



# **HOMES AS SANCTUARIES:** AUDIENCE & STORYTELLING INSIGHTS FROM YOUTUBE

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## Introduction

Our homes are emotional sanctuaries. They define our identities and sense of belonging and provide a foundation for security and community. For too long, housing justice narratives have underrepresented this storytelling aspect, leaving critical stories untold and engagement opportunities unexplored. Without new storytelling techniques, the narratives that shape public understanding and support for housing justice will continue to overlook the experiences of Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities, further entrenching disparities in access to secure, affordable housing.

Through media platforms like YouTube, housing justice advocates have a wealth of opportunities to expand their storytelling practices. As an influential platform driven by personalities and emotional content, YouTube offers opportunities to broaden community engagement by meeting audiences where they are and using relatable storytelling techniques to drive participation in the movement.

Research conducted by PolicyLink, in collaboration with Harmony Labs and Erin Potts, has concluded that YouTube has enormous potential to engage diverse audiences through storytelling and expand policy impact.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

Our research underscores the importance of engaging audiences through familiar and impactful genres like crime, horror, and gaming. These genres fulfill emotional needs and provide relatable frameworks for discussing housing issues. Additionally, community-oriented events such as Halloween offer unique opportunities to mobilize action and raise awareness around housing justice, fostering collective efforts and enhancing community bonds.

Gaming and nostalgia are emerging as potent tools for engagement, allowing housing justice advocates to connect with audiences in innovative ways. By tapping into the emotional resonance of nostalgic content and the interactive nature of gaming, advocates can create a more engaging and dynamic narrative landscape.

Ultimately, the goal is to shift the dominant narratives from intellectual discussions about housing policies to emotionally engaging stories that depict homes as sanctuaries and centers of identity. This approach not only addresses the emotional and narrative needs of diverse audiences but also amplifies the potential for meaningful change through collective action and shared understanding.

## Project Context and Methodology

PolicyLink and its partners conducted an analysis to understand how different audiences consume housing-related content on YouTube and identify opportunities to better engage them with housing justice issues. YouTube was selected due to its vast reach and the engagement it generates, particularly through emotional and personality-driven content.

The methodology consisted of three key phases: identifying relevant keywords, mapping content and relative reach, and analyzing audience engagement. Initially, Harmony Labs tested 46 potential keywords to filter housing-related content, narrowing it down to 18 effective keywords such as “apartment,” “eviction,” and “mortgage.” Using these keywords, they mapped the relative reach of housing content on YouTube, analyzing channels, videos, and specific timestamps to gauge the frequency and engagement level of housing-related content.

The final phase focused on audience engagement, identifying content viewed by three audience segments based on our annual attitudinal research: 1) anti-racists, 2) sympathetic liberals, and 3) diverse strivers. The analysis covered videos from October to December 2023, along with 15 additional videos from January 2024 for verification, resulting in a total of 259 unique videos. Each video was examined for various elements, including messengers, tone, format, setting, themes, and narratives, providing insights into audience consumption patterns. This thorough methodology highlighted opportunities to better engage different audiences with housing justice narratives on YouTube.

## Research Insights

In this section, we highlight the importance of using personal experiences, emotional storytelling, and community-oriented events like Halloween to engage audiences. YouTube, in particular, with over 239 million American users, presents a vast arena for storytelling. Housing-related keywords frequently appear across various genres, yet specific housing justice content is sparse and less engaging. Housing themes are prevalent in crime, horror, and gaming content, fulfilling emotional needs for managing stress during chaotic times.

### Crime, Horror, and Gaming Themes

Our research identified several recurring themes in how audiences engage with housing-related stories, including that it is often intertwined with topics like immigration, LGBTQ+ issues, the economy, and international conflicts. Fortunately, this intersectionality is already reflected in the collaborative nature of the housing justice movement. Below we explore three similar themes that we saw across two or more of our key audiences and beyond.

Crime stories are extremely popular in America at the moment, and clearly are captivating several of our audiences. As it turns out, crimes often happen in houses, making it one of the biggest spaces that audiences are experiencing housing themes in storytelling. These stories typically include problem-solving elements and strategies to thwart criminals, and are especially engaging to those interested in self-protection. Moreover, they address broader issues of justice and legal system concerns, highlight power imbalances, and offer moral clarity. Other research has found that the familiar structure of crime stories—a crime followed by an investigation and resolution—satisfies viewers' psychological needs for order and safety and keeps them deeply engaged.

Another theme we saw in the content consumed by all of the audiences was that houses are frequently depicted in horror stories. It may be that the frequency of horror has to do with the timeframe of the Harmony Labs analysis happening around Halloween, but its presence in our study gives us a moment to consider both this timing and the use of houses in horror stories. First off, Halloween is a unique, nationwide holiday where interacting with your neighbors is expected. It's also a few days before Election Day, and a great opportunity to prime people on housing policy before they go into the voting booths. Second, in horror stories houses symbolize safety, making their "haunting" by supernatural forces even more unsettling. Like crime, this genre is on the rise as it resonates

particularly during uncertain times, allowing audiences to confront and manage fears in a controlled way, providing a cathartic experience.

Gaming videos on YouTube are an entire category of content on the platform, and range from live streaming of gameplay, where viewers can watch gamers play in real time, to tutorials that help viewers improve their skills or navigate complex game mechanics. YouTube gaming channels often foster a sense of community among fans, allowing them to share tips, celebrate achievements, and discuss gaming culture collectively.

The video games that we saw most often coming up within the Harmony Labs research period included several life management or role-playing games. These types of video games allow players to simulate and manage complex lives, offering them the ability to create and control characters, make decisions that affect various outcomes, and explore intricate worlds full of challenges and opportunities. We saw several that were directly related to building houses, making homes, building neighborhoods, and other topics that are important to the housing justice movement.

