensive policy, shielding tenants from displacement by limiting how much a landlord can increase the rent each year. But it can also be read as an expansionist policy. When crafted well and backed by strong organizing, rent control can shift power dynamics, strengthening tenants' collective influence over landlords.

Rent control's transformational potential stems from the ways it interacts with other housing policies, resulting in more effective defensive strategies. For example, when paired with just cause tenant protections, rent control defends tenant organizers from retaliatory evictions and rent increases. Furthermore, it dovetails with the right to counsel, providing tenant lawyers with more tools to fight evictions. In private rental markets, rent control limits the potential for rent inflation in subsidized units, making housing vouchers more effective.

Rent control can also support expansionist policies that bring housing under public or community control by reducing the speculative potential of privately owned rental housing. By lowering the value that could be extracted from multifamily rentals, rent control creates market conditions where nonprofit developers and community land trusts can afford to purchase buildings and convert them into social housing. Similarly, when combined with subsidies and technical assistance, rent control can make tenant right of first refusal laws more effective. As complementary strategies to build more deeply affordable housing are implemented, rent control ensures long-term affordability of both preexisting and new housing.

Over time, the steady rates of rent increases under rent control could stabilize land values, reducing development costs for new social housing. However, rent control alone cannot create a robust social housing sector. It requires infrastructure for cooperative and community ownership that matches the scale of the publicly supported multibillion-dollar industry undergirding single-family homeownership.

3.2 Tenants Gain Stability and Affordability

KEY TAKEAWAY

Rent control benefits tenants by immediately protecting households from displacement and improving affordability. While it benefits tenants broadly on a large scale because of its power to cover private-market housing, rent control also disproportionately benefits communities of color, low-income households, immigrants, women, and people living with a disability or chronic illness.

Rent control is a critical tool for alleviating our housing affordability emergency. It is a necessary policy to stop the bleeding—preventing homelessness and evictions—as longer-term solutions, like increasing the stock of social and truly affordable housing, are more gradually put in place. Rent control helps keep tenants in place and preserve existing lower-cost housing on a large scale.[186]

Rent control works: it is effective at immediately improving housing stability and affordability for current tenants.[187] Tenants living in rent-controlled units move less frequently and are less likely to experience destabilizing forced moves. They pay substantially less than tenants in nonregulated units: e.g., $3,650 less per year in Los Angeles, $3,780 in San José, $6,000 in New York City, over $6,440 in Santa Monica, and $18,000 in high-cost Manhattan.[188] The savings—and protection against eviction—are even greater when stabilized rents are compared to market-rate-asking rents advertised for vacant units.

Rent control is the largest source of housing for low-income people—housing more low-income families than other kinds of housing stock—in some cities where it exists.[189] Thus, rent stabilization has the potential to be a significant source of affordable housing in these localities.[190]

Nationwide, since 2013, we have lost over 2.5 million lower-priced homes, renting for below $600 per month—in large part due to landlords' rent increases.[191] Moreover, one in four renter households can only afford rents in this price bracket.[192] Yet we have not built enough affordable housing to compensate for this hemorrhage. In 2025, developers are projected to complete only 78,300 subsidized homes aimed at lower-income households.[193]

Rent control is a smart and pragmatic policy for safeguarding the currently lower-cost and affordable housing we do have.

Stability for Low-Income Renters

Rent control increases housing stability for renters who are vulnerable to displacement.[194] Studies of rent control consistently find that tenants living in rent-controlled units move less frequently and are less likely to be forced out of their homes due to rapidly rising rents.[195] Rent control helps people stay in their homes for longer periods.[196] The stability created by rent control disproportionately benefits low-income households, people of color, seniors, and families with children, who are most at risk of displacement, forced moves, and their negative consequences.[197] For example:

- Immediately after Los Angeles adopted rent control, moving rates declined significantly so the share of renters who moved in the last year decreased by 37 percent. What is more, moving rates dropped the most for Black and Latinx renters.[198] Today, rent-stabilized tenants in Los Angeles are more likely than non-stabilized tenants to have lived in their units for over a year. Additionally, rent-stabilized tenants are more likely to be lower-income, Black, elderly, noncitizens, and less fluent in English.[199]

- In New York City, tenants in rent-regulated units were three times as likely as those in market-rate units to have lived in their homes for 20 years or more (23 percent compared to 7 percent). In Manhattan, they were 10 times as likely to have enjoyed that length of tenure (35 compared to 3 percent).[200] In 2023, most tenants in uncontrolled market rentals reported moving in the year before, in contrast to a minority of rent-stabilized tenants (57 compared to 24 percent). Tenants in market rentals were nearly 1.7 times as likely to have moved in the two years prior compared to rent-stabilized tenants.[201]

- In Santa Monica, the passage of rent control led to a doubling of the proportion of tenants living in their units for more than 10 years—slowing gentrification and halting an exodus of lower-income households and families with children.[202]

Rent control counters displacement due to gentrification. Displacement due to rising rents is rapidly devastating low-income neighborhoods. Rent control is a key factor that allows low-income households of color, from New York City to San Francisco, to continue living in their gentrifying neighborhoods.[203]

- In 2002, only one out of 15 poor renters who remained in gentrifying New York City neighborhoods rented in the unregulated market—48 percent lived in stabilized units, and the rest largely resided in public housing.[204]

Especially for the most precarious renters, rent control is most effective at countering displacement when it includes vacancy control. A comparison of jurisdictions with vacancy control in California to those without it found that tighter controls were more protective against displacement.[205] (See page 44.)

Affordability

Rent control improves affordability for tenants in rent-controlled units—reducing financial strain and freeing up resources to spend on other household needs.[206] Rent control slows down the growth of rent costs over time—so that regulated rents are as much as 44 percent to 52 percent less than unregulated, market-rate units.[207] In cities with rent regulations, median rents in stabilized units are hundreds of dollars cheaper than those in unregulated units:

- In Manhattan, monthly rents were approximately $1,500 lower in stabilized units in 2017.[208] In 2023, for New York City overall, the median monthly rent was $500 lower in stabilized units than in uncontrolled units.[209]

- In Cambridge, Massachusetts, before rent control was abolished, rents in stabilized units were 44 percent lower than those in non-stabilized units of comparable size, quality, and characteristics.[210]

- In Los Angeles, for units of comparable size, the average rent in stabilized units was 19 percent lower than that in non-stabilized units—amounting to a difference of $304 per month in 2022.[211]

- In Richmond, California, the median monthly rent in rent-controlled units was $1,525 in Fiscal Year 2018, while the median market-rate-asking rent was $2,733, according to Zillow.[212] In San Jose, the difference between the average monthly rent for rent-stabilized one-bedroom apartments and uncontrolled one-bedroom apartments was $315 in 2021.[213]

The difference between stabilized and market-rate-asking rents is even more dramatic.

These immediate savings that rent control provides tenants are critical, offering both short-term and long-term benefits. In the short term, rent control's predictable and more affordable rents help protect tenants against homelessness. In the longer term, studies show that strong rent stabilization allows tenants to afford health care and child-rearing costs, save for retirement, plan for the future, and make important life choices for their long-term well-being, such as changing careers, attending school while working, choosing fulfilling but lower-paying work, or starting a small business.[214] While too often precarious tenants are preoccupied with simply trying to secure the present, rent stabilization has provided financial flexibility, allowing tenants to plan and pursue better futures.

Rent control helps preserve affordability in gentrifying neighborhoods.

- During the late 1990s, rent for unregulated apartments in New York City's gentrifying neighborhoods increased by an average of 43 percent—compared to 11 percent for rent-stabilized apartments in the same neighborhoods.[215] By 2009, unregulated rents were an average of 52 percent higher than regulated rents.[216]

Rent control policies should limit the maximum allowed increase to a rate lower than inflation for the greatest benefit to tenants. Moreover, doing so would not necessarily hurt returns to most landlords.

- A 2021 study in Minneapolis found that, had rent stabilization been in place from 2009 to 2018, rent increase limits could have been set at 75 percent of CPI. Meanwhile, at CPI, this pricing would have allowed returns to landlords comparable to the actual average and median rent increases in the uncontrolled market. Limiting rent increases at CPI plus 3 percent would have allowed returns comparable to the higher end (90th percentile) of rent increases of the existing market, and a rent cap at CPI plus 7 percent would have allowed landlords to yield profits far exceeding what they actually achieved at the top of the market.[217]
- During the 1980s, tenant movements in Berkeley, Santa Monica, and West Hollywood, won rent control ordinances that included vacancy control and capped rent increases at one-third to half the rate of inflation (as measured by the CPI). Numerous studies have found that one-third to half of landlord costs were unaffected by inflation, justifying the lower rent increase limits.[218] Today, several cities still limit rent increases to 60 or 65 percent of the CPI.[219]

INSIGHT

Vacancy Control: Rent control is more effective at preserving affordability and stability when it also limits rent increases after tenants move out.

Vacancy control means that rent increases are restricted even between tenancies, regardless of whether tenants change or move out, as well as within tenancies. Without vacancy control, landlords can increase the rent without limit to market-rate when tenants leave. Thus, without vacancy control, rent control becomes increasingly ineffective over time, as turnover in rent-stabilized units leads to rents increasingly resembling market-rate rents. In the 1970s, many localities initially adopted rent control with vacancy control; however, in the 1990s, the real estate industry fought to roll back this measure through statewide preemptions that imposed vacancy *decontrol*.

Many studies have tracked the benefits of vacancy control to renters, as well as the detrimental effects of vacancy decontrol:

- In California, jurisdictions with rent control and vacancy control experienced median rents $117 lower than adjoining areas that either lacked vacancy control or rent control completely.[220]
- In Santa Monica, prior to vacancy decontrol, rents for 83 percent of controlled units were affordable to households with low, very low, and extremely low incomes. In contrast, since vacancy decontrol, less than 4 percent of stabilized rental units today are affordable to such households.[221]
- Vacancy decontrol has contributed to the displacement of Black renters in California. Before vacancy decontrol, the share of Black renters increased in California cities benefitting from robust rent control. However, after vacancy deregulations allowed landlords to raise rents without limits between tenancies, the share of Black renters decreased as landlords priced out Black tenants.[222]
- In Springfield, New Jersey, rents skyrocketed an average of 56 percent after vacancy decontrol.[223] In San Francisco, prices increased 30 percent on average immediately after decontrol.[224] In Los Angeles, as a result of vacancy decontrol, from 2005 to 2022, the average rent paid by tenants who had newly moved into a stabilized unit increased faster than the CPI.[225]
- Long-term data shows that with vacancy decontrol, the benefits of rent control to newer tenants are muted compared to the savings enjoyed by older tenants who did not recently move. For these older tenants, landlords have not recently had the opportunity to increase their rents to market-rate, so their rents are markedly lower. In Berkeley, the 2022 median rent for tenants who moved in prior to 2013 was $1,200, compared to $2,083 for all stabilized units (which includes homes subject to recent or multiple market-rate rent hikes with tenant turnover under vacancy decontrol).[226]
- In Santa Monica, in 2024, the median monthly rent was $1,117 for long-term tenants who had not moved out since vacancy decontrol took effect in 1999, and thus, their units had thus never been raised to market-rate. In contrast, the median monthly rent for stabilized units with tenant turnover was $2,683.[227]
- In West Hollywood, tenants who moved in before 1996 could afford a rent-stabilized one-bedroom apartment on an annual income of $36,000 in 2018 but new renters moving into a stabilized unit that year were subject to vacancy-decontrolled rents and would would need an income of $83,000 or higher to afford a one-bedroom.[228]

- In San José, stabilized units with new tenants actually underwent an 8.7 percent rent increase in 2022 due to vacancy decontrol—even though rent increases within tenancies were limited at 5 percent, and stabilized tenants experienced an increase of 2 percent on average.[229]
- A Canadian study found that 11 percent of rental units in Ontario saw tenant turnover in 2022–23, and that given vacancy decontrol, the average rent increase for these units was 36 percent—even though rent stabilization limited within-tenancy increases to 2.5 percent. Immediately after vacancy decontrol in 1998, eviction applications jumped 28 percent, largely due to unaffordable rents. The study estimates that had rent control included vacancy control, impacted tenants would have saved thousands of dollars per year, or the equivalent of a month of full-time work at the local minimum wage.[230]

Cities with weakened rent controls are suffering worsening unaffordability as a direct result. Evidence from Los Angeles shows that even moderate rent controls have a positive impact on affordability,[231] but without vacancy control, these benefits are at risk of eroding over time. Today, newly passed rent control policies in Maryland and New York, as well as existing rent regulations in New Jersey, include vacancy control and, thus, better protect renters for the long term.

INSIGHT

Advancing Social Justice: Rent Control Disproportionately Helps Tenants Most in Need

As with any consumer protection, rent control is not means-tested and applies to renters of all incomes—a feature, not a flaw. Universal policies like rent control can be more effective at promoting large-scale social equity than means-tested policies that are available only to a small fraction of those in need. Whereas rent control's universality is automatic, means-testing would unnecessarily create application hurdles for those in need, making benefits less accessible, particularly to those who are informally employed, immigrants, living with a disability, and others facing application barriers. Means-testing for rent regulations would also incentivize landlords to discriminate against lower-income tenants.

Rent control is critical for—and disproportionately benefits—those most harmed by rising rents and displacement, including seniors, people living with chronic illness or a disability, and families with children, as well as the following groups:[232]

- **Low-Income Tenants.** In New York City, 68 percent of households living in rent-stabilized units are low-income, a much higher proportion than those in market-rate rentals; seniors are also concentrated in stabilized apartments.[233] In Los Angeles, low-income households gained the greatest savings after rent stabilization's passage, with average rents measuring at 40 percent below the market-rate.[234] Long-term tenants in rent-controlled units are even more likely to be low-income, living with chronic illness or disability, seniors, and single parents.[235]
- **Communities of Color.** Studies of rent regulation in California, Massachusetts (before its rent control ban), New Jersey, and New York City indicate that people of color disproportionately live in rent-controlled homes or communities with rent control.[236] In Los Angeles, immediately after adopting rent stabilization, Black renters received the greatest savings for one-bedroom

units compared to white renters.[237] Rent regulation helps slow gentrification, which threatens communities of color.[238]

- **Immigrants**. As a regulation, rent control reaches low-income immigrants, including those who are not eligible for government housing assistance. In New York City, immigrants are more likely to live in rent-stabilized housing but less likely to live in subsidized housing than nonimmigrants.[239] Rent control, together with just cause eviction protections, can help counter the displacement of undocumented people who only have access to the tenant protections that cover private rental housing.
- **Women**. Rent control disproportionately benefits households headed by women, who are more likely to both rent and be rent-burdened, especially women of color.[240] Housing stability also benefits domestic violence survivors and protects against abuse.[241]
- **People Living with Disability or Chronic Illness**. In New York City, people with a disability disproportionately live in rent-stabilized housing; 25 percent of stabilized households include one or more people with a disability, in contrast to 15 percent of unregulated households.[242] In Berkeley, 24 percent of long-term renter households in rent-stabilized housing are home to a person with a chronic illness or disability.[243]

It is important to note that rent control is most equitable when it is robust and free of loopholes. Rent control is most effective at reaching those in need when it includes vacancy control, covers all rental homes, and limits rent increases to the rate of inflation. See page 44 for more on the necessity of vacancy control and how vacancy decontrol has singularly hurt renters who are Black, low-income, and living with a disability.

3.3 If Rent Control Expands Nationally, Who Gains?

Rent control regulations can have tremendous reach and impact, benefiting millions of renters across the nation—and especially households that are particularly vulnerable. Ambitious rent control policies without limitations on the type or age of housing stock have the potential to cover millions of US households. Notably, we estimate that if broad rent control policies were implemented in the 45 states without existing regulations, then 31.5 million renter households would be stabilized.[244]

BY THE NUMBERS

Who would benefit from expanding rent control?

31.5 million

renter households would be stabilized. Of those:

19.7 million

would be low-income

7.6 million

would be extremely low-income

14.7 million

would be households of color

Expanding rent control would disproportionately benefit low-income households and Black, Latinx, and multiracial households.

Source: PolicyLink analysis of 2023 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Data and Mapping Tool, Data Version AFFHT0007.

Low-income renter households would overwhelmingly benefit from this expansion of rent control. Specifically, 19.7 million or 60 percent, of renter households who would be covered are considered low-income, making below 80 percent of their state median household income. And 7.6 million, or 23 percent, of covered households are considered extremely low-income, meaning they earn below 30 percent of the state median household income. While nearly one-quarter of stabilized renter households are extremely low-income, these households only make up 10 percent of all households in the 45 states. Rent control policies would protect these renters from excessive rent increases that threaten their housing and financial security.

Rent control policies are more likely to benefit Black, Latinx, and multiracial renter households. With nationwide rent control, 14.7 million households of color would be covered, constituting 46 percent of the households covered. Thus, Black, Latinx, and multiracial renters would disproportionately benefit: over one in five eligible renter households have a Black householder, compared to only 13 percent of all households.

FIGURE 10

Anticipated impacts of expanding rent control nationwide

Number of renter households potentially covered by rent control policies and all households by race/ethnicity

	Number of stabilized renter households	Share of stabilized renter households	Number of all households	Share of all households
All	31,534,161	100%	97,857,085	100%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	1,189,614	4%	3,372,137	3%
Black	6,757,177	21%	12,774,056	13%
Latinx	1,889,846	6%	4,335,952	4%
Mixed/other	4,709,186	15%	10,710,588	11%
Native American	198,067	1%	503,745	1%
People of Color	14,743,890	46%	31,696,478	32%
White	16,790,271	54%	66,160,607	68%

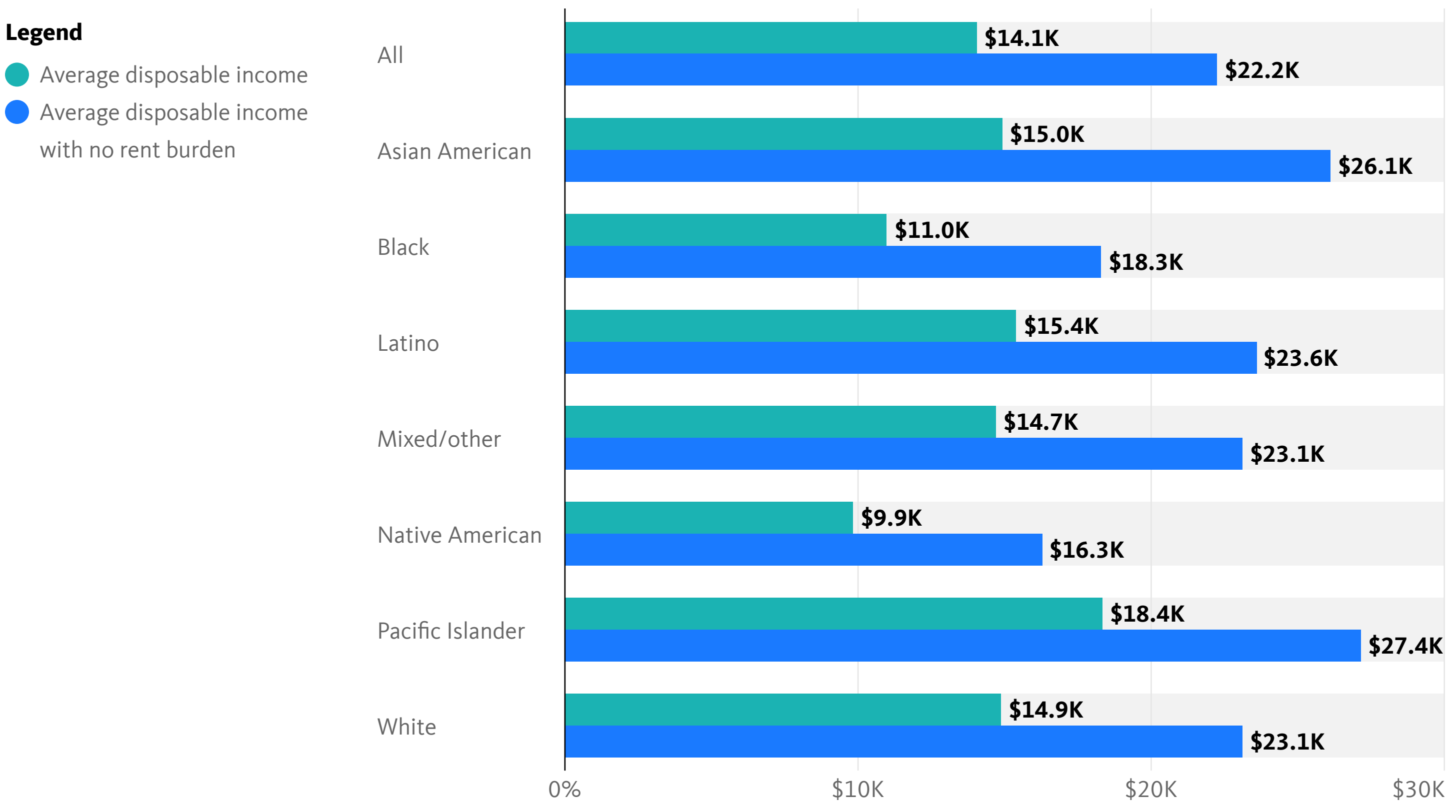
Source: PolicyLink analysis of 2023 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Data and Mapping Tool, Data Version AFFHT0007. **Note:** Estimate exclude states with existing rent control policies (CA, DC, NJ, NY, OR and WA).

Sweeping rent control policies also protect families with children. Presently, 9.2 million, or 29 percent, of covered renter households are home to at least one child under 18 years old. Greater housing and financial security are critical for children and families to thrive. Stabilized housing and housing costs help families invest in childcare and education, while also providing a secure environment for growth and learning.

If housing is affordable, everyone wins. In 2022, if all renters in the US had not experienced rent burden, they would have seen an additional $173 billion in disposable income.[245] This lost opportunity represents billions of dollars that could have gone back to the local economy. Gains would have benefited all people, especially people of color. On average, Asian American renters would have experienced the highest increase in disposable income, from $15,000 to $26,128. Disposable income for Black renters would have increased from $10,974 to $18,259, and disposable income for Latinx renters would have risen from $15,427 to $23,562.

