

SOCIAL HOUSING FOR ALL

**A VISION FOR THRIVING COMMUNITIES,
RENTER POWER, AND RACIAL JUSTICE**



MARCH 2022

THE
CENTER
FOR
**POPULAR
DEMOCRACY**

**RENTERS
RISING**

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Cover, background: Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa, a social housing development in Vienna, Austria, renowned for its greenery and amenities including swimming pools, saunas, daycares, schools, gyms, medical centers, youth center, restaurants, shopping center, and more. A tenants council represents residents. (Photographer: Dominik "Dome;" CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Cover, foreground; photos on pages 1, 3, 13, 20, 30, 33, 40-1: Members of Renters Rising protest corporate landlords' role in ending eviction moratoriums, at the National Multifamily Housing Council's fall meeting in September 2021. (Photographer: Erika Nizborski; Renters Rising)



The Center for Popular Democracy is a nonprofit organization that promotes equity, opportunity, and a dynamic democracy in partnership with innovative base-building organizations, organizing networks and alliances, and progressive unions across the country. www.populardemocracy.org



Renters Rising is a national alliance of renters working to shift the balance of power between renters and corporate landlords to guarantee that renters are able to live with dignity. www.renters-rising.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

America's rising rents and increasingly unaffordable housing costs are infamous, epic—and deeply felt by millions of families in every corner of the country. In the world's wealthiest nation, over half a million people are homeless.¹ Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, over 20 million renter households were charged unaffordable rents.² In fact, a full 30 percent of renters nationwide can only afford to pay rents that are \$600 or less per month. Yet over the past 10 years, our communities lost at least 4 million deeply affordable homes renting in this price bracket, to rent increases, conversions into other uses, and demolitions.³ Our country needs affordable housing production more than ever. Instead, high-end luxury rentals are a growing share of construction, accounting for as much as 80 percent of new housing in 2020.⁴

At the root of our housing problems is a corporate stranglehold over all aspects of housing finance, production, and provision—as well as over our nation's housing policy-making. Real estate acquisitions by the largest corporate landlords, predatory investment, and housing speculation have only skyrocketed in the past decade.⁵ Wall Street landlords and speculators target low-income Black and Brown communities, disproportionately subjecting them to eviction, rent gouging, and health violations.⁶ And the real estate industry has exerted its political influence to oppose renter protections, promote deregulation, and gut public housing.⁷ While renters have lacked sufficient political power in our government institutions to counter these dangerous trends, tenants across the country are increasingly organizing to demand a new course.



Now more than ever, all levels of government must step up to produce the deeply and permanently affordable housing that we need. Policymakers must wake up to the fact that the for-profit, private sector is incapable of creating deeply affordable housing at scale. We cannot continue to rely on for-profit development to solve problems that it is in fact driving. Without decisive intervention, the devastating harms of corporate profiteering in our housing market will only increase. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Social housing is a public option for housing that is permanently affordable, protected from the private market, and publicly owned by the government or under democratic community control by non-profit entities. Around the world, robust social housing programs have successfully ended affordable housing shortages; expanded democratic accountability and equitable housing access; and raised whole populations out of poverty and into prosperity.⁸ This report lifts up principles and practices of model social housing policy, drawing on powerful and proven real-world examples that have worked, in order to chart a course for guaranteeing housing as a human right in the U.S.

The federal government must provide \$1 trillion over ten years to fund the construction of 12 million new social and public housing units.⁹ Social housing policy in the U.S. must put low-income communities of color first; these communities are disproportionately cost-burdened and have the least access to quality housing.¹⁰ Public housing in the U.S. is a critical source of deeply affordable housing for the lowest-income families. Yet policymakers have subjected our public housing to severe disinvestment for decades, and its residents to racist criminalization and over-policing.¹¹ Instead, the federal government must prioritize expanding quality public housing—under democratic control and resident management. It must allocate at least \$180 billion over ten years to fully fund repairs and retrofits in existing public housing, while making subsidized housing accessible to people with records and regardless of immigration status.¹² It must end policies and practices that harass residents or that harness policing to facilitate eviction.