### VIDEO GAMES ABOUT HOUSING

Several video games focus on building houses, managing communities, real estate and other housing-related themes, offering a blend of creativity, strategy, and management. Here are some notable titles:

- [\*The Sims Series\*](#) – This is perhaps the most famous life simulation game where players design homes and manage the lives of their simulated characters, from daily activities to major life decisions.
- [\*Animal Crossing Series\*](#) – Players develop and manage a town filled with anthropomorphic animals, decorate their own home, and interact with residents to build a thriving community.
- [\*Cities: Skylines\*](#) – While primarily a city-building game, it includes elements of housing management where players plan residential zones and must balance housing with amenities and city services.
- [\*House Flipper\*](#) – Players buy, renovate, and sell houses. It includes detailed mechanics for repairing and upgrading homes.
- [\*Minecraft\*](#) – Minecraft allows players to build elaborate houses and structures in its block-based world.



## FIVE POPULAR VIDEOS ON “HOUSING JUSTICE” (ALL AUDIENCES):

1. [Social Justice Warrior Steph Curry Attempts To BLOCK Low-Income Housing Near His \\$30 Million Mansion](#) (118K in 1 year): A Black conservative talking about liberal hypocrisy, using housing and NIMBYism as the example.
2. [Housing Justice Leaders Discuss Affordable Housing and Economic Justice](#) (108K in 10 months): An hour-and-a-half-long discussion with various housing justice leaders from around the country talking about the issues surrounding housing.
3. [Journalists Discuss Housing Equality and Media Narratives](#) (62K in 10 months): Another hour-and-a-half-long panel discussion in the same series as above.
4. [Matter Of Place by The Fair Housing Justice Center](#) (25K in 10 years): A mini-documentary about housing discrimination and justice that is used in educational settings.
5. [The Truth about “Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing”](#) (24K in 1 year): An animated explainer video about fair housing.

## General Observations

As a result, we have identified the following prominent storytelling opportunities:

- Highlighting **personal experiences** of housing insecurity.
- Emphasizing **emotional** over intellectual storytelling.
- Leveraging community-oriented holidays like **Halloween** for awareness and mobilization.
- Exploring **gaming** as a significant area for advocacy.
- Utilizing **neighbor and community-focused** narratives to promote collective action.

## Audience-Specific Insights

As described, three audience segments composed our base, including persuadables: (1) anti-racists; (2) sympathetic liberals; and (3) diverse strivers. The following insights were gleaned from each audience.

- **The Anti-Racist Base:** Consumes pop culture, financial advice, and gaming content. Skeptical of homeownership, they favor narratives of transformation and nostalgia.
- **Sympathetic Liberals:** Engage with crime, policy impacts, and myth-debunking videos. They appreciate balanced views on neighbors and community involvement.
- **Diverse Strivers:** Interested in crime stories related to financial crimes, especially involving prominent figures like Donald Trump. They value financial advice and narratives around home defense.

# Mapping Our Future Directions

## Areas of Opportunity for Housing Justice

In this section, we provide actionable recommendations for leveraging the research findings to better engage with key audiences. We emphasize the importance of utilizing emotional and personality-driven storytelling, popular genre techniques, and tapping into community events like Halloween and gaming to connect with audiences meaningfully.

Recommendation Theme	Summary
Emotional and Personality-Driven Storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create stories that emotionally resonate, depicting homes as sanctuaries and spaces of identity and security.</li><li>• Identify and promote compelling personalities within the housing justice movement.</li></ul>
Leveraging Popular Genres	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use crime and horror storytelling techniques to add suspense and engagement.</li><li>• Collaborate with existing YouTube personalities who discuss housing and related issues.</li></ul>
Community and Holiday Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Utilize Halloween and other community-oriented holidays to raise awareness and mobilize action.</li><li>• Develop narratives around “neighboring” as an action to highlight collective community efforts.</li></ul>
Gaming and Nostalgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore gaming as an engagement tool, creating content around housing-related games.</li><li>• Tap into the trend of nostalgic content to connect emotionally with audiences.</li></ul>
Future-Oriented Narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tell stories about the future of housing and homes, emphasizing positive visions and solutions for housing justice.</li></ul>

## Creative Action Ideas

In this section, we suggest innovative strategies and digital content ideas to bring the research findings to life. It includes proposals for artist collaborations, influencer campaigns, and gaming engagement to enhance storytelling and advocacy efforts, including:

- Convene artists and organizers to generate and fund content ideas.
- Develop a housing justice YouTube content strategy through an RFP process.
- Create digital content that showcases the collective action of neighbors and emotional mini-documentaries about “neighboring.”
- Engage with gaming communities and create housing-related gaming content.
- Identify and connect with communities on the ground that have rich stories to tell and are in the process of telling those stories in creative ways.

## Conclusion

The transformative power of housing justice storytelling lies not just in presenting homes as physical spaces but in highlighting their role as foundations for identity, security, and community. Emotional and personality-driven storytelling, leveraging popular genres, and utilizing community-oriented events offer promising avenues for engagement. The creative strategies outlined offer a pathway to reframe narratives, connect with key audiences, and promote a vibrant future of safe, affordable housing for All.

## Author Biographies

**Erin Potts** is a strategist and cultural researcher who uses her 30 years of bringing together culture and social justice to help others do the same.

**Laura Hughes** is the Director of Narrative Strategies at PolicyLink. She is responsible for harnessing the power of narrative to advance racial equity and justice for the more than 100 million individuals who live below 200 percent of the poverty level.

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