FIGURE 11

Average gain in disposable income per rent-burdened household with no rent burden, United States, 2022



Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. **Note**: Data for 2022 represent a 2018 through 2022 average.

From 2022 to 2023, the national average annual rent increased by 8 percent from $16,798 to $18,092.[246] Meanwhile, with the rising cost of living exacerbated by high inflation, households are feeling the pain in their wallets. However, if rent increases were capped at 3 percent in 2023, renters, on average, would have seen an additional $790 a year in income that could have instead bought groceries, medical care, childcare, and savings. Across the US, the savings would have totaled $36 billion.

3.4

Rent Control Has Immediate, Widespread, and Cost-Effective Impacts

KEY TAKEAWAY

Rent control can take effect almost immediately with swift impact. Because rent regulations cover private rental housing, they have tremendous reach and can be implemented at a far lower cost than other affordable housing strategies.

Speed and Scale

Rent control's speed and scale are unrivaled by other policy options. Rent control has key practical advantages: it can take effect almost immediately, and, because rent regulations cover private rental housing, they have tremendous reach. Rent control is unmatched in its capacity to protect a vast swath of low-income renters at risk of eviction, displacement, and homelessness.[247]

In U.S. cities where it exists, rent-stabilized stock can house more low-income people than public or subsidized housing projects. Where rent control is strong, it can serve as the largest source of affordable housing for low-income households.

- In New York City, rent-regulated stock is home to nearly one million families.[248] Over triple the number of low-income households live in rent-regulated stock, compared to the number in public and subsidized housing projects combined, and roughly twice as many extremely low-income households live in rent-regulated stock, than in public and other subsidized projects.[249] While most New York City renter households pay unaffordable rents, according to 2023 data, most rent-stabilized households are *not* rent-burdened.[250] Moreover, approximately 286,400 low-income households in rent-stabilized housing spend an affordable share of their income on rent. These affordably housed, low-income families in rent-stabilized housing exceed the number of low-income households (205,300) in public and subsidized rental housing projects.[251]
- In San Francisco, the number of homes stabilized by rent regulation—173,000 units—is three times the number of affordable units provided through all other rental housing programs combined.[252]

New York City:

286,400 **Number of low-income households in rent-stabilized housing that spend an affordable share of their income on rent.**

> 205,300 **Number of low-income households in public and subsidized rental housing projects.**

As estimated above, if rent control is implemented in the 45 states that lack it, 31.5 million households would be stabilized, with the majority of these households being low-income and 47 percent being households of color.[253]

Expanding rent control would also benefit the increasing number of renters living in suburbs, small cities, and rural communities. In 2017, single-family rental homes represented nearly three-quarters of the rural rental stock nationwide, while mobile homes represented another 20 percent.[254] Both types of properties are typically lacking or are exempted from any rent regulations, while increasingly falling victim to real estate speculation. Low-income Black and Brown people often reside in single-family rental and manufactured housing, targeted by corporate landlords for price gouging and eviction, making rent regulations all the more necessary.[255] Many localities in California and New Jersey limit rent increases for manufactured homes, and these protections can be strengthened.[256]

Cost-Effectiveness

In the wake of federal housing cuts, state and local governments are cash-strapped and in need of additional resources for affordable housing and other services. Rent control is an excellent tool because it can be implemented at little cost—and at far lower cost than other affordable housing strategies.[257]

Rent control regulations are administered by rent boards (sometimes alongside state-level agencies, as in New York). Rent boards are fully or largely financially self-sufficient. The rent boards in Berkeley and Santa Monica, for example, do not draw from their cities' general funds; instead, they cover all operating costs from per-unit fees (shared by landlords and tenants) that are set yearly to match projected expenses. Santa Monica raised its rent board budget of over $5 million in 2018 by charging landlords a monthly registration fee of $16.50 per unit; with this capacity, the board employs 26 full-time staff and oversees over 27,000 units.[258] In the short term, rent boards may have limited startup costs, such as in Richmond, California, which totaled roughly $1.1 million for its first year.[259]

Other affordable housing policies are far more expensive than rent control. For example, in 2013, Berkeley's program stabilized 19,000 units for $4 million. In comparison, it would have cost $20 million to provide housing vouchers to 2,200 low-income renter households or $220 million to build or rehabilitate 2,200 affordable units through a housing trust fund.[260] While the construction of deeply affordable housing is direly needed, by preserving affordability on a widespread basis, rent control helps local governments stretch limited funds for subsidized housing much further.

The costs of rent stabilization programs are offset by the relief they offer to city budgets strained by homelessness and the housing crisis. The cost of leaving a person out on the street is over $35,000 per year—money spent mainly on publicly funded crisis services such as emergency medical treatment.[261] The Urban Institute estimated that housing insecurity and eviction cost cities millions annually in homeless services, unpaid utilities, and more—up to $157 million of Chicago's total budget of $7.7 billion, for example.[262]

3.5

Rent Control Benefits Entire Communities

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Stable, affordable housing offers far-reaching and long-term benefits that ripple across society—boosting local economies, improving health and educational attainment, increasing environmental sustainability, and strengthening social safety nets, inclusion, and democracy.[263]
- Rent regulation is not only a short-term, stopgap measure—it provides vital, long-term benefits. When renters thrive, they lift up their communities.

Community Wealth Building and Stronger Local Economies

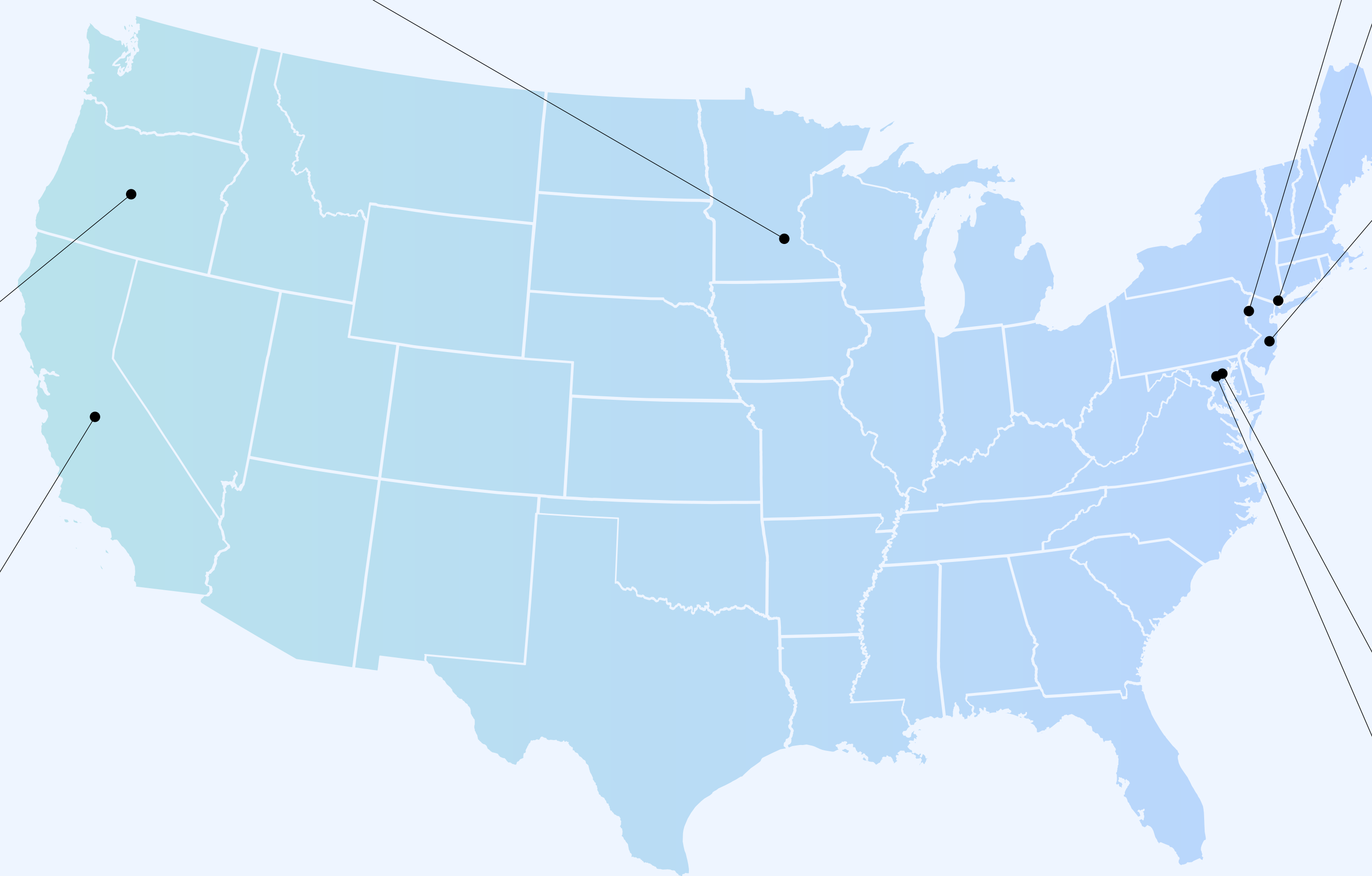
Rent control supports more inclusive prosperity. While landlords continue to profit, rent control supports the financial security of renters, channeling resources toward forms of economic growth that are more likely to create jobs and bolster small businesses compared to real estate speculation. Employers also benefit from these effects since stable housing increases employee productivity and retention.

Widespread rent control would have the following impacts:

- **More money in renters' pockets, boosting local economies.** In 2022, if all renters paid 30 percent of their income or less on housing, they would have an additional $173 billion—approximately $8,100 per rent-burdened household.[293] The greatest gains would go to renters of color, reducing racial inequity. Moreover, when low-income households gain income, they are more likely than higher-income households to spend these extra funds, stimulating local business activity, employment, and tax revenues.[294]
- **Decreased inflation as rent increases slow.** Rising rents and housing costs are a significant driver to inflation.[295] The cost of rent is a component of inflation, or consumer spending, that hits lower-income households, in particular, the hardest. By slowing the increase of rents, rent control can help dampen inflation, particularly as it matters most for working-class and lower-income people.
- **Low-wage workers can continue to live in higher-cost cities and benefit from wage increases.** Although 22 states and over 40 cities raised their minimum wages in 2024, rising rents and resident displacement (often to outlying areas with lower minimum wages) prohibit workers from realizing these hard-fought gains. Rent control is an essential complement to economic justice policies that "raise the floor" for low-wage workers, such as measures for living wages, paid leave, and wage theft prevention. In addition, rent control helps those who perform undervalued care labor—such as social workers, teachers, nurses, childcare providers, and low-wage service workers—continue to live in high-cost cities.

FIGURE 12

Rent control works



Saint Paul, Minnesota

After voters passed a strong rent stabilization measure with vacancy control, the real estate industry pushed back and gained a new construction exemption for housing built after December 31, 2004, partial vacancy decontrol, and other exemptions.[269] Roughly a third of Saint Paul's housing stock is now exempt from rent stabilization. Still, over 50,000 units are covered.[270] In 2025, rent increases for stabilized units are limited to 3 percent within tenancies.[271] In contrast, median contract rent increased by 12 percent from 2021 to 2022 before rent stabilization took effect in 2023.[272] Median contract rent increased by 4 percent from 2022 to 2023, slowing as rent stabilization was implemented.[273]

Oregon

Oregon's statewide rent cap covers 500,000 households, including manufactured and floating homes.[280] Enacted in 2019, the cap limits rent increases to 7 percent plus CPI; for 2025, the maximum increase is limited to 10 percent.[281]

California

California's statewide rent cap affected an estimated 2.4 million households when it went into effect in 2020; it caps rent increases at 10 percent, or CPI plus 5 percent, whichever is lower.[274] Many California cities have rent stabilization protections that extend beyond the cap, with dozens of municipalities across the state possessing local rent regulations.[275] In Los Angeles, rent stabilization covered 600,000 units, which accounted for 40 percent of all units and 70 percent of rental housing in the city, as of 2019.[276] In 2025, rent increases for stabilized units are limited to 60 percent of CPI or 3 percent, whichever is less, between tenancies.[277] In Berkeley, for 2025, rent increases for stabilized units are limited to 65 percent of CPI, which amounts to 2.1 percent within tenancies.[278] Rent-stabilized units in Berkeley number 19,300 and constitute the majority, or 73 percent, of rental units.[279] California's statewide Costa-Hawkins Act preempts vacancy control and the coverage of newer buildings, single-family homes, and more.

Phillipsburg, New Jersey

The town adopted rent stabilization in 2024, which applies to 95 percent of rental units and exempts units built after 2005.[282]

New York City, New York

Nearly one million households live in rent-stabilized housing,[264] including over 653,400 low-income households.[265] Three-quarters of rent-regulated tenants are people of color, and 44 percent are immigrant households.[266] About 286,400 stabilized units are affordable to low-income households, making rent-stabilized stock the city's largest stock of affordable housing.[267] For 2025, rent increases in stabilized units with one-year leases are capped at 2.75 percent—both within and between tenancies.[268]

New Jersey

Two-thirds of renter households live in municipalities with local rent control.[286] In the 1970s, tenant organizing resulted in the passage of strong rent controls with vacancy control, but, with real estate pushback, by the 1990s, half of the 106 municipalities with rent control adopted some form of vacancy decontrol.[287] Some rent boards became inactive and defunct as a result.[288] Recently, the state has witnessed a resurgence of tenant organizing. In 2022, tenants in Perth Amboy won a lowered ceiling on rent increases for the first time in 30 years.[289] Subsequently, rent increases are limited to 3 percent for tenants who pay for water and 2.5 percent for those who do not within tenancies.[290] Newark and Union are examples of cities with vacancy control. In 2023, Newark's rent stabilization covered 70 percent of units.[291] As the pandemic moratorium on rent increases for stabilized units expired, the city council expanded rent regulations to cover single-family homes, where increases are limited to 4 percent or CPI, whichever is lower, and to ban "unconscionable" rent increases in newer apartments (built in the last 30 years).[292]

Washington, DC

About 73,000 units in DC are rent-stabilized as of 2020.[283]

Montgomery County and Prince George's County, Maryland:

In 2020, renters in Montgomery County won a 2.6 percent rent cap under the state of emergency due to COVID-19. From 2019 to 2021, the median contract rent increased 2.6 percent but after the rent cap expired in 2022 median contract rent jumped up by 7 percent between 2022 and 2023.[284] In 2023, Montgomery County passed a new rent stabilization law with vacancy control that became effective in mid-2024, limiting rent increases to 6 percent or CPI plus 3 percent, whichever is lower, both between and within tenancies.[285]

- **Small businesses can remain in neighborhoods threatened by gentrification.** Small local businesses that rely on lower-income clientele often struggle to stay in business when neighborhoods gentrify and their customer base dwindles.[296] Yet, these small businesses are at the frontlines of hiring local, low-income people of color who often face discrimination from larger chains. Rent control helps to keep their customer base and workforce in place while boosting their spending power.

- **Improved employee performance and retention.** The largest metro areas are responsible for most of the country's economic growth, but unchecked housing costs limit their potential.[297] Housing instability can make it challenging to find and retain employment: people who experience eviction, for example, are up to 22 percent more likely to be laid off, even with a stable employment history.[298] Displacement and the negative health impacts of housing instability lead to absenteeism, reduced productivity, and higher turnover—significant costs for employers. Unaffordable rents also hamper firms from attracting and retaining employees.

Healthier People and Communities

Homes should be places of shelter and refuge and are the foundation of health. Access to stable, safe, and affordable housing has a profound impact on mental and physical health.[299] Stable housing enables people to nourish themselves and loved ones and be part of the social, economic, and political fabric of communities.

Rent control helps create conditions for better health. Research indicates that rent control lowers housing costs and increases housing stability—conditions that support health:[300]

- **Reduced financial strain relating to unaffordable rent, which harms health.** A 2018 study of more than 22,000 low-income renter households in five cities found that, controlling for other factors, just being behind in rent was associated with poor caregiver health, maternal depressive symptoms, and increased child lifetime hospitalizations.[301] National research has found that a 10-point increase in rent burden was associated with an 8 percent higher risk of death.[302] People who struggle to pay rent are twice as likely to take sick days, and their children are at risk of developmental delays.[303] Furthermore, people plagued by worries about affording their housing are three times more likely to be in frequent mental distress compared to those with stable housing.[304]

- **Fewer unhealthy trade-offs due to unaffordability.** Rent-burdened families suffer worse health outcomes due to a lack of funds for nutritious food, medicine, and health care.[305] When low-income families instead pay rents they can afford, they are able to spend four times as much on health care and 50 percent more on food compared to their severely cost-burdened peers—making them more likely to obtain health care and necessary medication.[306] Additionally, rent control helps protect domestic violence survivors since access to affordable independent housing is a decisive factor in helping women leave abusive situations, recover from PTSD, and avoid revictimization and homelessness.[307]

- **Reduced catastrophic health impacts from displacement and homelessness.** Displacement is a public health crisis; even the threat of displacement harms health, and the health consequences of forced moves are long-term.[308] A study of 12,882 New York City residents found that, controlling for other factors, those displaced from gentrifying neighborhoods had higher rates of emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and mental health-related visits compared to their counterparts who remained—or who lived in low-income neighborhoods that were not gentrifying.[309] Other studies have found that forced moves are linked to nutritional deficiency, low birth weight and other health challenges for children; they can prove fatal for seniors and those with a disability or chronic illness.[310] Homelessness catastrophically erodes health and increases mortality.[311] In contrast, housing stability is linked to better self-rated health, decreased depression and anxiety, and improved conditions for people with mental illness, chronic diseases like HIV/AIDS and diabetes, and substance abuse problems.[312] Rent increases are a key driver of houselessness. For example, a 5 percent increase in rent could mean 3,000 people becoming houseless in a place like New York City,[313] while nationally, a $100 increase in median rent was associated with a 9 percent increase in homelessness.[314] Because rent control helps prevent evictions and houselessness,[315] it helps prevent their harms to public health.
- **Reduced environmental health risks through better-maintained buildings.** When accompanied by mechanisms for tenants to hold landlords accountable for maintenance, rent control can help enforce critical health and safety standards, thus reducing hazards like lead and mold, which are linked to asthma and other illnesses.[316]
- **Community-level health benefits from housing stability**, including community cohesion, which is associated with improved mental and physical health.[317] Stability promotes health for children and seniors aging in place.[318] Stable housing also allows tenants to build organizing power to improve overall living conditions.[319]
- **Greater health equity.** Black and immigrant communities, single mothers, and people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by rent burden and evictions, making rent control a critical policy for promoting health equity.[320] Additionally, rent control discourages corporate profiteering, which could otherwise drive up housing costs, evictions, and poor housing quality, exacerbating health inequities.[321]

Rent control promotes public health. When complemented by a broader set of health-protective housing policies, including just cause eviction and enforceable habitability laws, rent control can ensure that our families, neighbors, and communities can access housing and health that benefits all of us.

Improved Educational Outcomes

- **Increased school attendance, promoting educational attainment**. Children who move frequently have more absences, a lower likelihood of finishing school, lower test scores, and educational delays.[322] With every move, a student loses an estimated three to six months of education, resulting in delayed literacy and skills.[323] In contrast, students who experienced zero moves are over 10 percent more likely to graduate than those who moved three times during their childhood.[324]

- **Teacher retention.** Rent control can also help teachers who are increasingly underpaid and rent-burdened to continue in their profession. A national survey found that one in four former teachers would consider returning to teaching if offered housing incentives.[325]

Climate-Friendly Development

- **Equitable transit-oriented development.** Anti-displacement policies, including rent control, are necessary to realize the equity and environmental benefits of transit-oriented development. Low-income households use transit more frequently than wealthier households. When transit-rich areas gentrify and low-income households are replaced by higher-income households, transit ridership decreases, while car usage increases.[326] Those same displaced low-income workers often commute longer distances, typically by car, because they remain tied to jobs and services located in the urban centers from which they were displaced.[327]
- **Disaster-response and climate resilience without displacement.** Solid rent regulations are necessary for preventing displacement after disasters when landlords and speculative investors may take advantage of the lack of housing to price gouge. Rent control also helps prevent the costs of green upgrades from burdening renters by ensuring landlords pay their fair share.[328]

A Stronger and More Inclusive Democracy

- **Stronger civic engagement.** Stable, affordable housing allows renters additional time and resources to participate politically, volunteer, and give back to their communities. A study in Atlanta found that gentrification is linked to decreased voter turnout among historically disenfranchised groups.[329] A national study in 2023 also links evictions to decreased voter turnout.[330]
- **More resilient communities of color.** Rent control can anchor communities of color in place, guarding their political representation, cultural and civic institutions, and small businesses. When allowed to build wealth that stays in their communities, historically Black neighborhoods have been vibrant cultural centers and bulwarks against job discrimination. Immigrant enclaves connect new migrants to culturally and linguistically specific supports, services, and job opportunities.[331]
- **Healthier safety nets.** Rent control brings stability, which helps renters establish long-term roots. When renters can stay in their homes, they deepen social ties with their neighbors and local communities. They develop safety networks they can rely on, such as nearby friends who can support them with health care, childcare, or other needs.[332]

3.6

Rent Control is Popular

KEY TAKEAWAY

From New York to Washington, from Arizona to Pennsylvania, overwhelming majorities of renters and homeowners are in favor of rent control—and say they will vote for leaders who support it. At the local and state levels, politicians who back rent control win their elections when housing issues are top priorities.

Rent Control is Wildly Popular

Rent stabilization is popular among both renters and homeowners, and polls show it is a critical issue for winning votes in election campaigns. Yet politicians have not fully harnessed the potential championing rent stabilization offers in winning over voters.