Social housing offers effective, proven, and lasting solutions that powerfully and transformatively address the roots of our housing crisis:

- **Social housing production is the solution for our severe and growing lack of deeply affordable housing.** Examples prove that government-led construction of social housing has succeeded in creating massive amounts of deeply affordable housing, where the private sector has failed.¹³ Upfront public financing for public construction of social housing under government or non-profit ownership—not tax breaks to private developers and investors—is the only way we will produce the sheer amount of affordable housing we need.
- **Social housing expands renter power, bringing much-needed accountability, transparency, and increased democracy to our housing market.** Tenant organizing and democratic accountability must be at the center of how we achieve and implement social housing. Social housing policies are most effective when they promote renter power by engaging residents and community members in all aspects of decision-making. Social housing includes mechanisms for tenant unions to collectively bargain over housing conditions. Unlike housing in the private sector, it can be developed, owned, managed, and operated through entities that are democratically accountable to the public, residents, and marginalized communities. When renters have greater political leverage, they can advance policies that protect everyone from speculators, profiteers, as well as market pressures and instability.

- **Social housing on a sweeping scale is how we can correct harmful legacies of our country's racist housing policies and make strides towards racial justice.** Social housing as a form of wealth redistribution can further racial equity. It can be sited in well-resourced neighborhoods to promote desegregation and expand access. In low-income communities, it can counter displacement and help build community wealth. Towards these ends, social housing must prioritize resourcing low-income communities of color and put marginalized communities at the center of the decision-making, to foster their political self-determination since they can best determine how to meet their needs.

Through social housing, government policy must counter the grip that Wall Street investors currently have over housing finance. As noted, such investment is driving up housing prices and incentivizing predatory abuses towards residents. Regulations must untie real estate from global financial markets, shifting to public finance that is not beholden to for-profit investors. The government must provide upfront grants, expand public banking, and direct low-interest loans to favor social housing.

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This report presents specific policy tools to implement at every stage of our housing production pipeline in order to actualize the promise of social housing. We emphasize policies for democratic transparency and accountability, as well as how to make social housing work for low-income people and communities of color. We end by discussing concrete initiatives already underway that policymakers can support to move towards robust social housing.

The transformations we envision require massive government investment and a shift in government priorities: the redirection of funds from subsidizing corporate landlords and the wealthiest billionaires, as well as from institutions that harm and criminalize our communities, towards increased resources for permanently affordable housing.

But the far-reaching societal benefits are well worth it. The construction and maintenance of social housing will create union jobs. By ensuring everyone has a home, widespread social housing will help improve educational attainment, workforce development, and public health. Savings to residents will build community wealth, boost local economies, and increase racial and gender equity. Our country has the resources and every reason to expand social housing as a foundation for thriving communities, well-being, and human potential.

We can end homelessness.

We can provide affordable housing for all who need it.

We must provide social housing for all.



An apartment in Väinölä, a social housing development for formerly unhoused people in Espoo, Finland. (Photographer: Vilja Pursiainen; Y-Foundation)

INTRODUCTION: HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Rising rents and real estate speculation. Vacant condos alongside unhoused elders, children, and people. These have become features of life in America. Yet the appalling homelessness we see in our communities, our burdensome housing costs, and the tremendous harms of housing instability to health, education, and financial security are not only a shameful human tragedy. They are also preventable—and unnecessary.

Around the world, for decades now, a wealth of examples has shown: social housing is a sensible, effective, and proven solution to housing shortages and skyrocketing costs. And cities with some of the strongest social housing programs have been deemed the most livable in the world because of their high-quality, affordable housing.¹⁴

While other governments and municipalities embarked on a path of significant public investment in social housing and other safety nets, in the U.S., our federal and state governments have aggressively slashed funds for public and subsidized housing since the 1970s. Policymakers and politicians have gutted publicly funded and owned affordable housing, relying on for-profit investors and landlords to run our housing system. On top of that, since the 1980s, the federal government has fomented real estate speculation and deregulated banking.¹⁵ Its policies unleashed predatory lending practices, driven by Wall Street investors, over our homes and neighborhoods—precipitating the 2008 foreclosure crisis which more than halved Black and Brown wealth.¹⁶

