

Houston is not Exempt from the Housing Crisis, and it Affects Much More than Rent Costs

What is the first word that comes to mind when you think of housing in Houston, Texas? Affordable? Houston has long had a reputation for low housing prices, but one has to wonder if this is a warped perception. After analyzing the numbers beyond housing supply, this becomes evident.

Although the overall supply of housing in Houston between 2010 and 2017 grew at a higher rate than the state and national averages, the rate of building permits issued was lower. What's more, the percentage of overcrowded housing in Houston is about two percent higher than the national average. Not to mention, the median gross rent in Houston is increasing at a much faster rate than the median income.

(https://api.understandinghouston.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Understanding-Houston_Housing-Summary-2019.pdf)

As one of the largest cities in the United States with a population of over seven million people, the Houston metro area does not have the housing infrastructure to support its growing population. In Houston, only 19 in 100 homes are available for low-income renters, compared to 37 in 100 nationwide. Houston's ratio is second-worst in the entire nation, only higher than Las Vegas.

As a pre-med student, people often ask me why I am passionate about housing instability. In reality, this issue should be a topic of concern to people in every field, as it is the root cause of so many issues. Housing insecurity leads to constant evictions and foreclosures. Frequent moves during childhood has been linked to lower weight and lower academic performance in children, as well as higher rates of depression, suicide, and substance abuse in people of all ages. This may be due to the fact that leaving a community often means leaving behind support systems, and the distress of not knowing whether your family will have shelter next week increases risk factors for mental health conditions. Not only does housing instability negatively impact residents' health, but overcrowding of housing units has also been found to be associated with an increased risk of tuberculosis, diarrhea, and respiratory diseases. Interested in the correlation of overcrowding and Houston residents' health, I decided to do more research on the topic. I was shocked to find that Harris County's tuberculosis rate is more than twice the national average. Housing instability and overcrowding has a direct correlation with public health, education, and policy. My main point is that advocates of any cause must be aware of how housing insecurity augments the severity of their issue.

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK535289/>)

So how do we create more affordable housing? We must provide developers with incentives. One way to do this is expanding low-income tax credits. This way, developers will not fear losing profit when lowering costs of housing units. Another key step we must take is reducing lot

requirements and zoning regulations. Although Houston does not technically have zoning, private deed restrictions and ordinances ultimately determine where houses of a certain value or size are allowed to be built. If we examine the River Oaks deed restrictions, for example, we see that these restrictions make it virtually impossible for any multi-family housing or commercial property to be built in this area. By increasing taxes on larger and underused properties, we will effectively increase opportunities to build smaller, more affordable housing units. Lastly, we should expand subsidy programs like the National Housing Trust Fund if we want to ensure that nobody is spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing, which 46 percent of renters in Harris County currently do.

https://www.understandinghouston.org/topic/housing/home-affordability#housing_cost_burden

Now, you may be thinking: wow, we do need to make these changes, but what can I actually do right now to help? Research your representatives' stances on housing policy. The only way to enact sustainable long-term change in reducing Houston's housing instability is through advocacy for policy changes, but until these changes are implemented, let's try to diminish the effects of housing insecurity on our neighbors through mutual aid and relief efforts. While we contact local representatives, including Lizzie Fletcher, Dan Crenshaw, Al Green, Sheila Jackson Lee, and Sylvia Garcia, encouraging them to support housing restriction reforms, we can also volunteer with or donate to organizations like The Beacon and Coalition for the Homeless that provide pro bono legal services and increase access to shelter services. And always remember that homelessness and evictions are not inevitable. It just takes the willingness to implement the measures that prevent them.