- A 2024 poll of 2,500 registered voters in the swing states of Arizona, California, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Michigan found that 70 percent—and 78 percent of renters who were registered to vote—said they were more likely to vote for a candidate who supports rent stabilization.[333]
- In the same poll, 67 percent of homeowners registered to vote stated they were more likely to vote for a candidate who supports rent stabilization. In fact, rent stabilization was the most popular policy—the most likely to attract voters—out of a variety of housing proposals ranging from affordable housing construction to vouchers and other tenant protections. Respondents expressed they were most likely to vote for a candidate supporting rent stabilization, compared to other housing policies.[334]
- A second 2024 poll of over 1,100 likely voters in the swing states of Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin similarly found that 75 percent supported a cap on rent increases, and 63 percent were more likely to vote for a candidate supporting rent caps.[335]
- Likewise, a 2024 survey commissioned by Redfin of over 1,800 US residents found that 82 percent support rent caps. It found that 86 percent of renters, 78 percent of homeowners, and 79 percent of Republicans agree with rent caps.[336]
- A 2023 poll of 1,000 registered voters nationwide revealed that a majority are concerned about housing affordability, and 69 percent have personally experienced housing instability, such as trouble paying rent or moving frequently due to cost. A majority of 79 percent supported federal limits on rent increases, and 71 percent supported federal rent control measures. Most, including most Republicans and Independents, said they were more likely to vote for a candidate who supported "policies to protect renters."[337]
- In Washington State, a 2025 survey of 1,100 registered voters found that 72 percent support rent stabilization, including a majority of Republicans, Independents, and non-renting homeowners; 61 percent said rent increases should be limited to 6 percent or less per year. A majority of

respondents, 74 percent, opposed exempting new construction from rent stabilization, instead supporting limiting rent increases for these buildings as well. A majority, 71 percent, said that rent increases have seriously impacted their financial situation.[338]

- In New York State, a 2024 survey of over 4,700 residents living in areas across the state that have *not* adopted rent stabilization found that the measure is wildly popular among diverse constituents: 81 percent of respondents, including 75 percent of Republicans and 89 percent of suburban residents, support implementing rent stabilization in their community.[339]

But while registered voters have ranked the cost of rent and housing as a top personal concern, most reported they had not been hearing politicians address this issue much, or at all, in the lead-up to the 2024 elections.[340] Currently, renters are less likely to vote than homeowners but, if politicians were to speak more to their issues, it could motivate more renters to come to the polls, with dramatic impacts on election results.

Electeds Win by Championing Rent Control

Politicians are successfully winning office by championing rent control.

- In 2024, New York State Assemblymember Sarahana Shrestha handily won reelection to a second term on two-thirds of the vote in her Hudson Valley district, running on a comprehensive housing platform that included bringing rent stabilization upstate.[341] Shrestha had previously been active in Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and defeated a longtime Democratic incumbent in 2022. She has now co-introduced a bill to ease localities' adoption of rent stabilization upstate and expand the pool of buildings that could be covered.[342]
- In Brooklyn, DSA member and tenant organizer Marcela Mitaynes won election to the New York State Assembly in 2020, narrowly defeating a Democratic incumbent in the primary by making housing issues central.[343] She won reelection again in 2024 by a large majority. With a background as an immigrant and renter who personally suffered eviction from a rent-stabilized apartment, Mitaynes is committed to strengthening rent stabilization by eliminating a loophole for capital improvements and renovations and fully funding enforcement.[344]
- In Saint Paul, Minnesota, following a 2021 voter referendum that successfully approved rent stabilization, the 2023 elections flipped its city council to become the most diverse in history. All seven members were women under age 40, and six were women of color.[345] Councilmember Mitra Jalali, an early champion of rent stabilization and the first renter elected to the city council in 2018, was reelected by her constituents and elected council president by her peers.[346] Councilmember Nelsie Yang, who publicly supports rent stabilization, was also reelected, and new Councilmember Hwa Jeong Kim won her election on a platform that included strengthening rent stabilization and eliminating vacancy decontrol.[347] In 2022, Jalali and Yang were the only councilmembers to oppose and vote *against* a real estate-backed effort to weaken Saint Paul's voter-approved rent stabilization measure, which passed 5–2 against majority public opinion.[348] The two councilmembers who sponsored the measure to weaken rent stabilization, as well as two others who voted in favor of weakening, did not run for reelection.[349]

- In Boston, Michelle Wu became the first woman and first person of color to be elected mayor in 2021, winning two-thirds of the vote.[350] A champion for affordable housing, she was the only candidate to support bringing rent stabilization back to Boston.[351] Massachusetts preempts rent control at the state level, and as mayor, Wu has advanced a home rule petition and proposal to cap rent at CPI plus 6 percent, or 10 percent total, whichever is lower.[352] She continues to enjoy popularity against a challenger in the upcoming elections.[353]

- In Maryland, renters organized to make rent stabilization a key issue in the 2022 elections. They succeeded in electing a wave of progressive candidates who supported rent stabilization and then helped successfully pass permanent rent regulations in Montgomery and Prince George's counties. (See page 103 for more on these campaigns.)

- In Pasadena, California, City Councilmember Felicia Williams became the voice of landlord opposition to implementing a rent stabilization measure that voters passed in 2022. Williams was soundly defeated in her 2024 reelection campaign. (See page 107 for more on Pasadena tenants organizing for rent control.)

4.0 **INOCULATION TOOLKIT:** RESPONSES TO COMMON ARGUMENTS AGAINST RENT CONTROL

In this section, readers will find evidence and talking points that correct common misconceptions about rent control and its impacts. Use it to counter misinformation and affirmatively speak to why rent control works.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Many of the mainstream messages about rent control have been created and amplified by the real estate and landlord lobbies to protect their profits. Organizers can effectively use research, data, and community stories to push back against the misinformation about rent control and plant new narratives that catalyze the broad public support that already exists for stable, affordable housing for all.

4.1 The Truth About Rent Control

Rent control's main purposes are to stabilize rents, combat rampant speculation in the rental market, and balance the power relationship between landlords and tenants. It is also the subject of a great deal of public debate, most of which does not focus on what the policy is designed to do: stabilize rents. In a parallel example, we would not assess minimum wage as a policy by how many jobs it creates so why would we assess rent control by how many units it builds? Informed by empirical evidence, we already know that rent control works to increase housing stability for tenants who live in regulated units and improve overall neighborhood stability.[354] Now, we will address the misinformation and distractions that interfere with moving people who are newer to the issue.

Rent Control Does Not Decrease Housing Production

The real estate industry pushes an anti-rent control narrative focused on its potential indirect effects. Using the "Economics 101" theory, opponents suggest that any limit on prices will dampen incentives to build more housing, which reduces supply and increases rents.[355]

- An equally valid economic theory noted by economist Gary Painter says that rent control can *increase* supply in tight rental markets (where developers and landlords have market power). Why? Because, if housing developers cannot generate extra profit through rent increases, they have an incentive to build more units.[356]

- In general, other factors—including overall market conditions and zoning—have far more influence over new housing supply than the presence of rent regulations.[357] Multiple longitudinal studies of rent control in New Jersey, as well as other studies nationwide, have found no negative impact on construction rates.[358]

Rent Control Allows Landlords Fair Returns on Their Investments

Rather than causing landlords undue hardship, even strong rent controls allow landlords fair profits.

- Scenario modeling of rental housing in Minneapolis over a 10-year investment horizon used measures of cash-on-cash return, average annual increase in value, total increase in value, and internal rate of return. It found that rent caps *at and even below* the consumer price index would have allowed industry-standard returns on investment.[359] This demonstrates that, even in the absence of rent control, landlords were able to increase rents enough to cover operating costs and profit without exceeding theoretical rent caps. Read more about this study here (page 43).

Rent Control Effectively Reaches Low-income and Marginalized Tenants

Rent stabilization disproportionately benefits those most harmed by rising rents and displacement, including low-income people, communities of color, seniors, people living with chronic illness or disability, immigrants, women-headed households, and families with children.[360]

- In New York City, 37 percent of low-income households (households who earn under 50 percent AMI) live in rent-regulated apartments, which is nearly three times as many as those living in public housing and subsidized rentals combined.[361]
- For Latino and Black New Yorkers, rent-regulated apartments are the most common housing arrangement; they rely on rent regulation more than any other racial or ethnic group.[362]

Rent Control Can Help Uphold Habitability Standards When Paired with Effective Code Enforcement

Rent control does not lead to physical distress in buildings, but loopholes can. When strengthened by effective code enforcement and accountability mechanisms, rent control and rent boards can help uphold habitability standards and empower tenants to organize against unhealthy conditions.[363]

- Rent control can provide tenants with leverage to attain improved conditions. In Washington, DC, the share of physically deficient units quickly declined after rent stabilization, and 61 percent of tenants reported an increased willingness to insist on repairs.[364]
- In Boston, the loosening of rent control fueled gentrification and building improvements that were largely cosmetic.[365]
- In New Jersey, rent control resulted in no negative impact on plumbing, a critical public health and safety issue.[366]
- Deferred maintenance and habitability are issues that tenants face across the country, regardless of whether they live in jurisdictions with rent control.

Small Landlords Do Not Need to be Exempt from Rent Control

The anti-rent control narrative often weaponizes the vague concept of "mom-and-pop" landlords to exempt large swaths of housing from tenant protections—or not pass them at all. Opponents make claims that "mom-and-pop" landlords are unable to absorb risk or lost rental income, cannot bear the burden of regulation, and are more likely to leave the rental market.[367] But, to be clear: all landlords, regardless of size, operate their businesses in a regulated market. The purpose of rent control is to prevent predatory profit-seeking behavior, and no business entity, regardless of size, should be allowed to operate outside of reasonable regulations.

- In 2018, 10.3 million individual US tax filers reported owning rental property, representing 6.7 percent of filers. Collectively, they reported over $350 billion in rental income.[368]
- An analysis of almost 4,000 landlords in Seattle, Washington, found no evidence that tenant protection laws drove small landlords out of the rental market. (In this study, landlords were categorized as "small" if they owned or managed one to four units.) Furthermore, the research suggested that those smaller landlords utilize management practices that are broadly similar to those employed by landlords with larger rental portfolios.[369]
- Small landlords often house extremely vulnerable tenants who should not be denied protection.[370]
- Even landlords with small portfolios are profitable. A case study on Bay Area elected officials analyzed Form 700 tax disclosures filed in 2020, revealing that electeds who owned two to seven rental properties reported receiving rental income amounts ranging from $10,000–$650,000.[371]
- In Spain, opponents of rent control have similarly deployed "mom-and-pop" landlord language to counter regulation, even as corporate landlords buy up rental housing. However, a recent Spanish study found that even after landlords' rental income is subtracted from their incomes, they still rank among the highest-income households in the country. Without rentals, the median annual income for landlords would still be nearly double that of tenants, most of whom will never inherit property.[372]

Supply Alone Cannot Solve Our Affordable Housing Crisis

The anti-rent control narrative imagines that simply deregulating the housing market will create a surge of housing production that will produce trickle-down affordability for even the lowest-income renters. Such an over-simplification of the housing crisis fails to recognize many realities of our housing system, including the inability of for-profit development to meet our true level of need for affordable housing, as well as the increasingly distorting role of wealthy investors in the housing market.[373]

- The overall supply of housing does not guarantee that affordable units will be created, nor does it ensure that low-income households will occupy those units.[374] Investors and developers have no incentive to build affordable housing when they instead profit more from building more expensive housing. Thus, the for-profit market will not and cannot build deeply affordable housing at the scale our communities need. Comprehensive housing strategies must incentivize and finance the construction of deeply affordable housing while leveraging rent control and other policies to protect their affordability in the long term, ultimately working in tandem to increase and maintain an inventory of affordable housing.

- Evidence challenges the assumption that relaxing regulatory constraints would substantially lower housing prices and meaningfully expand housing supply. Examining local housing markets over 40 years using a general demand-and-supply framework, economists concluded that constrained housing supply was relatively unimportant in explaining differences in rising housing prices among US cities.[375]
- More and more economists agree: any plan to overhaul the housing market must confront the power that landlords have to raise rents.[376] Increasingly, who owns and operates housing is more important than what is being built. This phenomenon is best demonstrated by the nationwide use of rent-fixing software algorithms that enable landlords to drive up rents, withhold units to create housing scarcity, and maximize profits.[377]

Removing Rent Control in Massachusetts Harmed Communities

- The cities of Boston, Brookline, and Cambridge had rent control until 1994 when it was abolished through a public referendum. After rent control ended, the costs of both rent-controlled and nonregulated units rose dramatically. Between 1991 and 2001, median rents for a two-bedroom apartment doubled, with homelessness nearly doubling as well. Despite the claims of real estate groups that ending rent control would increase construction, the vacancy rate dropped from 4 percent under rent control to 2.9 percent four years after the regulations were abolished.[378]

4.2 Economists Are Starting to Rethink Rent Control

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Economists, like me, have played an outsized role in US public policy over the past 75 years. Our ideas often make or break laws and regulations—and therefore, people's lives. In recent decades, most economists have told a simple and captivating story: "free" markets were efficient, fair and much, much smarter than policymakers. And that fairy tale has cast rent control as a villain.

Starting in the second half of the 20th century, economists argued that, while rent control policies may be well-meaning, they were responsible for a range of ills, from a lack of affordable housing options to rampant inequality in the housing sector. "Release the fetters of government regulation," they demanded, "and the market would ensure that housing units would be '*immediately* available for rent at *all* levels [emphasis added].'" Because of their influence, economists set off an "intellectual movement" that dismantled hard-won support for rent control measures designed to tackle the *real-world* problems of rent profiteering, affordability, and housing insecurity.

Now, economics is in the midst of an empirical revolution challenging many core ideas the profession had previously "solved." And while we are still in early days, it seems the field's anti-rent control stance is well-poised to become the next piece of "conventional wisdom" to tumble.

The Bias and Failure of Models

Nearly every Econ 101 student learns that minimum-wage laws have good intentions but bad outcomes. Obstructing the perfectly competitive market, they are told, creates a mismatch between the increasing number of people who want to work and the decreasing number of employees the bosses want to hire. But decades of empirical work demonstrate that minimum-wage laws do not generate job losses, nor does the policy hurt low-wage workers, as many economists claimed. Instead, minimum-wage legislation does exactly what policymakers and advocates intended: it raises the wages and incomes of hardworking people. Full stop.

The same can be said for rent control. Econ 101 theorizes that rent control is bad. Yet this claim is not based on the actual empirical evidence. Rather, economists have simply created models—designed with built-in assumptions and biases such as perfectly functioning markets—that say so. But these models have been debunked time and time again. So what can modern economics, including our empirical and theoretical advances, *actually* tell us about rent control and the role it may have in building a more equitable and well-functioning housing landscape as policymakers seek to guide markets to socially beneficial outcomes?

First, it is important to highlight that the housing market, just like the labor market, is *not* a perfectly competitive market where tenants can freely enter and exit and always have a large swath of options available to them at different price and quality points. Instead, it is a landscape rife with market power and real-world complications.

In economists' models of the rental sector there are some extraordinarily subtle, yet powerful, assumptions. It assumes transactions are seamless and costless—yet we all know moving is extraordinarily expensive, with average local moves totaling $2,000 in costs while long-distance moves clock in at nearly $5,000. Furthermore, moving can often pull us away from the schools, jobs, and social networks we rely on for our well-being. Secondly, these models assume there are lots of "sellers" (i.e., landlords) in the market offering properties at various price and quality points at all times, while no single landlord, or group of landlords, possesses any form of market power to set prices. In this over-simplified model, prices are determined purely by supply and demand in the market.

But, in reality, none of this is true. Prices are not just set by supply and demand but are thoroughly influenced by power dynamics like racism, prejudice, discrimination, the power of landlords over tenants—billionaire investors and corporate conglomerates with outsized influence versus desperate tenants fearful of homelessness—and more.

The Outsized Power of Landlords to Manipulate Profits

Accounting for landlord market power busts the simplified model and flips the narrative on rent control. Instead of an inefficient policy attempting to correct a well-functioning market, rent control becomes an intervention needed precisely to balance market power, reduce inequality, and enhance efficiency.

Recent research has confirmed that landlords are effectively reducing the availability of rental supply to maximize profits, resulting in harm to tenants. Studies of rental markets from coast to coast has found that landlords' use of modern algorithmic pricing has resulted in the price gouging of tenants by landlords and a reduction in occupancy rates. The Justice Department has argued this practice is a form of collusion. In addition, recent empirical research also suggests the rent hikes from this type of collusion amount to an extra $53 in rent per unit per month—a straight-up redistribution of resources from tenants to landlords. Other recent work accounting for the market power of landlords over tenants finds that landlords are able to raise the price of an apartment by 9 to 25 percent above and beyond what the rent would be absent landlord power, thus further burdening tenants and generating more inequality and market inefficiencies.

Rent Control Helps Level the Playing Field

When we recognize the realities of the unfair system, rent control is recast as a logical regulation on the outsized power wielded by landlords. By taming the landlord's market power, rent control reduces the amount of economic rent landlords can extract from tenants. This is similar in many respects to the government creation of the modern-day 30-year mortgage, which was established to help minimize economic rent extraction from homeowners by financial institutions. Thus, the American middle class was essentially built on a practice that functions as rent control for homeowners.

The empirical research is also clear that rent control does not negatively affect housing supply. In fact, some studies on the long-term impacts find that rent control is associated with an *increase* in housing supply. Even upon the repeal of rent control, which according to neoclassical theory should result in an increase in housing supply, we see no significant changes to housing supply. In short, the data demonstrate that rent control simply does not affect supply, especially when policies close loopholes, such as those related to condo conversions.

It is Time for Economists to Reconsider

Rent control by itself is not a silver bullet capable of solving our housing woes. However, building an equitable housing sector will indeed require rent control as a key piece of the housing policy puzzle, in addition to significant investments in social housing, zoning and regulation changes, and more. So it is time for us all—including economists—to come to terms with the data, which support rent control as a commonsense approach, to begin righting the ship. As the great early 20th-century economist John Maynard Keynes said, "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"

5.0 GUIDE TO WINNING RENT CONTROL

This section is designed as a tactical guide to winning rent control for organizers and advocates in any campaign phase. It begins with a detailed breakdown of policy design, an introduction to the principles of federal and state law that make rent control legal, and an overview of the complexities of state preemption. Then, it transitions to learning from past and ongoing campaigns across the country with case studies demonstrating how they have advanced policies that create the foundation for rent control, won rent control itself, protected and strengthened preexisting rent control, and fought for robust implementation and enforcement. Use parts of this guide as needed during different campaign stages.

5.1 Overview of Policy Design

Constructing a Rent Control Policy

The process of crafting the right rent control policy for jurisdictions is a balance of renter needs, political pathways, and power building.

- **Center the demands of renters of color and low-income renters in designing a policy**. Their experience in the rental market will inform factors that merit close attention. For example, if single-family renters are experiencing predatory rent increases, it will be essential to design a policy that does not exempt single-family homes.
- **Develop a keen analysis of the political and legal landscape to understand where policy limitations may exist**. For instance, if meetings with councilmembers have revealed that a majority would only support the policy with new construction exemptions, that will be a core design consideration.
- **Create a plan to build the power required to shift what is winnable**. Successful strategies can entail electoral organizing under a 501(c)(4) to shape who is in elected office, developing a campaign to build power with a 501(c)(3) base-building organization to win rent control through the legislature, or vastly expanding the base to usher in a ballot initiative victory.

Landlords will try to evade or circumvent rent control laws by taking advantage of loopholes, such as deferring maintenance, converting rental units to condominiums, and even holding housing units vacant. Organizers and advocates must be prepared to counter all of these potential evasions—and policy design is a key pathway to doing so. In designing policy, they must also consider whether policies will be simple enough to understand, enforce, educate, and organize tenants around. The elements of a rent control policy are each covered below.

Annual Rent Adjustment

Unless the power to set annual rent increases is assigned to local rent boards (such as in cities in New York), designing rent control legislation will require determining a maximum annual rent cap. These caps can be:

- A flat percentage, such as Saint Paul, Minnesota's annual 3 percent cap
- Based on measures of the consumer price index (CPI), such as Bell Garden, California's annual cap of 50 percent of CPI or 4 percent, whichever is less
- A combination of both, such as Montgomery County, Maryland's annual cap of 3 percent plus CPI or 6 percent, whichever is lower

Rent freezes and rollbacks are also possible. While rent boards are capable of setting annual rent adjustments lower than some cities' formulas, they are challenging to navigate. Depending on the makeup of rent boards, tenant representatives may not hold enough power to ensure low annual rent adjustments. Furthermore, maintaining a powerful presence on a rent board requires sustaining long-term organizing.

Across the country, rent cap formulas result in caps ranging from a low of 50 percent of CPI to a high of CPI plus 7 percent or 10 percent, whichever is lower. State caps (e.g., in California, Oregon, Washington) measure the highest at a maximum of 10 percent, followed by counties (e.g., Montgomery and Prince George's counties) at a maximum of 6 percent. Local jurisdictions (e.g., cities, boroughs, townships, villages) tend to have the lowest rent caps, with the vast majority being CPI-related or under 5 percent.

Important to Note:

- To put these formulas into context, if inflation is at or around the Federal Reserve's target of 2 percent, then a CPI plus 2 percent formula allows rents to rise at double the rate of inflation.
- Some jurisdictions using a CPI-based cap have amended their formula to lower their caps due to historically high inflation, and because CPI-based caps can offer too generous of returns for landlords (see page 43). For example, Oakland, California's original rent control ordinance set annual rent increases equal to regional CPI but in 2022, skyrocketing inflation rates resulted in a regional CPI of 6.7 percent—much higher than increases renters had ever experienced.[379] Consequently, later that year, Oakland City Council amended the formula to 60 percent of CPI or 3 percent, whichever is lower.
- If organizers and advocates must agree to a higher rent cap, they should in turn hold a harder line on limiting pass-through costs and other exceptions to the cap.

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What is CPI?

CPI, or consumer price index, is a measure of the change in prices paid by consumers for goods and services, including food, housing, transportation, medical care, and education. It is measured monthly by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics at a national level and for large metropolitan areas. Places that set rent caps relative to CPI use the most local CPI measure available for their jurisdiction, which can be found here.

Vacancy Control

Vacancy control is the most important element of ensuring that rent control provides tenants with maximum protections. Policies with vacancy control attach rent control to the unit, meaning the maximum annual rent increase applies between tenancies, even when tenants change or move out. Without vacancy control, landlords may raise the rent to market-rate or as high as they see fit when tenants move out. In places where rent control lacks vacancy control, rents in stabilized units increasingly resemble market-rate rents over time. Furthermore, landlords are incentivized to discriminate and evict tenants—including informally by harassment—so they can raise the rent without restriction and replace current tenants with short-term tenants, such as students. Evidence from studies in California and New Jersey suggests that vacancy control is an important feature in achieving the goal of rent moderation.[380] For more information on vacancy control, see page 44.