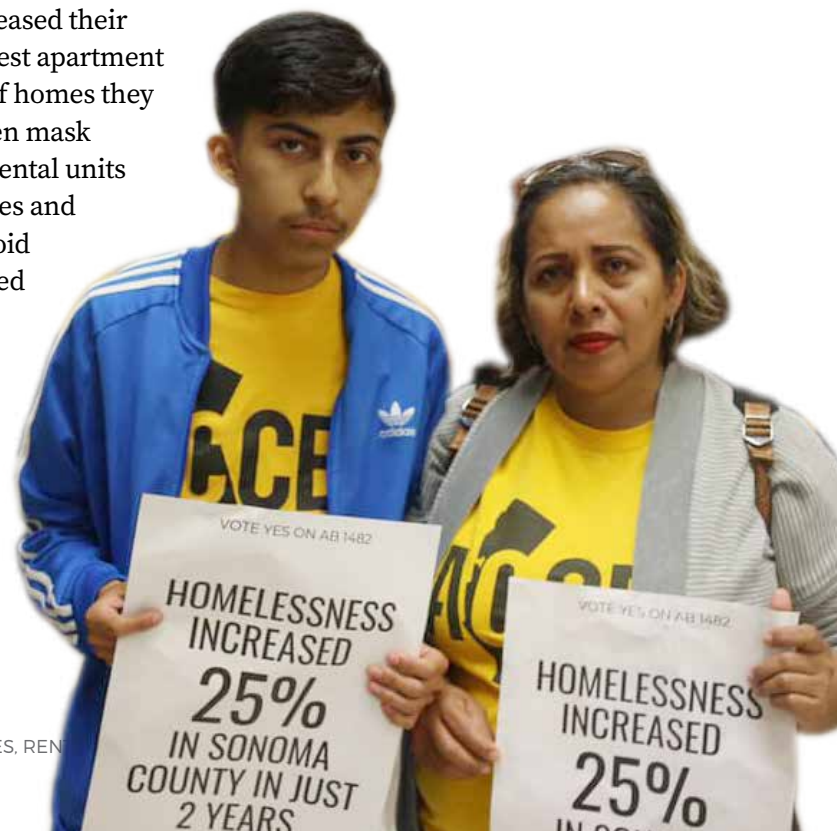
Instead of helping households facing foreclosure, the Federal Housing Administration* then sold off foreclosed homes to the largest corporate landlords at bargain discounts.¹⁷ It favored the rise of today's predatory Wall Street landlords, which concentrate their holdings in Black and Brown communities and disproportionately subject residents to high rates of rent gouging, evictions, health violations, and property flipping.¹⁸ Corporate landlords have increased their holdings over buildings of every size.¹⁹ The 50 largest apartment rental firms have steadily expanded the number of homes they own.²⁰ Institutional investors and LLCs, which often mask corporate landlords, now own a near majority of rental units across the country.²¹ Hiding behind shell companies and subsidiaries to disguise their true holdings and avoid accountability, corporate landlords have an outsized influence in driving up rents.²²

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the largest corporate landlords and Wall Street speculators have amassed even more property, enjoying

California renters call for a statewide rent cap and just cause eviction protections, September 2019. (Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment)

*The federal agency which intervenes in mortgage markets. It approves mortgage lenders and provides insurance on loans made by these lenders.

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generous government subsidies while renters struggle to apply for relief.²³ Because government policies have tied real estate to financial markets, volatile and speculative investment in housing continues to rise. In 2021, investors bought one in seven homes sold in top metropolitan areas nationwide, the most in over two decades; they targeted these purchases in majority Black neighborhoods.²⁴ Private equity, a kind of Wall Street investment fund, is the predominant form of financing behind the largest corporate landlords of multi-family apartments; the most aggressive private equity funds seek profits of 20 percent or more for their investors.²⁵ This corporate stranglehold over all aspects of our housing system is driving our rising and unaffordable housing costs. Meanwhile, renters, and especially renters of color due to institutionalized exploitation and disadvantage, lack both protections and political power.