Vacancy control exists in Maryland (e.g., Montgomery and Prince George's County), various jurisdictions in New Jersey (e.g., Atlantic Highlands, Chesilhurst, East Windsor, Egg Harbor, Irvington, Lakewood, Newark, North Bergen, Oaklyn, Union, and Wallington), South Portland, Maine, and various New York jurisdictions that have rent stabilization due to the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019.[381]

Partial Vacancy Decontrol

Some places enact partial vacancy decontrol, meaning landlords can increase the rent of a unit in between tenancies, but only up to a certain amount and with additional limitations. For example, in Washington, DC, landlords can increase rent 10 percent upon vacancy of a unit or increase it to the same rent amount as a "comparable rental unit," but by no more than 30 percent. Portland, Maine, has a slightly stronger partial vacancy decontrol, which allows landlords to increase rent above the cap (70 percent of CPI) upon vacancy, but with a maximum of 5 percent. Saint Paul, Minnesota's partial vacancy decontrol depends on the nature of the end of tenancy. If the tenant was displaced by a no cause eviction, the annual 3 percent maximum applies; alternatively, if the tenant was displaced by a just cause eviction, the landlord can increase rent up to 8 percent plus CPI.

Key Learning:

- Partial vacancy decontrol is not a good compromise. During New York's period of deregulation from 1994–2019, rent stabilization allowed for a 20 percent vacancy bonus at the point of apartment turnover with permanent deregulation when rent reached a "high rent vacancy deregulation threshold" of $2,700. As a result, the state bore a loss of 170,386 rent stabilized units.[382] Afterward, advocates successfully passed the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act in 2019, which eliminated vacancy increases in New York.

Vacancy Decontrol

Policies with vacancy decontrol attach rent control to the tenant, meaning landlords can reset rent as high as they would like after a tenant vacates a unit. Vacancy decontrol is an element of rent control policies in places such as Oregon, various jurisdictions in New Jersey (e.g., Atlantic City, East Brunswick, Passaic, and Sayreville[383]), and all jurisdictions in California due to the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act of 1995.

Key Learning:

- Rent control is most effective at preserving affordability when it includes vacancy control. Conversely, vacancy decontrol vastly undermines the long-term effectiveness of rent control, and Berkeley, California, is a clear example of this fact. Berkeley passed rent control in 1980 with vacancy control. When the Costa-Hawkins Act was passed in 1995, it created a three-year transition period during which rent-controlled units gradually fell into decontrol. Within 18 years, 85 percent of all rent-stabilized apartments had turned over at least once, and rents increased to the high levels typical of the Bay Area's unrestricted market.[384] For more data on the harmful impacts of decontrol, see page 44.

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What is Costa-Hawkins?

In 1995, the California legislature passed the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act, which limits the ability of local governments to enact rent control. Specifically, it:

- Exempts all single-family homes and condominiums from local rent control
- Exempts all residential units built after February 1, 1995
- Preempts vacancy control in local rent control, essentially mandating vacancy decontrol

Preferential Banking

Preferential banking is an element of policy design through which landlords can increase rent more than the annual cap to "make up for" years in which they did not increase rent or in which they increased rent by levels below the cap. This provision creates a way for landlords who do not want to increase rent on long-term tenants to recoup rent increases, or "catch up," at a later point in time. For example, if a landlord in a city with a 3 percent rent cap did not increase rent at all during a three-year period, they would be able to "bank" those unused increases and apply the cumulative 9 percent increase in the third year.

Most jurisdictions with rent control do not incorporate preferential banking; the few that do limit the maximum banked amount or restrict landlords to only charging the banked rent when a tenant moves out to shield them from sudden massive rent increases that could have a displacement effect. In Oakland, California, landlords can defer applying annual rent increases up to 10 years after which unimposed rent increases expire, and the amount of banked increases cannot exceed three times the CPI. In Montgomery County, Maryland, landlords can bank the amount of the unused rent increase and charge it to a current or future tenant, as long as it does not exceed 10 percent.

Preferential Banking Scenarios:

In the following scenarios, the landlord does not increase rent at all for five years, then seeks to apply the full banked amount.

Scenario	Annual Rent Cap	Preferential Banking Limit	Rent Increase Applied at 5 Years
A	2%	None	10%
B	3%	Expire after 4 years	12%
C	6%	None	30%
D	8%	Maximum of 10% at once	10%

There are legitimate trade-offs involved in incorporating preferential banking into rent control that must be considered. For example, an absence of banking allowances means that landlords are more incentivized to raise rents by the maximum amount every year. However, unrestricted banking can allow landlords to stockpile years of increases that could displace a tenant when applied all at once. The scenarios above demonstrate the importance of securing a sturdy annual rent adjustment and setting limitations to banking via expiration dates or maximums.

Building Exemptions

Every existing rent control policy includes exemptions for certain types of buildings that do not have to comply with rent control. Exemptions can be categorized into three groups: building use, building size, and subsidized affordable housing. In large part, exemptions represent a political choice that elected officials make to render rent control more politically palatable.

Common building use exemptions include licensed facilities with the primary purpose of treating illnesses or providing care, religious facilities, licensed assisted living facilities or nursing homes, and school dormitories. Institutional investment in student housing as an asset class has increased in recent years, which should caution communities against exempting student housing, especially since the student housing market is expected to grow steadily.[385] In addition, advocates should pay special attention to particular types of tenancies that low-income people in their communities may have—such as employer-owned housing, farmworker housing, mobile homes, or subleasing—to ensure the policy covers them.

Building size exemptions tend to target smaller buildings, such as single-family homes, 1–4 unit buildings, and smaller owner-occupied buildings. These exemptions are based on an assumption that individual owners are more likely to own smaller or fewer buildings and thus should be exempt from regulations. However, owners of smaller buildings should not be exempt from commonsense regulations, particularly considering the racial equity implications for renters. Renters in 2–4 unit buildings have the lowest median household income, and Black and Hispanic tenants rent 44 percent of the units in 2–4 unit buildings.[386] Exempting these units would have a disproportionate impact on low-income renters and renters of color, leaving them vulnerable to harmful rent increases. Furthermore, given the rise in investor ownership of single-family homes and associated aggressive management practices such as large rent increases, communities should strive to include single-family rentals in their rent control policies.[387] The bottom line: The point of rent control is to prevent predatory profit-seeking behavior, and no business entity, regardless of size, should be allowed to disregard reasonable regulations.

The final category of common exemptions is **housing that receives any form of subsidy from local, state, or federal governments**, sometimes referred to as "affordable" or "subsidized" housing in the language of ordinances. These exemptions are carved out under the assumption that subsidies already come bearing their own tenant protection requirements—which is not always the case. For example, while residents of public housing are guaranteed to pay no more than 30 percent of their income on rent, in practice, residents of low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) and HOME-funded (via the HOME Investment Partnerships Program) units are not insulated from housing cost-burden since their rent is set based on regional area median income (AMI) standards—not their actual household income. Organizers should push back on this misconception that subsidies are paired with tenant protections. For instance, this was successfully done in Antioch, California, which passed a rent control ordinance in 2022 without any exemptions for LIHTC or subsidized housing.

LIHTC Example

A four-person household in Minneapolis earning $37,000 in 2024 (30 percent AMI) would qualify to live in a 50 percent AMI LIHTC 2-bedroom unit with rent set at $1,397. In 2025, the regional AMI increased, which led 50 percent AMI rent to increase by nearly $100 to $1,490. Because LIHTC rents are based on regional AMI, the landlord can increase the rent by the full amount even if that household's income stays the same or even decreases.

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Mom and Pop Landlords

In this report, we intentionally do not use the term "mom-and-pop landlord." Instead, we have chosen the term "small landlord"[388] for multiple reasons:

- The image of "mom-and-pop landlords" is a convenient symbol that allows landlords to be portrayed as blameless victims, hiding the true power dynamics of the housing market.[389]
- Corporate landlords use the concept of the "mom-and-pop" landlord and the associated societal empathy as a smoke screen for their attacks on tenant rights. Small landlords often echo real estate industry talking points in testimonies against tenant protections and serve as plaintiffs in lawsuits seeking to overturn these protections, illustrating how this narrative is weaponized.[390]
- Even small landlords generally possess sufficient resources to mitigate the financial impacts of rent regulation (see page 61), whereas renters do not have the same resources to mitigate the myriad effects of unmanageable rent increases.

How to engage with the term when encountering it in the field:

- Seek clarity and shared definitions. Instead of relying on assumptions about what "mom-and-pop landlords" look like, ask users of the term to define what they mean. How large of a portfolio do they consider small—under five units or under 50 units? Be sure everyone is on the same page. Most places do not have a clear way of easily identifying landlords' portfolio sizes, but rental registries and open books laws can create transparency.
- Shift focus from the identity to the action. Rather than allowing the conversation to be led by the question of who landlords are, focus on the actions that rent control seeks to prevent—of which any size landlord is capable.
- Discuss ideas for local programs that can assist smaller landlords, such as low-interest home repair loans or special property tax exemptions. This is especially important when talking about rent control related to the racial wealth gap. Although the racial homeownership gap remains wide, there are a number of Black households who have bought and operated rental properties as a wealth-building tool, and it is important to acknowledge the historic and current barriers to Black wealth building.
- Focus attention on who is profiting from the misery of others (i.e., corporate landlords) and emphasize alternative pathways to collective wealth building that do not rely on extraction from community members.

New Construction Exemptions

Many rent control policies have new construction exemptions, which exempt newer buildings, purportedly with the goal of incentivizing new construction. However, it is important to clarify that "new construction" is a misnomer. As an example of this term in practice, all housing units built after February 1, 1995 and January 1, 1974 are exempt in California and New York, respectively. However, units built in 1995—let alone 1974—can hardly be considered new housing stock. Similarly, in the state of New Jersey, where 117 municipalities have rent control, exemptions are allowed for units in "newly" constructed 4+ multifamily buildings built after 1987, for either the length of amortization of the mortgage **or** thirty years after construction ends, whichever is less.[391]

Exempting aging housing stock under the guise of incentivizing new construction should be heavily scrutinized. Such scrutiny is especially merited given that multifamily underwriting standards are often set at a default rental growth rate of 3 percent a year—meaning the majority of real estate pro-formas only assume rent will grow 3 percent a year—an amount comparable to annual allowable rent increases in many rent control policies.[392] Ultimately, the burden of providing financial evidence to prove the need for new construction exemptions should be placed on landlords, developers, and investors, rather than on tenants to prove that they are not needed.

Prioritize shorter and rolling exemptions. If forced to contend with a new construction exemption, it is best to advocate for shorter exemption periods that are on a rolling basis (i.e., residential rental units are exempt for the first five years of their certificate of occupancy) as opposed to exemption periods that are based on a specific date, such as the ones used in California and New York. Rolling exemption periods ensure that units that were once exempt enter the rent-controlled housing stock at some point in the future, whereas date-based exemptions widen the proportion of exempt housing over time. Furthermore, date-based exemptions permit all future construction to overlook a vital and commonsense tenant protection. Therefore, as cities work to close their affordable housing gaps, they must grant future units the same protections as current units.

Portland, Maine, is an example of a jurisdiction that has no new construction exemption and a thriving development ecosystem. Voters passed a rent control ordinance with an annual rent cap of 70 percent of CPI in November 2020, and the policy was implemented in 2021. Below is a table showing the approved and completed housing units across the city. After a slight drop in approved units in 2022—likely due to rising interest rates and inflation—numbers have rebounded in 2023, with hundreds of units in the pipeline.

FIGURE 13

Portland, Maine sees increase in approved and completed housing units after passage of rent control

Year	Units Approved	Units Completed
2019	538	141
2020	350	362
2021	966	428
2022	363	184
2023	1,283	570
2024	238	409

Source: City of Portland, Maine Housing Dashboard

Important to Note:

In Oakland, Disability Rights Advocates and the Public Interest Law Project have filed a class action lawsuit alleging that people with disabilities are discriminatorily excluded from Oakland's rent stabilization program due to the new construction exemption. They argue that people with disabilities who need accessible housing are denied rent control protections as nearly every accessible rental unit in Oakland was built after the new construction exemption cutoff (February 1, 1995).[393] On April 2, 2020, a judge denied the City of Oakland's motion to dismiss the case, but a decision has not yet been made.

Exceptions to the Annual Rent Adjustment

The vast majority of rent control laws across the country include a process through which landlords can apply or petition for an exception, permitting them to increase rent more than the annual allowable amount. Exceptions can be based on the following:

- **Pass-through of capital improvements, property taxes, or utility costs:** Landlords can request exceptions that allow them to pass on the costs from increases in operating expenses like property taxes and utilities or capital improvements made to the property. Remember: maintenance and capital improvements are not the same. Maintenance refers to the repairs necessary to keep a property in working order, such as repairing leaky pipes or replacing a broken thermostat. Capital improvements, on the other hand, consist of permanent upgrades to a building that increase its property value, such as installing solar panels or adding in-unit laundry. Saint Paul, Minnesota's rent stabilization ordinance allows landlords to pass on the cost of capital improvements to tenants on an amortized schedule spread over 5–20 years, limited to specific schedules for different improvements. For example, the cost of adding an elevator to a building can be spread across 20 years, whereas the cost of adding dishwashers to units can be spread across five years.

- **Fair or reasonable rate of return:** As referenced in the "Legal Foundations for Rent Control" section, exceptions that allow landlords to make a fair or reasonable rate of return on their properties act as a provision used to fend off due process clause-related challenges. There is no constitutionally mandated formula required to define "fair" or "reasonable," though most cities in California use the Maintenance Net Operating Income (MNOI) methodology, further described in this presentation to the Richmond Rent Board. This methodology essentially interprets a fair return as growth in net operating income relative to the increase in consumer price index (CPI or inflation). For example, Richmond, California's MNOI is equal to CPI, and Pasadena's is equal to 50 percent of CPI. Neither Oregon nor California's rent stabilization policies, which have a maximum cap of 10 percent, include fair or reasonable rate of return exemptions, likely because the annual allowable rent increase is quite high, even relative to high inflation rates.

Important to Note:

- Capital improvement pass-throughs can unfairly shift maintenance costs to tenants, especially unjust if the landlord has not fulfilled their obligation to maintain the building, and these costs can translate to a sizable rent increase that displaces a tenant. Ultimately, capital improvements increase property values for landlords, who will reap the long-term benefits of any improvements, not tenants.[394] In 2019, organizers in New York fought against Major Capital Improvement (MCI) pass-throughs after a state agency report found two key takeaways:
  - "Owners are primarily improving buildings in neighborhoods undergoing economic revitalization, and the poorest areas are receiving little to no investment using the MCI program"; and
  - "Major types of building improvements that are essential to prolonging a building's useful life—such as plumbing and wiring replacement—are not often generated by the program."[395]
- Some jurisdictions allow a sufficiently large renovation to be considered a "new construction," even if the building is not physically torn down. For example, Montgomery County, Maryland, treats buildings that are "substantially renovated" the same as new construction: with a rolling 23-year exemption. The county allows landlords to petition for a 23-year exemption from rent stabilization for an existing building if they conduct renovations that "enhance the value of a building and cost an amount equal to at least 40 percent of the value of the building."[396]

The entity responsible for reviewing and approving these requests for exceptions varies across the country. In some jurisdictions, rent control boards, rent leveling boards, rent review commissions, or related bodies determine the outcomes of grant requests (See Santa Monica, California, and Hoboken, New Jersey). In others, that decision belongs to a government agency or a hearing officer residing in a government agency (See New York State and Pomona, California).

Definition of Rent

Consider defining "rent" in a way that explicitly includes the additional fees landlords will charge for occupancy-related costs. Comprehensive language will ensure that fee increases or additions cannot be used as a loophole to circumvent the annual rent cap, such as through junk fees like valet trash or administrative fees. See Atlantic City, New Jersey's definition of rent: "*Includes the consideration, including any bonus, benefit or gratuity demanded or received for or in connection with the use or occupancy of housing space or the transfer of a lease for such housing spaces, including but not limited to monies demanded or paid for parking, heat and utilities, pets, the use of furniture and subletting. In the event that rent is paid upon some interval other than one month, then the monthly rent shall be calculated by apportioning the rent so as to determine the sum for the term of one month.*" This definition not only calls out parking, utility, and pet fees but also covers unique circumstances in which rent may be collected at a weekly, biweekly, quarterly, or other cadence.

Enforcement and Implementation

The strongest implementation of rent control requires a coordinated infrastructure of institutions for accountability, enforcement, public education, and transparency. Policies are implemented through various bodies that can generally be categorized into three groups:

- **Elected or appointed rent control board:** Jurisdictions with rent stabilization in New York defer to local rent boards to determine annual rent caps. For example, New York City's maximum rent increases are determined by the NYC Rent Guidelines Board. In contrast, the state's jurisdictions in Nassau, Orange, Rockland, and Westchester counties defer to their county-level rent board. In other places, such as Pasadena, California, and Portland, Maine, the rent board is also responsible for mediating conflicts between landlords and tenants and evaluating landlord requests for exceptions, as mentioned earlier in this section.
- **Government agency or department:** Washington, DC's rent control is administered by the Rental Accommodations Division of the Department of Housing and Community Development.[397] This division is responsible for regulating residential rental housing licensing and registration, adjudicating rent adjustment petitions, leading compliance and enforcement, and conducting community outreach. In Sacramento, California, the Tenant Protection Program is housed within the Community Development Department's Code Compliance Division.[398] Staff are responsible for ensuring that landlords participate in the rental registry, paying the annual Tenant Protection Program fee ($20 per unit), and considering both tenant and landlord petitions.
- **No proactive enforcement:** Although Oregon's Office of Administrative Services calculates and publishes the maximum annual rent increase, the state lacks an agency or department in charge of enforcing compliance with the rent cap.[399] Instead, Oregon has a tenant-based compliance system that puts the onus on tenants to take landlords to court to enforce the law, which demands an unreasonably high amount of time and resources. While local legal aid organizations can assist tenants in enforcing their rights, the implementation burden lies overwhelmingly and inequitably on underfunded organizations and tenants.

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Rent Control Boards

Rent control boards can provide meaningful opportunities for program oversight and tenant leadership. For example, boards can request that city staff produce studies on compliance and the impacts of rent control, an imperative source of evaluation data to bolster the continued case for rent control. These boards also serve as an area of ongoing contested power for organizers. Because board membership consists of representation beyond tenants (i.e., landlords, homeowners), it is key to continue building power to ensure anti-tenant forces do not take them over.

- In Berkeley, California, the elected rent control board includes tenant leaders. The board conducts and publishes a regular survey of tenants in rent-stabilized housing, featuring detailed information on rents, demographics, and impacts of vacancy decontrol. The surveys provide critical empirical data on who rent control helps.[400]
- In contrast, in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, appointed rent boards were allowed to become nonoperational and effectively defunct when elected officials failed to make appointments to them.[401]

Without institutions to provide oversight and enforcement, the burden of enforcement effectively shifts to tenants.

Santa Monica's Implementation System:

Santa Monica, California has a robust infrastructure that consists of:

- An elected rent control board that oversees implementation and enforcement, including filing lawsuits against landlords. The Board makes changes to regulations about implementation and holds hearings about rent decreases or increases. Rent control board commissioners are elected, serve four-year terms, and are compensated $75 for each monthly meeting.
- A Rent Control Agency (RCA) with a staff of 25, funded by per-unit fees from landlords and tenants, that supports outreach and enforcement. The RCA maintains a registry of all rent-controlled units and proactively pursues delinquent registration fees. The agency's annual reports provide detailed information on rents and turnover in stabilized stock, tracking the negative impacts of vacancy decontrol.[402] It also runs a rent control office that manages inquiries from landlords and tenants, publishes a biannual newsletter mailed to landlords and tenants in rent-stabilized housing, produces educational videos, and more.
- A Public Rights Division (PRD) under the city attorney that receives complaints from tenants and can initiate legal action against a landlord on behalf of the city. Santa Monica's code enforcement officers are trained on tenant harassment protections and can issue citations, which can become part of a PRD lawsuit.[403]

Along with enforcement, it is critical to build in substantial penalties for landlords who violate the law, as well as policies that provide a petition process for tenants to win rent reductions. In places where there is not a robust implementation system, it is wise to set penalties as high as possible to deter landlords from breaking the rule, on the off-chance that they are caught.

- Passaic, New Jersey, punishes landlords who violate the city's rent control ordinance with a fine of up to $1,000, imprisonment up to 90 days, or both. The city also requires landlords who receive a reduction in municipal property taxes to pass 100 percent of that decrease onto their tenants.[404]
- Tenants in San Francisco, California, can petition the rent board for a reduction in rent if the landlord has substantially decreased a housing service without adjusting the tenant's rent accordingly. A reduction in services can be related to repairs, maintenance, parking, storage, or subletting.[405]

Important to Note:

Because the real estate industry invests so substantially in undermining the evidence of rent control's benefits, it is important to preemptively build in processes or requirements for government agencies to collect data on the policy's impact. There are a few ways this can be done:

- Rental registries can be used to collect landlord information, such as evictions and asking rent. They can be created prior to, simultaneously, or after rent control is passed. A rental registry can make a tremendous difference in a jurisdiction's ability to enforce the law when paired with resourcing the capacity of rent program staff (i.e., sending out mailings to all tenants stating their current rent ceiling). See page 89 for more information on rental registries.
- Data collection can be built into policy. For example, Portland, Maine's rent board has the jurisdiction and authority "to prepare an annual report on the state of the City's rental unit availability, which shall be presented to the City Council as part of a regularly scheduled public hearing."[406] New York City's rent regulation laws require survey data collection, such as through the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey, which has been conducted every three years since 1965.[407]

See page 105 to read more about implementing and enforcing rent control policies, including from organizers and advocates in Pasadena, California, and Saint Paul, Minnesota.

See page 119 (Appendix A), for examples of strong policy language.

5.2

Legal Foundations for Rent Control

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Landlords and others in the real estate industry have advanced different legal challenges to try to stop rent control—but the Supreme Court has rejected these attempts.
- Rent control can be challenged on the state level, though, depending on the state's constitution and preemption laws (discussed in the next section).

*Author: **Thomas Silverstein** is the President and Executive Director of the Poverty & Race Research Action Council.*

It is well-established that rent control does not violate federal law. In our federal system, states generally have the power to regulate to protect public health, safety, and welfare, a power which is known as the "police" power. In light of this authority, in order for an action taken by a state under its police power to violate federal law, there must be some specific provision of the US Constitution that conflicts with the action. The US Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld rent control laws[408] and has rejected attempts to get the Court to revisit its past decisions as recently as 2024.[409]

The industry has advanced different theories in its attempts to undercut rent control:

- First, landlords have alleged that rent control violates the Takings Clause, which prohibits federal, state, and local governments from taking property for public use without compensating the property owner. For example, if a state were to use eminent domain to acquire land for the widening of a highway but fails to pay the owner of that land the fair market value of their property, that would violate the Takings Clause. However, under the framework for evaluating whether regulations effectuate takings,[410] landlords generally cannot show that rent control reduces their financial expectations (or anticipated profits) enough to violate the law.
- Second, Due Process challenges have been similarly unsuccessful, though decisions involving other price controls holding that such policies must allow regulated entities to earn a reasonable or fair return.[411] Those cases typically necessitate the inclusion of "fair return" exceptions into rent control laws, but they do not call rent control writ large into question.[412] For example, in *Kavanau v. Santa Monica Rent Control Board*, the California Supreme Court upheld the ordinance of the City of Santa Monica, which paired a maintenance of net operating income formula with a 12 percent hard cap on the larger increases that may be permitted under a fair return clause.[413]
- Lastly, the Contracts Clause applies a forgiving rational basis standard of review, under which courts are likely to uphold the application of rent control to existing leases; yet the clause has no bearing whatsoever on the ability of governments to apply rent control to future leases.[414]

State laws that affect a municipality's power to adopt rent control vary more widely. As discussed more in the following section of this report, some states explicitly bar municipalities from adopting rent control policies, through what are typically called "preemption" laws.

Additionally, it is theoretically possible that landlords might challenge rent control laws on the basis of their state constitutions' Takings and Due Process Clauses. While state courts may interpret those provisions more broadly than federal courts to prohibit a broader range of government regulation,[415] such decisions are few and far between, likely because states with the most conservative judiciaries also have statutes that preempt rent control. Lastly, a few state courts require legislative bodies to make a finding of "emergency" conditions in order for their police power to authorize rent control.[416] Not every state defines a state of emergency in the same way, but some examples are illustrative. In New York, an emergency exists if the rental housing vacancy rate is not over five percent.[417] In light of the housing crisis, governments that have had to satisfy this requirement have generally been able to do so.

As previously noted, the US Supreme Court recently considered and rejected attempts by landlords to overturn precedent and persuade the Court to hold that rent control violates the Takings Clause, most recently in the efforts of New York City landlords and trade associations to overturn their rent stabilization law.[418] Although Justices Thomas and Gorsuch have expressed interest in taking up the issue, opponents of tenant protections have not yet been able to garner the four votes needed for the Court to accept the case, much less the five required to win. It is worth noting that, in trying to convince the Court that there is a circuit split (or difference of opinion in the lower courts) on this well-settled issue, landlords have primarily relied on case law that arguably implicates restrictions—often passed in tandem with rent control—on no cause and end of lease term evictions rather than price regulation.[419] Thus, just cause eviction protections may be at marginally greater risk of being overturned in the coming years than rent control, despite having been upheld by the Supreme Court in *Yee v. City of Escondido*, which remains good law and binding precedent. This is well-known by the real estate industry, which is trying once again to overturn *Yee v. City of Escondido*.[420]

5.3 State Preemption Landscape

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Preemption occurs when a higher level of government limits or removes the authority of a lower level of government. One common example is states limiting or banning cities from enacting rent control—and, increasingly, a broader array of local tenant protections.
- To fight back, advocates and local governments can work in solidarity to stave off, or at least narrow, state preemption bills, challenge the laws in court if they pass, and find ways to work around them at the municipal level to protect tenants.

*Author: The **Local Solutions Support Center** (LSSC) is a national hub that coordinates and creates efforts to counter the abuse of preemption and strengthen local democracy. **John Pollock** is the Coordinator at the National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel (NCCRC).*

As with local price fixing, it is important for policymakers and advocates to understand how corporate-driven state bans—"preemption" legislation—block local governments from regulating the price of rental housing. Preemption occurs when a higher level of government limits or removes the authority of a lower level of government. This happens, for example, when the federal government regulates in an area (e.g., automobile safety), and states cannot regulate in ways that conflict with federal policy. Very often, preemption happens when state governments block local government policies, even in the absence of a state regulatory regime. Preemption can ensure uniform policymaking and help manage local conflicts. But states can abuse this power to reinforce oppressive systems and undermine local democracy.

Local government power can come directly from state constitutions—called "home rule"—and from state legislation. Under home rule, courts tend to interpret the scope of local authority broadly. Under a system called "Dillon's Rule," local governments have to point to some state law explicitly authorizing them to act, which some courts tend to construe narrowly. Because the details vary significantly across the country, local officials and advocates should research and understand the details of their particular state.

Dillon's Rule gives states very broad power to limit or remove local authority; however,state constitutions can grant home rule jurisdictions some degree of immunity from state control, particularly in policy areas of distinct local concern. Either way, states are bound by other procedural and constitutional constraints when seeking to preempt local governments.

Dillon's Rule	Home Rule
• Local governments subject to Dillon's Rule must be able to point to some state law that explicitly authorizes them to act in a given area of policy, and courts often construe any such delegation narrowly to preserve state prerogatives. • States have very broad power to shape and control local authority.	• Home rule jurisdictions can point to constitutional authorization to act, often phrased in terms of power over local affairs or, more broadly, authority to regulate to advance public welfare. • Many forms of home rule, while empowering local governments to act across any area of policy in the first instance, explicitly reserve the state's power to preempt (even before a local government has taken action). • Some forms of home rule, however, provide local governments with some immunity from state control, particularly over matters of distinct local concern.

State Preemption of Local Rent Control Policies

State preemption of local authority to regulate rents is long-standing and widespread, with examples dating more than a half-century ago. In 1973, an Illinois state senate staffer formed an organization—initially called the Conservative Caucus of State Legislators—to work in the states on combating wage and price controls advanced by the Nixon Administration, with rent control being an early target. By 1986, over 30 states had adopted some form of rent control preemption. The organization, which later evolved into the American Legislative Exchange Council, also known as ALEC, eventually developed model state legislation to preempt local rent control ordinances.[421]

Tracking the precise landscape of rent control preemption is a bit more challenging than it might seem at first glance. For example, there are Dillon's Rule states without any statutes specifically granting local authority to establish rent control; however, local governments might still be able to point to some other state statutory source. Many states have a mix of home rule and Dillon's Rule jurisdictions, so some of their local governments may be able to act while others may not.

In some states, limited forms of rent control are allowed while others are barred, as in California with the Costa-Hawkins Act's preemption of vacancy control. Advocates have challenged the coverage of preemption in some states, so the boundaries of what states allow may be contested.

That all said, some form of state preemption of local rent control policies exists in:[422]

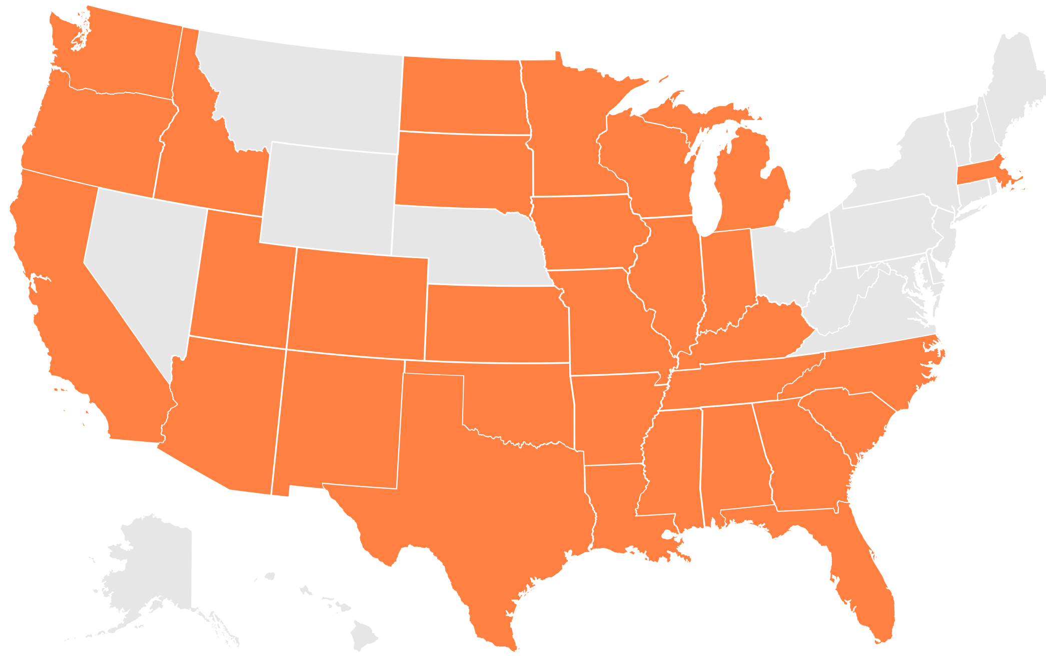
- Alabama
- Arizona
- Arkansas[423]
- California
- Colorado
- Florida[424]
- Georgia
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Indiana[425]
- Iowa
- Kansas
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- Massachusetts
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Mississippi
- Missouri
- Montana
- Nebraska
- New Mexico
- North Carolina
- North Dakota
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- Ohio
- South Carolina
- South Dakota
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Washington
- Wisconsin

For more details on the specific laws at issue, the Local Solutions Support Center (LSSC) has created an interactive map that identifies the preemption of various equitable housing policies, including rent control, source-of-income antidiscrimination, and inclusionary zoning. (The map is current through 2020, with a few intervening changes, such as Ohio's 2022 adoption of rent control preemption, not depicted.)

FIGURE 14

State rent control preemption

The orange states all have some form of rent control preemption as of 2020.



Source: Local Solutions Support Center "Rent Control Preemption Map, 2020".

In recent years, states have been moving to ban a much broader array of local tenant protections. For example, in 2023, Texas passed House Bill 2127 (D. Burrows, 2023)—dubbed the "Death Star" preemption bill—to remove local power over several areas of policy, including business and commerce, labor and occupations, and, notably, property, which includes landlord-tenant law, unless specifically authorized by the state.[426] Similarly, Florida passed a sweeping provision in 2023 that preempts all local regulation of residential leasing,[427] which has threatened nearly 50 different tenant-protection ordinances, as noted by the National Low Income Housing Coalition.[428]

Strategies to Respond

There are several strategies for advocates and their local government partners to consider for resisting or overcoming abusive state preemption.[429] One approach involves advocates and local governments working in solidarity to stave off, or at least narrow, state preemption bills while they remain pending. In West Virginia, for instance, a diverse coalition has successfully thwarted sweeping anti-worker preemption bills for nearly a decade.[430]

In instances where they have not succeeded in fending off such bills, as too often happens, some local governments and advocates have brought lawsuits to challenge abusive state preemption laws on home rule, as well as other constitutional and procedural grounds. One recent example involved El Paso, Houston, and San Antonio challenging the Texas Death Star preemption law as unconstitutional in its vagueness and its infringement on their home rule authority, which led a judge to declare the law unconstitutional just days before it was to take effect.[431]

Furthermore, even when states preempt local authority in some ways in a given area of policy, local governments may still be able to act through other means. For example, if a state preempts local rent regulations and other tenant protections, local governments may still be able to advance similar goals through spending programs and the like. Many state laws preempting rent control, for example, carve out municipally owned housing and rents set through agreements with owners in exchange for local support.

An Anomaly in the Preemption World: Tenant Right to Counsel

At their core, state preemption laws in the landlord/tenant context seek to prohibit localities from enacting laws that affect landlords in three basic ways:

1. Augmenting the rights of tenants (like creating new defenses)
2. Restricting the powers of landlords (such as a prohibition on using certain lease clauses)
3. Altering procedures landlords must follow (like lengthening the eviction notice period)

Local laws of each of these types have been preempted in a number of states, and sometimes preemption legislation has targeted multiple policies at once.[432] Even when not named specifically in a preemption law, many tenant protection reforms can be easily swept up into broad preemption language that, for instance, prohibits local laws affecting "the regulation of residential tenancies [and] the landlord-tenant relationship" (as in Florida's preemption law).

However, a law providing the right to counsel for tenants facing eviction (TRTC), which now exists in 26 jurisdictions (including some at the state level),[433] is one of the only landlord/tenant reforms that does not easily fit into these three categories or into such broad language. A TRTC law, at its core, is simply a promise by a local government to tenants that they will be provided with a government-funded lawyer if eligible, accompanied by a budgetary commitment. In other words, it is a matter purely between the locality and the tenant, and provided that the TRTC law does not also change the eviction law (such as by requiring landlords to serve notice of the TRTC), the landlord is not involved in *any* way. Granted, a landlord may have a more difficult time evicting a tenant who has representation, but only because a represented tenant can more effectively utilize **existing** law or negotiate. TRTC blocks landlords from winning cases by default in just seconds, or from obtaining one-sided "settlements," none of which are "rights" that landlords possess.

Examining the language of some of the broad preemption laws supports this conclusion. For instance, Texas House Bill 2127 established preemption of an "ordinance, order, or rule regulating evictions,"[434] but a TRTC does not have to "regulate evictions," as it does not have to touch the eviction process. Indiana's preemption law presents a closer case, as IC 32-31-1-20 preempts "the rights of the parties to a lease," but a court interpreting such a provision should hold that the intent of such language is to address rights and responsibilities *as established in the lease*, since otherwise the legislature could have specified it was addressing the rights of "landlords" and "tenants." Furthermore, a TRTC has no connection whatsoever to the lease or to the lessor and lessee as parties to a lease agreement.

Of course, if a state were to pass a law expressly prohibiting a locality from enacting a TRTC, that would be difficult to overcome unless the state preemption law was invalid or unconstitutional in some way.[435] However, no state has expressly preempted TRTC to date, perhaps because many landlords can see how TRTC benefits them.[436] In fact, the Real Estate Board of New York (the largest trade industry in the state) testified in support of the expansion of NYC's TRTC,[437] as well as in support of a bill to establish a statewide TRTC (albeit at the same time that they opposed statewide rent control).[438] Additionally, two Massachusetts companies that collectively manage 27,000 rental units coauthored an opinion piece in support of proposed statewide TRTC legislation, arguing that the state could "save millions of dollars, prevent homelessness and help struggling low-income families—both tenants and owner-occupant landlords—keep a roof over their heads by providing legal representation during the eviction process."[439]

Even if a state attempted to preempt TRTC, such a preemption law would likely remove only the guarantee of representation; it would not stop the locality from electing to pay for counsel for all tenants unless the preemption law also explicitly imposed controls on such spending.

It is also possible to work toward repealing existing state laws that block local policy innovation and, where such legislation is needed, as in Dillon's Rule states, explicitly authorizing local government rent regulation. Indeed, in 2019, responding to the hard work of a statewide housing justice coalition, New York authorized any local government in the state to adopt rent stabilization, expanding this policy tool beyond New York City and its suburbs.[440] Additionally, advocates have been working in other states—including California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, and New Mexico, among several others—to advance legislation or move ballot initiatives that would repeal rent control preemption.

Finally, given the growing breadth of the preemption of tenant protections, advocates should consider structural reforms to protect local democracy. This kind of reform moves beyond repeal campaigns to try to change the basic law of home rule, overturning Dillon's Rule where needed or rebalancing the current power that states have to block local policies where home rule is not strong enough.[441] Home rule advocacy efforts and reform coalitions are emerging in places like Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia. This work is in the very early stages, but the precarious state of so many renters is a critical motivating factor in organizers seeking a new balance of power between states and local governments.

5.4

Strengthening and Expanding Rent Control

This section of the report outlines the various stages of rent control campaigns for organizers and advocates. Whether campaigns start in places with preemption or preexisting rent control laws, there is always work to be done. Each stage is accompanied by case studies filled with strategic learnings from local and state campaigns exemplifying the powerful ways groups are building power and winning, even when they are not explicitly winning rent control. The stages are:

1. Winning Policies That Build the Foundation for Rent Control
2. Winning Rent Control
3. Protecting and Strengthening Rent Control
4. Implementing and Enforcing Rent Control

Stage 1: Winning Policies That Build the Foundation for Rent Control

Demonstrate to the base that even though rent control isn't possible now, other things are winnable.

Develop and practice co-governance with values-aligned electeds and government staff.

Build the organizing and coalition infrastructure needed to scale up the housing justice movement.

Start crafting a narrative and begin innoculating against the real estate lobby's misinformation machine.

Cultivate relationships with reporters in the local and national media landscape.

All rent control campaigns start at different points and follow unique paths. Some are in cities that are preempted from passing rent control by the state; some exist in states where a majority of legislators are landlords or are opposed, so rent control is politically infeasible in the short term. Whether coalitions are five or 15 years away from passing rent control, critical organizing can be done now to build the foundation for victory.

- **Demonstrate to the base that even though rent control is not possible now, other things are winnable.** Momentum can be built in many ways, from organizing tenants towards building-level wins, like repairs and rent freezes, to winning policies that build the foundation for successful rent control in the future. The chart below includes examples of policies and programs that not only provide strong tenant protections on their own but also establish infrastructure to support and sustain a future rent control policy. The case study that follows demonstrates how Colorado Homes for All (COHFA) successfully fought for one of these policies: for cause eviction.
- **Begin building the organizing and coalition infrastructure that will be needed to scale up the housing justice movement**, whether that is citywide (e.g., City Wide Tenant Union of Rochester, Los Angeles Tenants Union, St. Petersburg Tenants Union), statewide (e.g., Connecticut Tenants Union, North Carolina Tenants Union), or beyond (e.g., Autonomous Tenant Union Network, Tenant Union Federation). Take the time to build trusting relationships, not just within tenant advocacy groups but also with cross-sector organizations and unlikely partners.
- **Develop and practice co-governance with values-aligned electeds and government staff**, who may grow to see organizers as necessary allies—if not helpful political cover to justify policy decisions—pushing tenant rights and protections forward internally.
- **Cultivate relationships with reporters in the local and national media landscape**, who are often renters themselves, and share tenant stories uplifting individuals as heroes in the fight for housing justice.
- **Start crafting a narrative and begin inoculating against the real estate lobby's misinformation** machine (see page 61). Read how COHFA accomplished this by hosting "Slummy Awards" to bring attention to corporate greed. Launch smaller campaigns taking on landlords who are unjustly treating tenants and elevate these tenants' stories so that people increasingly recognize the actions harming our communities.

With these pieces in place, the campaign can strategically work towards and prepare for the right political window.

INSIGHT

What is Co-Governance?

Dēmos defines co-governance as "a strategy centered around sharing economic and political power that helps ensure that the government is actively working with communities to design and implement policies such that the people who are most harmed by structural racism and our economic system are part of co-creating the solutions."[442] Read this guide to learn more.

FIGURE 15

Policies that build the foundation for rent control

Policy	Where It Exists	How It Relates to Rent Control
Just Cause (or “good cause” or “for cause”): A policy that protects tenants from arbitrary, retaliatory, and discriminatory evictions and lease nonrenewals by requiring that landlords have a just cause for filing an eviction. Common just causes include nonpayment of rent, lease violations, and substantial damage to the unit.	Seven states: New Jersey, New Hampshire, California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, New York; Philadelphia, PA, and more.	Just cause is a necessary complement to rent control, which is why they are often passed simultaneously or as part of rent control ordinances where just cause laws do not already exist. It is critical to protecting tenants from landlords who want to take advantage of vacancy decontrol and displace tenants in order to increase rent. Rent control without just cause means that landlords can evict or refuse to renew tenants without reason. Together, they close loopholes, providing fuller protections against displacement.
Rental Registry: A database of rental properties that includes information about the owner and property, such as owner contact information, beneficial owner contact information, annual rent, unit count and size, additional fees charged, public subsidies, eviction filings, inspection, and code violation data. Rental registries may require owners to pay a rental licensing or registration fee.	Buffalo, NY: Cedar Rapids, IA; Concord, CA; Louisville, KY; and more.	Ownership transparency can empower both tenants and local governments. Tenants can organize more effectively if they know who owns their homes, which can lead to corporate campaigns or portfolio-level organizing. Local governments need to understand their housing stock to make well-informed housing policies that respond to tenant needs. And, when rent control is passed in the future, the rental registry can be leveraged for implementation and tracking rent increases.
Relocation Assistance: A policy that requires landlords to provide financial assistance to tenants to help cover moving expenses, security deposits, and other relocation costs under certain circumstances. These payments are triggered by rent increases above a certain percent, no cause evictions or nonrenewals, or substantial changes in lease terms that result in tenants moving.	Portland, OR; Eugene, OR; Tacoma, WA; Bellingham, WA; California.	In places where rent control or just cause are preempted, relocation assistance for renters can be a pathway to winning tenant protections. Though it does not prohibit harmful landlord behavior, setting relocation assistance amounts high enough can still deter landlords from displacing tenants. At the minimum, tenants gain additional financial resources to help them find new housing.
Fair Rent Commission (FRC): A fair rent commission is a municipal board with the power to restrict rental charges in residential housing that are “so excessive as to be harsh and unconscionable.” It holds hearings and makes decisions regarding tenant complaints. The Connecticut legislature passed Public Act 22-30, which requires each town with a population greater than 25,000 to adopt a FRC ordinance in accordance with the Fair Rent Commission Act.	Connecticut (54 cities and towns).	Connecticut does not yet have statewide rent control, but many tenants benefit from fair rent commissions. FRCs have jurisdiction over rental charges even when there is no rent increase. For example, they have reduced rent when there are habitability issues. Complaints from tenants can result in the reduction or denial of rent increases or the phasing in or delay of a rent increase. The FRC normalizes the idea that egregious rent increases are not a right of property ownership and that landlords must justify rent increases. When rent control is passed in the future, the FRC structure can act as a preexisting rent control board.

Tenant Right to Counsel: A policy or program that provides a right to legal representation to tenants facing eviction, often prioritizing low-income renters and offering representation at no cost to tenants.	26 jurisdictions.	Tenants with a right to counsel are more empowered to organize around tenant protection issues with less fear of retaliatory eviction. Advocates pursuing the right to counsel have created strong, diverse coalitions that help lay the foundation for power building. Additionally, enacting the right to counsel creates a much larger pool of eviction defense attorneys who can push for policy reform.
Limits to Junk Fees: A policy that limits the amount landlords can charge for housing-related rental fees, including application fees, security deposits, late fees, administrative fees, valet trash fees, and end-of-lease fees.	15+ states with junk fee regulations; 25+ states with security deposit caps; 10+ states with application fee caps; more at local level.	Winning limits to fees not only directly benefits tenants' financial well-being but also lays the foundation for organizing to limit predatory economic extraction. For some tenants, winning a fee reduction or limit signifies their first time exercising power in their lease. It can build momentum for broader movements and larger wins.
Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA) and Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (COPA): TOPA provides tenants living in multifamily housing with advance notice that the landlord is planning to sell their building and an opportunity for them to collectively purchase the building. COPA allows a qualified nonprofit or government entity to make a first offer to buy a building with low-income tenants if the property owner decides to sell.	San Francisco, CA; Washington, DC; Philadelphia, PA; and more.	TOPA/COPA can result in tenant or nonprofit ownership of a building, allowing for resident governance and efforts like the incorporation of rent control and other tenant protections into property management practices. Even if TOPA/COPA does not result in an acquisition, it can still give tenants a seat at the table to make demands of the new owner related to long-term affordability. Rent control can complement TOPA or COPA by bringing down resale values through limiting the rent that future owners can collect.
Right to Organize: A policy that gives tenants the ability to organize without fear of retaliation or eviction from landlords, owners, and management—within and across different properties.	Austin, TX; Seattle, WA; New York; Minnesota; all public housing tenants; and more.	A right to organize is foundational to shifting the power imbalance between tenants and landlords. It allows tenants to demand enforcement of their existing housing rights and fight for new ones. Paired with just cause, the right to organize can accelerate rent control wins. Conversely, rent control paired with the right to organize can accelerate just cause wins.
Rental Assistance: A program that provides tenants with monthly rent subsidies to help them afford housing. Often, funds go directly to landlords. State and local rental assistance programs can be designed to be less restrictive than the federal Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8) and can be available to groups like undocumented and formerly incarcerated people.	New Jersey, Iowa, Illinois, Massachusetts, and more.	Rental assistance can be paired with universal rent control to ensure deep affordability for extremely low-income households, those at risk of homelessness, and households with zero income. Rent control also makes rental assistance dollars go further, as private landlords are not able to drastically increase rents to maximize profit from rental assistance.
Social Housing: A public option for housing that is permanently affordable, protected from the private market, and publicly owned or under democratic community control.	Seattle, WA; see emerging programs and proposals here.	Rent control is key to maximizing the impact of social housing. When social housing units are built, rent control ensures they remain affordable to low-income residents for years to come, helping prevent further loss of valuable affordable housing stock.
Rent-Setting Algorithm Bans: A policy that prohibits the use of the rent-fixing software algorithms that some landlords are using to drive up housing costs.	Philadelphia, PA; San Diego, CA; Portland, OR; and more.	Banning the use of rent-setting algorithms does not replace the need for rent control but it does help address the problem of rising rents. Read more below.

INSIGHT

What's RealPage Got to Do with It?

The Problem: Landlords across the country are colluding to inflate rents, artificially constrain housing supply by keeping units vacant, and generate higher profits—and RealPage's rent-setting software is the vehicle through which it is happening.

How RealPage Works: RealPage collects publicly available data on local housing markets and proprietary data from private landlords regarding their properties, including current asking rent, unit descriptions, and vacancy rates. The company has data from more than 13 million units across the country, to which it applies an algorithm to generate recommendations on rent and occupancy levels. Rather than functioning as separate entities competing against one another to attract tenants, landlords who use RealPage effectively delegate their rental price and vacancy decisions to a common decision maker in a collusive arrangement. These recommendations not only maximize building-level landlord revenue but revenue for all RealPage landlords who share data.

What's Being Done About It: In August 2024, the US Department of Justice joined the Attorneys General of California, Colorado, Connecticut, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, and Washington in filing a lawsuit against RealPage, Inc. for "its unlawful scheme to decrease competition among landlords in apartment pricing and to monopolize the market for commercial revenue management software."[443] Cities and states are also taking matters into their own hands with ordinances that ban the use of algorithmic price-fixing tools, such as in San Francisco and Philadelphia, with proposed legislation on the table in over a dozen states.

Takeaways: Addressing price-fixing algorithms is one way to help bring rents down and is complementary to—but not a substitute for—strong rent control. For more information, see the American Economic Liberties Project and Local Progress, and join the End Rental Price-Fixing campaign.

CASE STUDY

Colorado Homes for All: For Cause Eviction

COHFA members at a for cause eviction rally at the Colorado state capitol. *(Photo courtesy of Colorado Homes for All.)*

Coalition:

Colorado Homes for All (COHFA) is a coalition of 23 organizations that is multiracial, community-centered, and structured to uplift the leadership and voices of those who are directly impacted by inequitable housing policies and unjust tenant conditions.

Campaign:

State legislative campaign to secure a For Cause Eviction policy (HB24-1098) that requires landlords and property owners to provide a tenant with a valid reason for filing for an eviction and prohibits them from refusing to renew a tenant's lease or using a lease holdover as grounds for eviction.

Context:

COHFA was created in 2016 when two grassroots organizations acted on repeated reports from Denver tenants that rents were quickly becoming unaffordable. As COHFA expanded across the state, many of its member organizations heard directly from renters about abusive landlord practices, such as using eviction as a tool to retaliate and then charge higher rents. In 2019, the coalition worked with a state legislator to repeal the ban on rent control, but it did not have the political power or capacity to succeed. In 2021, COHFA identified passing For Cause Eviction as a key priority.

Key Strategies:

- **Leadership of Impacted Communities:** Directly impacted people were central to the entire policymaking process; renters attended meetings alongside staff, asked tough questions of legislators, and weighed in on potential concessions.
- **Narrative Discipline:** Although messaging such as, "Tenants who pay rent and do not violate their leases should not be unjustly evicted," polled well, the coalition did not want to endorse the underlying idea that some renters are more deserving of power or protection than others, nor the notion that landlords had the right to unjustly evict in any circumstance.
- **Direct Action:** When the legislature failed to pass Just Cause Eviction and overturn the state's ban on rent control in 2023, COHFA seized an opportunity to transform frustration into strategic mobilization by hosting the "Slummy Awards," a direct action outside the Apartment Association of Metro Denver's annual awards dinner to spotlight the role the lobbying group played in killing renter protection legislation.
- **Temporary Strategic Coalition**: In 2024, COHFA built a temporary legislative coalition, the Keep Coloradans Housed Coalition, that leveraged the policy expertise and lobbying resources of allied organizations that did not have their own base, while maintaining COHFA's accountability to grassroots members.
- **No Compromises That Would Undermine Future Wins:** COHFA was intentional in grounding this win within the larger campaign for local control of rents. Its grassroots organizations were unwilling to accept amendments or use harmful messaging that would have undermined its long-term agenda.

What's Next:

An intentional, unwavering focus on corporate greed and prioritization of grassroots members formed the foundational pillars of COHFA's For Cause Eviction victory, and they will continue to be central to the fight for local control of rents in Colorado. The temporary structure, organizing, and narrative practices all laid the groundwork for continued efforts to overturn the ban on local rent stabilization policies in Colorado.

Read more:

https://www.policylink.org/resources-tools/colorados-fight-for-fair-evictions

Stage 2: Winning Rent Control

Choose a campaign pathway and power-map to assess the social and political landscape.

Develop parallel strategies for communications, field, and political engagement.

Build a broad coalition that is accountable to renters of color and low-income renters.

Winning rent control is never straightforward. Often, it means losing a legislative fight for multiple years while learning difficult lessons for the next year. Optimistically, it means changing hearts and minds while nimbly building the power to shift the way decisions are made. Both tend to be true. Below is a brief overview of the steps to putting together a successful campaign and getting them to act in concert. Then, read case studies from rent control campaigns in Connecticut and California to learn directly from the organizers themselves.

Remember: there is an entire real estate lobby and apparatus set up to fight the tenant organizing movement, so even a "perfect" campaign can still lose. If a win does not happen, the coalition can still establish elements for the future: growing the base, developing narrative strategy, implementing power-building tactics, and holding strong on amendments that would weaken a future policy. This last one is especially pivotal, as accepting amendments in one year often sets an expectation from policymakers that the same concession will be made in future years.

Choose a Campaign Pathway and Power-Map

Whether the coalition chooses to pursue rent control through a ballot initiative or a legislative body affects many campaign decisions. Begin with a legal analysis to see which pathways are available in the target jurisdiction. Statewide initiative or referendum processes are available in 26 states. In the states where they are not available, local jurisdictions often provide an option for ballot initiatives or referenda.[444] The ballot initiative route presents its own challenges, such as in fundraising against a monied opposition, voter outreach, and turnout. It also has significant advantages, such as bypassing an unfavorable elected body and not having to negotiate as much to complete the legislative process. See the PolicyLink Ballot Initiative Guide and Ballot Initiative Strategy Center for more resources.

The legislative pathway comes with similar considerations. While there will be less voter engagement required to ensure a victory, the legislators who need to be moved will be heavily influenced by the real estate lobby, both publicly and in meetings behind closed doors—and they may also be receiving campaign donations from interest groups. In addition, the campaign has less control over timelines in the legislative route. For example, committee hearings are held at the whims of legislators, and mobilizing members to show up for public testimony with days' notice is a challenge. In comparison, ballot initiative deadlines are more predictable (i.e., signature collection deadlines, campaign finance deadlines, election days).

Regardless of the pathway chosen, the campaign must complete—and regularly update—a power-mapping exercise.[445] Power-mapping gives organizers a chance to assess their social and political landscape, by organizing stakeholders into quadrants that measure how powerful or influential they are and how strongly they oppose or support the campaign objective. What results is a holistic sense of allies, opposition, targets, and base audiences, and most importantly, a tool to strategize who must be moved or neutralized to win.

Build a Broad Coalition That is Accountable to the Tenant Base

Some campaigns emerge from a preexisting coalition, while others start with one or more lead organizations. In either case, it is essential to center an accountability to the people most harmed by the current housing system—specifically, renters of color and low-income renters. Start by creating a coalition infrastructure that provides transparency in decision-making, clarity on roles and responsibilities, and mechanisms for accountability. A steering committee or central decision-making body may guide the overall direction of the coalition. From there, build out a broad coalition of cross-sector partners ranging from labor unions, faith-based groups, culturally based advocacy organizations, community developers, and beyond. These partners can be organized into working groups to carry out the field, communications, and political organizing-related tasks needed to win. A few tips:

- Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between organizations and other coalition agreement documents can be useful tools for formalizing partnerships rooted in shared values and expectations.
- Gain clarity on coalition capacity, specifically regarding who will do the work. Will the coalition be staffed, or will tasks get done by staff who work at coalition member organizations?
- Anticipate tension that may emerge between certain groups by holding open discussions before campaigns reach stressful moments. For example, autonomous tenant unions that are volunteer-run operate and make decisions differently from 501(c)(3) organizations, given their staff and accountability structures. Tenant organizing groups and technical assistance providers, such as movement lawyers and researchers, may have different expectations for one another's roles.
- Be strategic about how to incorporate non-housing organizations, such as labor and immigrant rights organizations, into the coalition. What risks or stances can individual organizations take that the coalition may not be able to? How can the full range of partners be leveraged for the unique voices and power they hold?

Develop Parallel Communications for Field and Political Strategies

Winning rent control requires recognizing, building, and claiming power in multiple realms. It means changing the way decision makers, community members, local media, and even tenants see the relationship between organizers and power. Accomplish this by developing field, communications, and political strategies that build upon each other. For example, use building-level campaigns targeting bad actors in the community—such as rent strikes against landlords who fail to maintain habitable living conditions in their properties or preservation fights for buildings with expiring affordability—to demonstrate that housing crises are created; they do not "just happen." Utilizing a diversity of tactics is also a strategic way to resolve tactical tensions within a coalition and ensure there is a role for everyone. This social change ecosystem is one helpful way to think about frameworks for sustainable coalition building.

Curate a narrative strategy that demonstrates who the villain is, what harm they create in our communities, and how people can be on the side of heroes seeking to make our community a more just and fair one. Nurture relationships with local media by giving them access to the stories behind these building-level fights and continue to be a news source as the campaign scales up. As these relationships are strengthened, it will become easier to shape the underlying narrative through which housing stories are written. Furthermore, remember that communications and narrative strategies can grow the base by exposing more new people to the work. In addition to shifting the narrative, securing a two-minute spot in the local evening news could be equivalent to knocking on hundreds of doors. Be prepared for new inquiries and spend time building a strategy for integrating new members.

Tie all of these strategies together to build political power. Now that the face of the villain has been painted, demand that elected officials choose a side. Through actions, rallies, public testimony turnout, and votes, show the current power brokers that tenants, too, hold power that is rapidly growing—and changing the way decisions are made. The passage of the 2019 Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act (HSTPA) by organizers and advocates in New York is a textbook example of how tenants successfully took on—and beat—the multibillion dollar real estate industry. Their grassroots organizing tactics were so effective that they shifted the way real estate lobbyists understood and maneuvered power in the legislature.

A lobbyist reflects: "When I was a young lawyer, you could fit all of the decision makers in the city... in the ballroom of the New York Hilton. And today you couldn't fit them all in the Javits Center. Power has become decentralized, just as communications have become decentralized. And it takes a different way of presenting public policies in order to convince more people that you've got the right answer."[446] While the real estate lobby has since adapted to these tactics, this success demonstrates how organizers can take advantage of a constantly evolving power landscape to catch the opposition off guard and achieve meaningful wins.

CASE STUDY

Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE): Tenant Protection Act

Organization:

The Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) Action is a multiracial, democratic, nonprofit community organization that builds power to fight and stand for economic, racial, and social justice.

Campaign:

Legislative campaign to pass the Tenant Protection Act of 2019, which capped annual rent increases and extended just cause eviction protections to millions of tenants throughout the state.

ACCE members at the Renters Rising rally at the California state capitol. *(Photo courtesy of Popular Democracy in Action.)*

Context:

In 2018, rents in many cities, particularly in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, had skyrocketed, and the state had the nation's fastest-growing rates of homelessness. The urgent demand for statewide rent control led to Proposition 10, a statewide ballot initiative that would repeal the Costa-Hawkins Act (see page 71). The real estate industry spent over $70 million to confuse voters into believing that stronger rent control measures would undermine affordability. The failure of Prop 10 led advocates to push for a policy that could be passed in the California legislature. In 2019, Democrats held the governor's office as well as a supermajority in both houses of the legislature. However, many moderate and conservative legislators were concerned about its potential economic impact on landlords.

Key Strategies:

- **Turning Public Frustration into Campaign Momentum:** The fight for Prop 10 helped ACCE and other groups to expand the base of activists and the coalition of groups in support of rent control. Public frustration with skyrocketing rents and homelessness continued to mount, setting the stage for a renewed push for a statewide solution. In the meantime, numerous cities across California adopted rent control and strengthened tenant protections.

- **Engaging Labor, Legal, and Environmental Groups:** ACCE along with organizations like PICO California, Public Advocates, SEIU California, TechEquity, and Western Center on Law and Poverty built a statewide housing justice coalition of more than 150 groups to support Assembly Bill 1482 (D. Chiu, 2019). Ultimately, the coalition included a diverse set of groups ranging from the Sierra Club to the California Labor Federation (AFL-CIO)—and many more. Labor advocates, who traditionally had not been involved in housing policy fights, became a critical partner in the fight, as housing costs emerged as a top priority for members.

- **Leveraging Influential Public Figures to Move Policy:** ACCE held a sit-in at Governor Newsom's office in order to encourage him to take a more proactive role in moving the bill forward and pressuring legislators to support it. As a result, Governor Newsom convinced the California Business Roundtable and the Chamber of Commerce—two of the state's influential lobby groups for corporations—to embrace or, at the very least, remain neutral on the bill, signaling to moderates that their support for the bill would not be deemed anti-business. Newsom became fully engaged, pushing the cap down to 5 percent plus consumer price index (CPI) with a maximum increase of 10 percent, allowing the bill to expire in 10 years instead of three and ensuring the bill's successful passage.

What's Next:

While AB 1482 was not a perfect solution to California's housing crisis, it marked a significant step forward in the effort to provide greater security for renters. The law's passage signaled that the voices of renters and community advocates could no longer be ignored in the debate over housing policy in California. In 2025, the coalition will fight for Assembly Bill 1157 (A. Kalra, 2025), a bill to create a 5 percent maximum cap, end the sunset, and eliminate the single-family homes exemption.

MRCT members speaking at a press conference at the Connecticut state capitol. *(Photo courtesy of Make the Road Connecticut.)*

CASE STUDY

Make the Road Connecticut: Cap the Rent Campaign

Organization:

Make the Road Connecticut (MRCT) is a member-led organization that builds power in low-income, working-class, Latinx, and immigrant communities in Bridgeport and Hartford.

Campaign:

State legislative campaign for a 3 percent annual cap on rent increases.

Context:

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of Make the Road's members were experiencing rent increases as high as 20 percent and emergency rental assistance resources were going directly to landlords. A love of community led MRCT to connect with its allies and launch its first housing campaign. In collaboration with the Connecticut Democratic Socialists of America, Connecticut Fair Housing Center, Connecticut Tenants Union, Hamden Tenant Union, and many others, they fought at the state capitol to Cap the Rent.

Key Strategies:

- **Intentional Onboarding:** MRCT created welcoming spaces where the community could connect, tell, and own their stories. In tenant workshops, organizers were intentional in their discussions, adapting as best they could to the needs of specific community members. Instead of just throwing people into tasks to build a bigger team, the organization made an effort to understand each individual's situation. Many of those who joined the movement continue to work with Make the Road Connecticut now, having gained more experience with collaboration, the legislature, strategic legal perspectives, and learning to further harness popular power and unity.
- **Impacted Communities Leading:** The members of organizations like Make the Road Connecticut and others which represented the most marginalized communities, such as the Connecticut Tenant Union, formed the base, force, and leaders of their campaigns. The campaign had many students and volunteers knocking on doors, canvassing, phone banking, and fighting to reach out to other tenants in the state. Their narrative was that people deserve the chance to put down roots.
- **Integrating Language Justice:** The campaign understood that language justice was the bridge needed to connect with communities, amplify their stories, and help them escape the isolation of the pandemic years. To resolve this issue, MRCT employed interpreters to serve as a resource for the community, facilitating meetings and including tenants in the decision-making process without language barriers. In 2023, it was the first time that the legislative office building employed an interpreter for public hearings. This initiative aimed to address the language barrier, which has historically been used as a deliberate tactic to silence, oppress, and exclude a significant portion of the population from participating in decision-making processes. The group found that language justice, where everyone expresses themselves in their preferred language, can unite each other more than ever.

- **Strategic Pressure and Presence:** Though it was the coalition's first year advocating at the state legislature, the campaign strategically canvassed the districts of key lawmakers, working in collaboration with local organizations to put pressure on these representatives. Thanks to strong grassroots organizing and engagement, MRCT had one of the longest public hearings in state history, testifying before the state legislature's housing committee for over 20 hours. They also learned how to leverage local and social media to draw attention to the coalition and raise awareness for the fights to come.

What's Next:

Make the Road Connecticut is currently in its second year of seeking an expansion of good cause eviction. Current good cause law protects tenants who are at least 62 years old or have disabilities. The proposed bill (House Bill 6889 (Housing Committee, 2025)) would expand those protections to tenants of buildings with five or more units who have been living in the unit for at least one year, safeguarding at least 11 percent of tenants in Connecticut. The campaign organizers' ultimate objective is to protect all individuals, including tenants residing in single-family homes; however, they recognize that this endeavor will need many years of effort.

This legislative session has also underscored the importance of rent control in Connecticut. A proposed bill (House Bill 6892 (Housing Committee, 2025)) was introduced that would allow fair rent commissions (FRCs) (see page 89) to presume a rent increase over 10 percent to be excessive if the property owner has had the home for less than a year, allowing the FRC to investigate further. This development has motivated MRCT to strategize and advocate for a reduced rent cap in the future.

Stage 3: Protecting and Strengthening Rent Control

Claim the narrative and leverage the celebratory energy to fuel the next chapter.

Prepare for litigation from landlords or property management companies.

Regroup as a coalition to assess what went well and opportunities to sharpen strategies and tactics.

Collect and share data on how renters and community members are experiencing rent control.

Make renters aware of their new housing rights, and their pathways to enforcing those rights.

Once a rent control policy has been won, there is little time to rest. The coalition must continue vital work to celebrate and affirm the win, anticipate and fend off attacks to weaken it, and, in most jurisdictions, work to strengthen it. This can look like reducing the annual rent cap, eliminating exemptions or loopholes, or converting a temporary protection into a permanent one. Below are some steps that should be considered, followed by case studies from New York and Maryland demonstrating how organizers have sustained local housing justice movements to continue strengthening rent control.

Claim the Narrative (And Celebrate!)

The first step after winning is claiming the narrative. The fearmongering and misinformation of the opposition will take center stage, so prepare talking points and headlines that tell the story *the coalition* wants people to read. The real estate lobby's efforts to undermine New York's Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act during the pandemic is an excellent example of this (see page 101). Remind everyone of—and celebrate—the collective victory that communities won by coming together around a shared vision. Be transparent about who is attacking the new policy and their self-interest; no one should be surprised that a profit-seeking industry is seeking to stop a profit-limiting tool. Feed into the positive momentum of the win and leverage that celebratory energy to fuel the next chapter.

Regroup as a Coalition

Before launching into the next phase of the campaign, take time to evaluate the coalition's work. Make sure everyone has the opportunity to rest and take care of themselves to avoid burnout. Assess what went well and discuss opportunities to sharpen strategies and tactics. Furthermore, refresh the power map and discuss whether it is time to invite other organizations to join based on the campaign's next steps. Perhaps something has been achieved at the state level, and now there is a need to affirm support for rent control at the local level to uphold the win. Acknowledge that changes in the work translate to a need for new coalition partners—and that some partners will leave the work, whether it is due to a change in direction or capacity issues.

Most importantly, ensure the coalition and base are ready for a new relationship with power. While winning may have required agitational tactics to move electeds to align with the campaign's position, the victory means that the party holding political power has shifted. Have intentional conversations to develop a shared analysis about what this power means and how the coalition seeks to wield it. For example, a rent control campaign may have started with organizers being the underdogs and distrusting city staff, but upon winning, organizers hold more power than before and should use it to engage with city staff to exert a strong influence on implementation and enforcement. Being unprepared for this moment may result in power slipping through the group's fingers—and the real estate lobby will be ready to step in.

Educate Renters of Their New Rights

In an ideal world, the laws we pass would have strong enforcement mechanisms and robust government capacity dedicated to implementation rather than relying solely on tenants to know their rights. Unfortunately, that is not always the case; the infrastructure for enforcement and implementation can take a considerable time to build (see page 105). In the meantime, it is crucial for organizers and advocates to make renters aware of their new housing rights and their pathways to enforcing those rights—especially if the new law takes effect immediately upon passage.

Prepare for Litigation

Prepare for a lawsuit from landlords or property management companies. This is a common practice following the passage of many tenant protection laws, even when there is no case to be won. Lawsuits and complaints are a commonly used tactic of the real estate industry to undermine the credibility of the new law and waste valuable resources (time and money) to protect it. The vast majority of the time, there will be legal precedent for upholding the law; however, the confusion surrounding a lawsuit can plant seeds of uncertainty making renters unsure of what rights exist. Filing a complaint is also a strategy that opens up an opportunity for the opposition to offer their own narrative, so organizers should be ready with both a litigation and narrative strategy. In partnership with legal partners, develop a litigation strategy that centers tenant perspectives. This could mean not intervening, hosting a press conference to reaffirm the victory and highlight who the opposition is, submitting an amicus brief, or engaging with a city attorney's office if they are the defendant. Weigh capacity, risk, and narrative strategy when considering these approaches.

Collect and Share Data

Start gathering quantitative and qualitative data on how renters and community members are experiencing rent control. This can take the form of collecting stories from the base (i.e., tenants sharing stories of housing stability or teachers noting a decrease in student turnover in their classroom), monitoring complaints reported to legal aid, publishing rent board reports (see page 78), or partnering with local research institutions to gather data on a larger scale. For example, the Community Service Society of New York conducts an annual statewide survey that includes questions on housing.[447] It is critical that organizers measure the success of rent control policies on their terms. While the real estate industry will likely participate in and publicize the results of a capital strike (temporarily holding off on submitting development permits or refusing to invest in a jurisdiction),[448] organizers know that the true measure of success of a rent control policy is how it stabilizes rents, not creates units.

In addition, pay attention to national development trends and economic factors that influence development beyond local levers. For example, the National Association of Home Builders conducts an annual industry survey asking builders about their top challenges.[449] In 2023 and 2024, the top responses were related not to rent control, but to high interest rates, rising inflation, and the cost/availability of labor. Remind local electeds of these broader economic factors, especially when local developers and investors exclusively blame rent control for changes in development patterns.

Key Learning: Prepare for the Next Election

After a community wins a rent control policy, the real estate lobby will often invest in upcoming elections to flip the balance of power that allowed for the passage of rent control. This can result in champions getting voted out and policies getting rolled back or repealed. Concord, California, is a recent example of this opposition strategy in action. Raise the Roof coalition fought for over eight years to pass rent control (with an annual rent cap of 3 percent or 60 percent of CPI, whichever is lower) and just cause in April 2024. Then, the real estate lobby ran their own candidate, Pablo Benavente, to replace Councilmember Edi Barsan, who was a champion for tenant protections representing Concord's District 4. Over 10 percent of Bonaventure's campaign donations came from local property managers and the California Association of Realtors.[450] He won by 109 votes and has since proposed amendments to weaken Concord's rent control. In April 2025, the city council voted to roll back the ordinance by increasing the annual rent cap to 5 percent per year and exempting landlords who rent out two or fewer single-family homes or condominiums from just cause.

CASE STUDY

Housing Justice for All New York: Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act & Good Cause

Members of HJ4A and NYS Tenant Bloc rally for good cause in Syracuse, NY. *(Photo courtesy of Housing Justice for All New York.)*

Coalition:

Housing Justice for All is a statewide coalition of over 80 groups representing tenants and homeless New Yorkers, united in our fight for housing as a human right. Our campaign is led by the people who are fighting to afford housing in New York every single day.

Campaign:

State legislative campaign to pass the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act, closing landlord-friendly loopholes in the state rent stabilization law, and good cause eviction protections.

Context:

In 1974, New York's tenant activists pushed to pass the Emergency Tenant Protection Act (ETPA), the basis of the state's rent stabilization system. Through the 1980s and 1990s, conservative legislatures attempted to gut it with loopholes, and ETPA's sunset clause led to recurring legislative haggling. Tenants achieved limited wins throughout the 2000s and 2010s while hundreds of thousands of apartments were deregulated. The political terrain began shifting in 2017 when a range of new and long-standing tenant groups coalesced around the Housing Justice for All (HJ4A) campaign.

Key Strategies:

- **Rent as an Election Issue:** Organizers made rent a central issue in key races, helping sweep in a true Democrat majority, as well as the first socialist state legislators in 100 years. Their strategy helped break a conservative stranglehold on state governance, enabled by a governor who elevated inaction on progressive issues to a perverse art form.

- **Clear Messaging:** After 18 months of organizing and coalition building, HJ4A emerged as a statewide movement with a package of nine bills to fix and expand the state's rent laws. Learning from previous campaigns, organizers created consistent, simple messaging—"Pass all nine bills!" and "Universal rent control!"—to avoid getting mired in statutory minutiae. Crucially, the proposed reforms benefited tenants across the state, not just in New York City.
- **Consistent and Escalating Advocacy:** Tenants became a common fixture in the state capitol, lobbying electeds on "Tenant Tuesdays," while continuing their local campaigns. Drawing on post-Occupy momentum, Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign energy, and alarm over Trump's first election, HJ4A effectively made it more difficult for many state elected officials to (openly) accept real estate money or reject tenant's needs outright. Through consistent lobby meetings and social media, HJ4A campaigners drew a connection between rent law loopholes and rising income inequality in the city. Electeds had to pick a side: tenants or real estate. As the 2019 legislative session neared its end, HJ4A escalated its inside/outside strategy with large, visible demonstrations and intensive legislative advocacy. The result was the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act (HSTPA), a modification of the 1974 rent stabilization law that closed its many landlord-friendly loopholes—but did not include good cause protections for approximately 1.6 million tenant households not covered by rent stabilization.
- **Navigating and Negotiating in a Pro-Property Legislature:** At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizing reoriented around emergency responses, while landlords regrouped with an aggressive campaign against good cause and for an HSTPA rollback, capturing electeds' attention with lobbying dollars and familiar narratives: declining housing conditions, struggling "small" landlords, and scary squatters next door. HJ4A led a five-year campaign for good cause, pushing back against false narratives in the media and organizing in key electeds' districts. At the same time, organizers warded off an underhanded campaign to weaken the HSTPA through negative media exposure targeting the bill's Democratic signatories. New York State passed Good Cause in 2024. However, a state legislature that was once again decidedly pro-landlord weakened the final version of the bill.
- **Moving from Passage to Implementation:** The 2019 HSTPA and 2024 Good Cause fights created the need for dozens of municipal opt-in campaigns. In less than a year, 14 localities opted into good cause, often with fewer loopholes. However, efforts to opt into HSTPA have been thwarted by landlord lawsuits, which successfully weaponized the ETPA's "rental emergency" requirement to block implementation.

What's Next:

Good cause and rent stabilization remain popular among voters across the state. In 2025, HJ4A organizers launched the NYS Tenant Bloc, a 501(c)(4) organization to support pro-tenant political candidates. While continuing to work on good cause opt-in campaigns, tenant groups across NY launched a new campaign to expand rent stabilization and simplify the ETPA opt-in process.

CASE STUDY

CASA: Rent Control in Prince George’s and Montgomery Counties

Organizers and advocates at a rally for rent stabilization in Montgomery County, Maryland. *(Photo courtesy of CASA.)*

Organization:

With over 175,000 lifetime members across 46 states, CASA is a national powerhouse organization that builds power and improves the quality of life in working-class Black, Latino/a/e, Afro-descendant, Indigenous, and Immigrant communities. CASA creates change with its power-building model that blends human services, community organizing, and advocacy to serve the full spectrum of the needs, dreams, and aspirations of members.

Campaign:

Local policy campaign for permanent rent stabilization in Maryland’s Montgomery and Prince George’s counties.

Context:

While Maryland has yet to adopt statewide rent control, it is one of few states where local governments have the authority to implement rent control policies. Before the pandemic, many of CASA’s members—predominantly immigrant, Black, and Brown working-class individuals—faced an already limited supply of affordable housing in Montgomery and Prince George’s counties, and many members were vulnerable to unchecked rent increases. During the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, many of CASA’s members faced illness or death as essential workers were forced into unemployment, worsening their financial hardships. Although a rent moratorium was in place, undocumented immigrants—many of whom are CASA members—were often ineligible for state or federal rent assistance.

Key Strategies:

- **Setting the Foundation with Temporary Measures:** At the onset of the pandemic, jurisdictions across the country—including in Maryland—recognized the urgent need to implement temporary rent caps to prevent a surge in evictions caused by widespread shutdowns and job losses. During this critical period, CASA and its members not only advocated for a strong rent cap but also used the moment to spotlight a deeper, long-standing issue: for many working-class families, particularly in Black and Brown communities, housing stability has always been precarious. For these households, a single missed paycheck, illness, job loss, or steep rent hike could mean the difference between security and crisis. Their advocacy resulted in the passage of the COVID-19 Renter Relief Act in Montgomery County, which imposed a 2.6 percent rent cap until 90 days after Maryland’s state of emergency ended. While a bill to make rent stabilization permanent within a one-mile radius of transit stops failed in December 2020, the county council extended the temporary stabilization measure for six months in response to pressure from renters and advocacy groups. Similarly, Prince George’s County amended the county’s Landlord-Tenant Code to prevent rent increases, rental terminations, and late fees during the COVID-19 emergency and for 90 days afterward. Again, due to pressure from tenants and advocates, the Prince George’s County Council later extended this temporary protection until October 2024, capping rents at three percent.

- **Making Rent Stabilization an Election Issue:** As temporary rent protections began to expire, many renters and advocacy organizations saw an opportunity to push for permanent rent stabilization laws. Both Montgomery and Prince George's counties saw growing coalitions of stakeholders led by renters—including local organizations, unions, faith communities, and essential workers—unite around the cause of permanent rent control. In the lead-up to the 2022 elections, community organizations and renters' advocacy groups worked tirelessly to raise awareness about rent stabilization and ensure it became a key issue for voters. Two grassroots coalitions formed in both Montgomery and Prince George's County, with each coalition driven by over 40 organizations who held town halls, housing forums, and candidate engagement activities to understand where political candidates stood on housing issues, particularly rent stabilization. By the time the fall elections took place, renters had successfully organized and helped elect a new wave of progressive candidates who publicly supported permanent rent stabilization.

- **Pushing Back on Opposition:** Coalitions in Montgomery and Prince George's counties developed a strategic plan to advance permanent rent stabilization protection—but opponents spent millions of dollars on social media ads, local media campaigns, and direct lobbying to sway public opinion. The coalition launched an aggressive countercampaign, highlighting the stories of renters and emphasizing the necessity of long-term housing stability. Community forums, press conferences, and a robust social media presence helped elevate the voices of renters and show the growing public demand for rent stabilization. As the pressure mounted, it became clear that no elected official wanted to be on record or perceived as opposing the growing concerns of multiple communities regarding rent increases. The result was a grassroots effort culminating in two competing bills in both counties: one bill, dubbed the "People's Bill," co-created with renters and community organizations, and another more moderate bill backed by developers and conservative politicians.

- **Navigating Conflict and Strategic Negotiation:** The introduction of competing bills created a dramatic political environment, with tensions rising among elected officials and coalition members. CASA and its allies worked tirelessly behind the scenes—meeting with legislators, negotiating terms, and guiding the process toward a compromise. Their coordinated internal and external strategy ensured that both permanent rent stabilization bills emerged with strong, aligned frameworks. In both Montgomery and Prince George's counties, advocates fought for a rent cap tied to affordability: 3 percent or CPI, whichever was lower. Ultimately, both jurisdictions settled on a cap of 3 percent plus CPI, not to exceed 6 percent. Key differences did emerge. In Prince George's County, rent increases for age-restricted senior housing are capped at the lesser of 4.5 percent or CPI—an important protection not included in Montgomery County's version. On the matter of new construction exemptions, both coalitions proposed a 10-year window. However, Montgomery County adopted a rolling 23-year exemption, while Prince George's opted for a fixed cutoff, exempting properties built after 2000. Perhaps the most contentious issue was vacancy control—a critical safeguard to prevent landlords from resetting rents between tenants and undermining the entire policy. For both coalitions, its exclusion was a potential dealbreaker. Yet, through relentless organizing, strategic pressure, and powerful tenant testimony, advocates in both counties secured enough votes to preserve vacancy control.

In July 2023, Montgomery County made history by becoming the first county in Maryland to pass a permanent rent stabilization law. Building upon this achievement, Prince George's County followed suit by passing its own permanent rent stabilization protections, becoming the second county in Maryland to adopt such measures.

What's Next:

As both counties now look toward implementing permanent rent stabilization protections, the strategy will shift once again toward strengthening these laws to cover more renters and ensure long-term housing stability.

Stage 4: Implementing and Enforcing Rent Control

Be active and shape the details when the city council or rent board are in the process of rulemaking or creating regulations for implementation.

Advocate for a landlord exemption process that puts the responsibility on property owners to prove their need, rather than putting the onus on tenants to report abuse.

If a rent board exists, cultivate tenant leaders who can be elected or appointed to the board and ensure language justice in all aspects of implementation.

Ensure implementation includes strong accountability measures for landlords who are not following the law, such as fines.

Support budget resolutions and funding allocations for implementation, including rental licensing fees as a way to collect revenue.

If there is a public process for landlord exemptions or appeals to be heard, show decision makers that the community is watching.

Implementation and enforcement require sustained power and engaging a base in something that is less exciting, but equally important, to the initial win. The political will of city staff will need to be developed to properly enforce rent control and empower them to take action against landlords who break the law. Such capacity requires government agencies to actively choose to deprioritize the property-owning class and consider tenants' rights to an equal degree. Shifting their priorities in this way challenges city staff to act in defiance of the "real estate state," which author Samuel Stein describes as "a political formation in which real estate capital has inordinate influence over the shape of our cities, the parameters of our politics, and the lives we lead."[451]

Rulemaking is where the real estate industry plays both the victim and the expert. Whether providing feedback on the definition of "rent" or the timeline for landlord appeals, real estate interests will always position themselves as the people who know best. They will be able to think of a what-if scenario to undermine confidence in any proposal and insist that they—the holders of excess property who control whether or not families are housed—are prioritized above all else.

Implementation is where government agencies often claim to lack budget and capacity. These are familiar arguments against taking on compliance duties, hiring additional staff to address tenant grievances and landlord appeals, and other agency responsibilities related to accountability. However, remember—city budgets and staffing decisions are a reflection of the city's values. How many city staff are there in total, and how many of them are dedicated to supporting renters (who make up a significant portion of residents)? How much money is allocated to spurring and supporting new development (affordable or market-rate) compared to assisting renters who live in existing housing? These are questions that should be uplifted to contextualize the demands being made of city staff.

In particular, the following actions should be taken to influence implementation and enforcement:

- When the city council or rent board are in the process of rulemaking or creating regulations for implementation, be active and shape the details. Pay very close attention to the language being drafted and ensure exceptions or exemptions are not being incorporated beyond the intended scope. Hearings for rulemaking bodies can often be afterthoughts for industry lobbyists, but a very fruitful space for tenants to discuss the real-world impact of rules. Take advantage of how industry lobbyists may prioritize legislative hearings over administrative ones and fill the room with testifiers.
- If elected officials are considering dedicating funds towards tenant outreach or implementation, show up to testify in support of budget resolutions and allocations. Recommend rental licensing fees as a way to collect revenue towards implementation when budget concerns arise.
- If a rent board exists, cultivate tenant leaders who can then be elected or appointed to the rent board. Having allies on the rent board represents votes that align with tenant interests—key to both maintaining important relationships with city staff who implement the policy and shaping the decision-making for critical aspects of the policy.
- Demand that language justice be included in the city's implementation approach. For example, organizers in Richmond, California, worked to get a monolingual Spanish-speaking tenant leader appointed to the rent board and pushed to make the board meetings and materials fully bilingual. Their successes not only made it possible for the tenant leader to meaningfully participate but made all rent board happenings more transparent to the city's large, Spanish-speaking tenant community.
- When it comes to shaping landlord exception processes, advocate for processes that are reasonable and fair to renters. Avoid falling into the trap of giving landlords the benefit of the doubt while requiring so much more of tenants (i.e., landlords can self-certify for excessive rent increases while tenants have to complete multiple forms to file a complaint).
- If there is a public process for considering landlord exceptions or appeals, show decision makers that the community is watching. Turn out members of the base to attend hearings, support tenants whose landlords are requesting rent increases above the allowable amount, and use public information requests to get a sense of how decisions are made across the board.

- Advocate for processes for tenants to report when laws are not being followed and, most importantly, accountability mechanisms for landlords who fail to comply with the law, such as fines. Unfortunately, ideal, proactive enforcement rarely exists, so tenants are held responsible for knowing when their rights are being violated—and even more unjustly, held responsible for enforcing their rights. Placing this burden on tenants is particularly problematic in light of the fact that nationwide, an average of just 4 percent of renters facing eviction have legal representation.

CASE STUDY

Pasadena Tenants Union: Implementing & Defending Rent Control

Measure H volunteers at a campaign event in Pasadena, California. *(Photo courtesy of Pasadena Tenants Union.)*

Organization:

Pasadena Tenants Union (PTU) is the heart of the struggle for housing justice in Pasadena, California. It is where tenants and allies gather to organize against rising rents, evictions, and gentrification. Tenants Together is a statewide coalition of local tenant organizations dedicated to defending and advancing the rights of California tenants to safe, decent, and affordable housing.

Campaign:

Local organizing to ensure accountability to voters and implementation of tenant protections policy passed by a ballot initiative in 2022.

Context:

On November 8, 2022, voters in the City of Pasadena approved (by 54 percent to 46 percent) a charter amendment known as Measure H, bringing a suite of tenant protections to the city, including rent stabilization, eviction protections, a rental registry, and a rent board with the power to enforce the voters' mandate. It was a monumental victory that no one thought possible—and required continued organizing far beyond the ballot box to defend and implement.

Key Strategies:

- **Weathering Opposition from Electeds**: During the campaign, several councilmembers, including the mayor, publicly opposed Measure H, while only one councilmember vocally supported it.[452] Following the ballot victory, the mayor, who owns several rental properties in Pasadena, has consistently recused himself (but not before writing an op-ed in the local newspaper opposing Measure H without disclosing his personal interests).[453] Then-Councilmember Felicia Williams also vocally opposed the board's attempts to establish itself by raising potential administrative roadblocks. After becoming the voice of the landlord opposition on the city council she was soundly defeated, 60-40 percent, in her reelection campaign on March 5, 2024.

- **Anticipating Legal Challenges:** Less than six weeks after losing the election, the California Apartment Association (CAA), joined by five local landlords, filed a lawsuit in the Los Angeles Superior Court against the City of Pasadena to block the implementation of the new charter article and invalidate the election results, essentially repealing the new laws. The campaign team anticipated this move from the CAA and tried its best to be mentally and emotionally prepared, but it was still terrifying and discouraging. For several days, despite the encouragement of the public interest law firm that wrote the charter amendment, all the Union could see was eighteen months of impossibly hard work being erased by powerful real estate interests. While the city organized its defense, several members of the campaign team petitioned the court and became interveners in the case with their own legal counsel. PTU worked closely with Public Counsel, a nonprofit law firm, to draft the charter amendment, and the organization also helped PTU secure counsel to defend the legal attack. While a judge ruled against the CAA, they appealed and, as of this writing, the appeal is fully briefed but still open before the appeals court.

- **Negotiating the Structure of the Rent Board:** Meanwhile, the city had to determine how to address a new charter article that they neither wrote nor particularly wanted. The tenant protections' law placed all the authority to implement and enforce its provisions in an 11-member Rental Housing Board. The city council appointed the board four months after the ballot measure passed. However, it took months of meetings between board leadership, city leadership, and outside legal counsel to parse the nuances of a structure that was "integral but independent" of the city government. Eventually, all parties agreed that the most appropriate form for the board was a city department, as the board was authorized to exercise police powers to enforce rules and regulations on private property owners. A nonprofit organization, even one established by the city itself, was determined to be unlikely to be authorized to exercise those powers. A full year after the ballot measure passed, the city council established a rent stabilization department, creating a mechanism to hire staff to carry out the direction of the board.

- **Building and Staffing a New City Department:** The lack of staff was a challenge in the early days of the board's work. The public came to the board with questions, needs, and demands, but there was no one assigned to address those needs besides the board members themselves, and that is not their role. The board appointed members to several ad hoc committees and eventually contracted with three external firms. (The charter amendment mandated that the city must advance funds necessary to start up the program until the board could collect revenue from the rental housing fee.) One committee focused on the foundational issues, such as the scope of the board's authority with respect to hiring, rulemaking, budgeting, and other matters related to the board's relationship to the city. Another committee worked with a local public relations firm to conduct outreach about the rights and obligations of both landlords and tenants. Yet another committee collaborated with legal counsel on drafting more than 15 major sets of regulations to fully develop the requirements of the charter. Finally, the program consultant conducted the initial program cost analysis, including staffing, rental registry, and overhead costs, as well as a study to determine the rental housing fee. The board then liaised with city staff to develop the budget and the rental housing fee, which is paid on a per-unit basis by landlords operating in the city. Building and launching the rental registry was another major undertaking—without which the program would not have any revenue. With the support of the city manager, the board eventually hired a department director who has now hired approximately 15 full-time employees to do a wide range of work divided into roughly five units: housing counseling and enforcement, hearings and appeals, rental registration, community outreach, and administrative support.

- **Ensuring Compliance and Creating Enforcement Mechanisms**: While there are an estimated 25,000–30,000 rental units in the city, the precise number is unknown. This knowledge gap highlights the need for a rental registry and also foreshadows the enormous challenge of achieving 100 percent compliance. Multifamily buildings are relatively easy to identify with county records, but renter-occupied single-family homes (including accessory dwelling units) and condos are more difficult to identify. In the first registration cycle, which ended in December 2024, the department achieved nearly 75 percent compliance by mailing all known landlords and conducting a broad public information campaign via local news media, social media, and public workshops. Yet enforcement remains a challenge. The board and department have received reports from tenants about landlords who refuse to comply. Tenant protections typically provide a defense against eviction, but few want to have to take that step. Instead, many tenants will surrender their rights to avoid going to court, and landlords are aware of this. The next step in the enforcement process, after one warning letter to landlords, is to inform tenants that they may petition to withhold rent on any unit that is not registered with the Rent Stabilization Department.

- **Managing Disruption Tactics:** Since Measure H passed, a group of individual rental property owners angry about the new rules has since coalesced into a Political Action Committee called Pasadena Housing Providers (PHP). The group raised nearly $39,000 in 2024 and regularly communicates with its base through a weekly newsletter and periodic meetings. PHP has filed numerous Public Records Act requests in the search for evidence to substantiate their claims of gross incompetence, financial mismanagement, cronyism, and violating a state law governing public meeting transparency. Furthermore, they have personally attacked individuals on the board, posting their pictures on the PHP website along with statements taken out of context in a blatant red-baiting campaign. Their self-stated goal is to run a ballot measure campaign in 2026 to make changes to the law, including eliminating the board and other aspects of rent control and just cause that they deem extreme.
- **Creating Effective Outreach Strategies:** Even in a relatively small city of approximately 133,000 residents, it is incredibly challenging to reach everyone. The department has employed a range of strategies to get the word out in multiple languages, including an engaging website, workshops for landlords and tenants held in person and using live video platforms like Zoom, tabling at community events, posting ads in local buses and on bus shelters, inserts in statements from Pasadena Water and Power, the city's public utility, and more. The program still has a long way to go to reach tenants who are still not aware they have protections. To that end, department staff are considering partnering with schools, churches, local social service offices, and other nonprofits that serve the community.

What's Next:

The board is nearly finished passing the regulations required to fully implement the charter amendment. The hearings division has just begun operating. A few landlords are filing petitions for upward adjustments of rent based on fair return regulations; meanwhile, several tenants have also filed petitions for downward adjustments of rent due to reductions in services, failure to maintain habitability, and illegal rent. In the near future, the board will serve its quasi-judicial function when a tenant or landlord files an appeal to the hearing officer's decision.

The Pasadena Tenants Union and other tenant advocates in the community are planning to defend tenant protections from the relentless attacks by landlords. In all likelihood, tenants will have to mount a campaign to protect against a landlord-led ballot measure in the 2026 election. Despite formal protections, it remains an urgent priority to organize tenants to defend their housing against abusive and scofflaw landlords. One key takeaway from this campaign is that strong laws are no substitute for organizing.

CASE STUDY

Housing Justice Center: Saint Paul Rent Control Implementation and Enforcement

Rent stabilization supporters at a campaign event in Saint Paul, Minnesota. *(Photo courtesy of the Keep St. Paul Home campaign.)*

Organization:

Housing Justice Center (HJC) is a nonprofit public interest advocacy and legal organization whose primary mission is to preserve and expand affordable housing for low-income individuals and families. HJC attorneys work with tenant and advocacy organizations, public and private housing funders, owners, developers, and policymakers in their efforts to protect and expand affordable housing. Based in Minnesota, HJC works nationwide—and was a key leader in the coalition that won rent stabilization in Saint Paul in 2021.

Context:

In November 2021, voters in Saint Paul, Minnesota, passed a ballot initiative that secured the strongest and most comprehensive rent stabilization policy in the nation. The Keep Saint Paul Home campaign succeeded in getting 53 percent of voters to pass a policy with a 3 percent annual rent cap with no exceptions based on building size, type, or age. Though the policy was popular with voters, it was markedly less so with the mayor and members of city council, who, shortly after the election, began efforts to amend and weaken the policy with revisions including partial vacancy decontrol, a self-certification process for landlords to request rent increases above the rent cap, and exemptions for new construction and affordable housing.

Campaign:

Local advocacy to effectively implement municipal rent stabilization policy passed by ballot initiative in 2021.

Key Strategies:

- **Participating in a City-mandated Stakeholder Group:** Only a few months after voter approval of rent control, Mayor Melvin Carter assembled a "Rent Stabilization Stakeholder Group" consisting of 41 members, many of which represented the real estate industry (property owners, management companies, developers, banks, and realtors). A slim majority of the group were in favor of weakening the rent control ordinance, but a handful of members were campaign and tenant leaders who coordinated among themselves to power-map and organize the stakeholder group. The stakeholder group was tasked with "improving and enhancing" the policy, which organizers instantly recognized as a guise to dilute the ordinance and appease developers who blamed the policy for slowing development rates. After a grueling five-month process during which industry members cited misinformation as facts in order to undermine rent control, campaign leaders were able to take advantage of disagreements within the stakeholder group and propose an amended policy proposal that received 60 percent of the stakeholder group's support: a 3 percent annual rent cap with provisions for reasonable rate of return, preferential banking in some form, a rolling new construction exemption of 15 years, and just cause eviction protections for renters. Disregarding the group's work and the organizers' remarkable success in yielding a robust policy with only moderate concessions, the city council ignored the stakeholder group's proposal and significantly weakened the ordinance.

- **Leveraging Private Right of Action:** The entity tasked with implementation is the city's Department of Safety and Inspections (DSI), and, from the start, renters suffered due to DSI's lack of clear messaging surrounding the ordinance's implementation, combined with their admission that they lacked the proper tools and resources to act against violating landlords. Thankfully, the ordinance included a private right of action mechanism, allowing tenants to sue a landlord privately for violating rent stabilization. While relying more heavily on this course of action has placed additional burdens on both tenants without the resources to file a civil lawsuit and legal aid organizations (who already struggle with limited capacity), legal advocates have achieved some success in enforcing tenants' rights through this provision.

- **Maintaining Public Pressure:** Attorneys have represented tenants in rent increase appeals heard by the legislative hearing officer, filed lawsuits against landlords who issued heinous increases without city approval, and conducted research on implementation through data practice requests. These actions have made it clear that without external pressure, the city fail to live up to the expectations of what rent stabilization promised its residents.

- **Closing Gaps in the Ordinance:** An initial hurdle renters faced was the lack of notice provided when their landlord sought an exemption to the 3 percent rule and whether the city approved it. Tenant notice was not a part of DSI's rulemaking and implementation plan. Without this knowledge, renters had no way of knowing whether their landlords had legal authorization to increase their rents by more than 3 percent. Thanks to the advocacy of legal organizations like Housing Justice Center and HOMELine, and the leadership of Councilmember Mitra Jalali, this issue was resolved with amendments to the ordinance, requiring the city to notify tenants when their landlord applied for an exception to the percent limit, when the city approved the landlord's application, and the tenants' right to appeal this determination. But, while tenants could now appeal these decisions to increase their rents, the city's lack of diligence in appeal resolution has left residents hanging. In one disappointing example, a resident who appealed her 26 percent rent increase in July 2023 did not receive a final resolution until August 2024, more than an entire year afterward.[454] While she ultimately won her appeal, the victory was bittersweet because her family had already moved out of their unit due to the property's conditions and the city's lack of timeliness in addressing the rent increase. Further, DSI has not provided a clear answer on whether this appeal applies solely to the appellant's unit or if it could protect the remaining residents who received the same (or higher) rent increases.

- **Navigating Self-certification:** As a part of the city council's amendments to weaken rent stabilization in September 2022, Section 193A.07 was added to the ordinance, establishing a "reasonable return on investment" application and complaint process for landlords to apply for rent increases above the annual 3 percent cap. This process included a problematic allowance for self-certification, through which landlords could simply submit an online form, self-attesting their justification for increasing rents between 3–8 percent. Requests for increases over 8 percent require staff analysis and certification; however, major concerns have emerged regarding enforcement and questionable oversight of the process. The contrast between the percentage of requests approved with city staff oversight (very low) and those without (high) raises doubt about the legitimacy of many self-certified exemptionss under the law. Organizers heavily advise against self-certification in any process, as it reduces transparency and eliminates accountability.

- **Advocating for Relevant Administrative Tools:** One of the most significant gaps in enforcement was the city's inability to issue administrative citations. Because these citations were not issued, the city was unable, or unwilling, to pursue criminal citations against rent stabilization violators—even when presented with evidence of violations as serious as unauthorized 56 percent rent increases or large-complex landlords falsely telling tenants that they had been granted an exception, and thus their rent increases were legal. In late 2024 and early 2025, several advocacy organizations that had been involved in the original Keep Saint Paul Home campaign advocated for a charter amendment that granted the city the power to issue administrative citations, successfully getting the amendment passed by the city council. Although this win is undoubtedly a victory for tenants to celebrate, it is too early to know whether it will actually bring the needed change in protecting renters from landlords who violate rent stabilization.

What's Next:

In March 2025, facing pressure from developers who continue to blame local ordinances for slow development amidst global economic uncertainty, Saint Paul city councilmembers proposed yet another amendment to the rent control ordinance to divorce it further from the will of the voters—this time seeking to expand the 20-year rolling new construction exemption to a date-based exemption that would exempt all buildings built after December 31, 2004. A public hearing was held in April 2025, during which tenants spoke out against this change and any further weakening of the ordinance. Despite their efforts, a slim majority of the council voted to approve the amendment.

CONCLUSION

Whether you are a renter, homeowner, unhoused resident, newcomer, community elder, or elected official, there is a role—and a stake—for you in this fight. Overwhelming public and political support for rent control continues to grow from the urgency of the crisis, persistent on-the-ground organizing by tenants and allies, and shifting tides in conventional economic thinking.

We can start anywhere to win the rent control we need. Just cause eviction protections, a rental registry, and the right to counsel are a few examples featured in this report that help unmask the real estate industry's outsized influence in our halls of government, and help to build our base and coalitions across differences. These tenant protections affirm and expand the right to organize and test the foundations of co-governance that we will need to win and defend effective rent control.

Where state preemptions prevent local communities from the protections they seek, tenant organizers and allies develop paths and can win. Colorado organizers developed new coalitions to win for cause eviction statewide. The outcome was no compromise but, rather, a meaningful win against unlawful evictions as part of a long-term strategic campaign for statewide rent control. Some organizing paths call upon long-term coalitions to pivot or complement existing strategies, such as forging the statewide tenant voter bloc in New York State to strengthen and expand upon housing justice wins. When movement moments and disciplined narrative align with existing local base-building and electoral strategies, strong, uncompromising rent control ordinances, such as in Portland, Maine, and Saint Paul, Minnesota, can reflect the protections we need based on the measure of the participatory and direct democracy we envision. To outlast movement moments, the organizing examples featured here also offer lessons: we must continue to build upon and defend our wins through the principles and practice of co-governance.

Rent control provides an immediate and widely felt governing accomplishment; in real-time, effective rent control policy can protect residents from exorbitant rent increases that we cannot afford. Strong rent regulations grow over time and reflect a capable government that other localities and states can emulate. Transparent decision-making and data, proactive inspections, enforceable lease and fair housing terms, and predictable rent change schedules by design can reinforce effective government operations in service to the public. Landlord-distributed fee collections grow these capacities at no cost to taxpayers.

Effective rent control ordinances incorporate mechanisms to democratize governing, involving all of us in co-governance. Representative rent boards include active tenant leadership. What is more, increased voter turnout is a known outcome of the stability provided by rent regulation and other tenant protections, and when tenants vote in local elections for a government that serves us, it is a win for our multiracial democracy.

All of these steps can help to restore trust in government, affirm our right to organize, and inspire residents to run for office. Movement champions who lead the way in removing real estate industry funds from elections are helping to disarm bad-faith landlords' misinformation campaigns attacking rent control. By fighting back against the unchecked influence of corporate interests over communities, more and more champions of housing justice demonstrate that we can choose our communities' interests by rejecting real estate industry contributions. With its rippling effects throughout communities, winning governing power by and for winning tenant protections shifts political conditions that outlast single campaigns.

Together, we can grow and advance the creative, multiracial leadership of today's housing justice movement. Members of our movement can be found among our neighbors, those who are unhoused, homeowners, and renters alike, who care for each other, patronize small businesses, pursue creative passions, and champion local schools. We are among the neighbors who grow gardens from abandonment and learn each other's names. We are known as builders who create the social value of a community. We help find a role for each person to join in and co-create the organizing path. We do this as part of larger efforts to withstand and transform racial discrimination, disinvestment, climate shocks, and the worst of community losses.

Where speculators attempt to profit from the social value created by communities, rent regulation curbs their ability to do so. In the work to win and defend effective rent control, we prevent the displacement of the very people who cultivated that rich community value. Through our actions, we illustrate the truth we want everyone to know: our communities are worth fighting for.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A:
Sample Policy Language

Language from the following rent control policies serve as examples of ways to design the strongest policy possible:

- Low annual rent adjustment:
  - Bell Gardens, California (50 percent of CPI or 4 percent, whichever is lower)
  - Richmond, California (60 percent of CPI or 3 percent, whichever is lower)
  - Saint Paul, Minnesota (3 percent)
- Fewest exemptions:
  - Portland, Maine (no new construction exemption)
  - Antioch, California (does not exempt LIHTC)
- Vacancy control:
  - South Portland, Maine
  - Montgomery County, Maryland
  - Prince George's County, Maryland
  - Newark, New Jersey
  - Union City, New Jersey
- Rent board:
  - Berkeley, California
  - Pasadena, California
  - Santa Monica, California

Appendix B:
Methodology

Methodology for Estimating the Potential Number of Renter Households Stabilized with Rent Control

PolicyLink analyzed the potential number of renter households stabilized if broad and aspirational rent control were implemented on a national basis. The methodology assumed that all rental units of any building size and any year of construction would be covered in states without existing policies. California, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Washington, and the District of Columbia were excluded from this estimation, though their policies do not cover as broadly as the estimation done for the 45 states without existing policies. The number of households we estimate could benefit from broad state level rent controls is a low estimate given that there are many renter households that are not currently covered by rent control in California, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Washington and the District of Columbia due to various exemptions.

We used 2023 5-year American Community Survey microdata from the University of Minnesota IPUMS USA database[455] and public housing data from the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Data and Mapping Tool, Data Version AFFHT0007. This universe includes renter households, excluding group quarters households and households that enroll in public housing programs. A household is considered to be living in a rent control covered unit if the unit is within a building structure, regardless of the number of units in the structure, as well as if the unit is a mobile home/trailer, boat, tent, or van. Units are also considered to be rent control covered regardless of the year in which the structure was built.

We calculated the number of these households that are rent-burdened. We needed to adjust the renter household numbers to exclude public housing households. Data on rent burden among those in the public housing program were not available at the state level so we assumed the national rate of rent-burden for public housing households (57 percent) based on data in the 2024 HUD report, *Characteristics of HUD-Assisted Renters and Their Units in 2021*. Using this figure, we estimated the number of households in public housing that pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs and excluded them from the overall number of stabilized renter households that are rent-burdened.

We also estimated the number of stabilized renter households at three income levels in relation to the state median household income for each included state. We defined “low-income” as earning less than 80 percent of the state median household income, “very low-income” as earning less than 50 percent, and “extremely low-income” as earning less than 30 percent. The state median household income is based on the 2023 5-year American Community Survey for each of the included states in the estimation. We determined a need to adjust the low-income numbers to exclude public housing households. For estimates of households with low, very low, and extremely low incomes, we assumed that all public housing households had incomes at or below 80 percent of the median income and were therefore excluded from these estimates.

Lastly, we estimated the number of covered renter households with children under 18 years old. AFFHT0007 did not break down public housing data by number of children in the household. Instead, we used data from the 2024 HUD report, *Characteristics of HUD-Assisted Renters and Their Units in 2021*. We excluded households in public housing with one or more children from the count of otherwise covered renter households with one or more children.

Appendix C:
Renter Households Potentially Stabilized with Rent Control Expansion

FIGURE 16

Estimated number and share of renter households stabilized with rent control by rent burden and income

State	Number of renter households stabilized	Number rent burdened	Share rent burdened	Number Low-Income (Household Income <= 80% of state median)	Share Low-Income (Household Income <= 80% of state median)	Number Very Low-Income (Household Income <= 50% of state median)	Share Very Low-Income (Household Income <= 50% of state median)	Number Extremely Low-Income (Household Income <= 30% of state median)	Share Extremely Low-Income (Household Income <= 30% of state median)
All Included States	31,534,161	14,827,824	47%	19,701,923	62%	12,998,001	41%	7,578,680	24%
Alabama	568,846	252,344	44%	361,019	63%	244,684	43%	141,456	25%
Alaska	86,771	35,490	41%	51,787	60%	33,039	38%	18,428	21%
Arizona	921,112	446,092	48%	538,389	58%	332,737	36%	187,678	20%
Arkansas	393,755	161,608	41%	240,860	61%	154,853	39%	87,895	22%
Colorado	777,762	389,151	50%	474,285	61%	304,185	39%	175,352	23%
Connecticut	469,309	233,734	50%	318,014	68%	223,805	48%	139,546	30%
Delaware	108,983	51,706	47%	70,440	65%	46,916	43%	25,918	24%
Florida	2,784,435	1,577,830	57%	1,597,599	57%	1,013,039	36%	566,415	20%
Georgia	1,368,767	671,814	49%	843,545	62%	559,129	41%	318,873	23%
Hawaii	179,060	95,008	53%	102,610	57%	64,716	36%	36,521	20%
Idaho	192,257	84,183	44%	119,821	62%	75,812	39%	39,786	21%
Illinois	1,627,006	745,272	46%	1,032,165	63%	713,062	44%	431,162	27%
Indiana	786,062	354,942	45%	521,012	66%	349,688	44%	206,104	26%
Iowa	366,389	151,697	41%	250,202	68%	169,267	46%	97,347	27%
Kansas	378,116	156,987	42%	243,862	64%	158,856	42%	87,975	23%
Kentucky	549,339	226,029	41%	340,004	62%	229,373	42%	137,029	25%
Louisiana	571,016	283,112	50%	370,882	65%	262,077	46%	160,451	28%
Maine	148,689	65,342	44%	96,975	65%	64,988	44%	39,063	26%
Maryland	752,970	372,036	49%	491,836	65%	330,991	44%	199,281	26%
Massachusetts	1,007,836	496,205	49%	646,807	64%	458,648	46%	301,550	30%
Michigan	1,080,611	516,246	48%	716,248	66%	492,874	46%	297,905	28%

State	Number of renter households stabilized	Number rent burdened	Share rent burdened	Number Low-Income (Household Income < = 80% of state median)	Share Low-Income (Household Income < = 80% of state median)	Number Very Low-Income (Household Income < = 50% of state median)	Share Very Low-Income (Household Income < = 50% of state median)	Number Extremely Low-Income (Household Income < = 30% of state median)	Share Extremely Low-Income (Household Income < = 30% of state median)
Minnesota	613,940	277,225	45%	419,545	68%	277,985	45%	162,332	26%
Mississippi	340,171	154,391	45%	215,020	63%	146,036	43%	86,484	25%
Missouri	786,257	334,653	43%	502,974	64%	333,915	42%	190,331	24%
Montana	137,398	55,809	41%	84,072	61%	53,109	39%	30,440	22%
Nebraska	257,241	103,925	40%	165,100	64%	105,478	41%	54,031	21%
Nevada	479,094	254,797	53%	278,443	58%	177,021	37%	99,890	21%
New Hampshire	149,880	66,232	44%	97,170	65%	62,928	42%	36,050	24%
New Mexico	249,373	114,304	46%	150,588	60%	105,756	42%	62,840	25%
North Carolina	1,393,967	628,207	45%	849,162	61%	543,118	39%	315,833	23%
North Dakota	118,407	44,523	38%	77,739	66%	49,714	42%	29,254	25%
Ohio	1,573,384	678,241	43%	1,028,273	65%	686,268	44%	416,576	26%
Oklahoma	520,115	222,188	43%	321,870	62%	209,074	40%	118,325	23%
Pennsylvania	1,556,681	703,928	45%	986,879	63%	666,979	43%	393,902	25%
Rhode Island	151,457	67,680	45%	98,761	65%	68,424	45%	42,043	28%
South Carolina	585,628	276,860	47%	370,243	63%	241,942	41%	145,312	25%
South Dakota	109,075	39,443	36%	72,889	67%	47,583	44%	25,869	24%
Tennessee	897,276	400,975	45%	545,105	61%	345,916	39%	200,920	22%
Texas	3,996,735	1,944,686	49%	2,415,726	60%	1,545,169	39%	865,576	22%
Utah	322,900	142,033	44%	211,426	65%	130,446	40%	69,735	22%
Vermont	73,127	34,966	48%	485,37	66%	32,386	44%	19,548	27%
Virginia	1,081,578	494,998	46%	665,983	62%	447,041	41%	263,745	24%
West Virginia	181,188	76,253	42%	120,267	66%	84,338	47%	53,326	29%
Wisconsin	774,770	318,562	41%	504,370	65%	325,512	42%	182,689	24%
Wyoming	65,428	26,118	40%	43,419	66%	29,124	45%	17,894	27%

Estimates exclude states with existing rent control policies (CA, DC, NJ, NY, OR, and WA). Rent burdened is defined as spending more than 30% of income on housing costs. Low-income is defined as earning less than 80% of the national median household income, very low-income is defined as less than 50%, and extremely low-income is defined as less than 30%.

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