Our nation faces a severe and long-standing shortage of affordable housing for those who need it most: lower-income households. The lack of available affordable housing is most acute for low-income renters who need lower-priced housing. But this shortage will not be remedied by market-rate construction. Since 2000, the share of construction that is high-end, luxury housing has only ballooned.²⁶

For-profit developers and investors, who dominate our housing market, do not and will not produce the deeply affordable housing we need. Producing housing takes significant upfront capital, so to recoup and maximize profits, for-profit developers focus on the luxury market. Data shows this trend has become increasingly extreme: more than ever, the for-profit sector is catering to the highest-income individuals, marketing properties too expensive for average renters.²⁷ These luxury rentals do not “trickle down” to become affordable to moderate- and low-income households within any immediate time-frame; if they do depreciate in cost, the process takes decades.²⁸

What’s more, underlying our imbalanced housing production, developers increasingly cater to speculators who treat housing not as shelter, but as tradeable investments—which like bars of gold, are just another physical form for wealth to take. Wealthy investors often treat buildings as tax shelters.²⁹ And whether the buildings sit empty, no longer functioning as actual homes but as “safe deposit boxes in the sky,” is incidental to big investors.³⁰ In fact, when making money depends on rising property values due to gentrification, buildings are more valuable to investors *because* they are emptied of poor people. The consequences cut across race, class, and gender—but Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income Asian and Pacific Islander people, particularly women of color, are disproportionately harmed and targeted by predatory real estate investment.³¹

Today’s speculation is no longer confined just to buying land and housing itself. Even more money is made speculating on novel and complex financial products derived from real estate, in unregulated global financial markets.³² The pace and volume of speculation is faster and larger than ever, driving up housing prices as for-profit investors scrape over the globe for opportunities to make a killing.³³ Speculative investment destroys affordable housing and also channels vast capital away from producing it.³⁴

It doesn’t have to be this way. Our lack of affordable housing is a problem created by elected officials, the real estate industry, and corporate landlords.

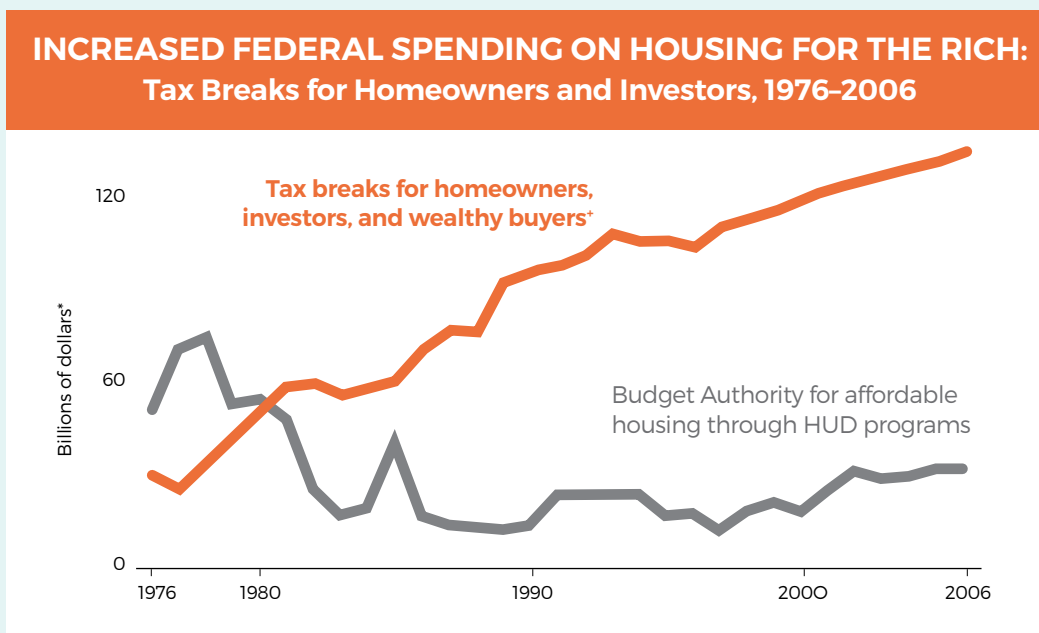
The solution is to change the role and responsibility of government in our housing supply. In doing so, we must increase the voice and power of renters, and address long-standing economic, racial, and gender injustice when it comes to how our housing is created.

The U.S. Housing Budget: Warped Priorities

The U.S. government spends far more money annually on subsidizing housing for the rich, to the tune of hundreds of billions, than it spends on housing for low-income people. The federal government handed the largest corporate landlords at least \$470 billion in recent tax breaks and giveaways, including over \$170 billion through the CARES Act.³⁵ It loses as much as an estimated \$600 billion annually due to mortgage interest tax deductions which subsidize wealthier homeowners—an amount almost 14 times more than the \$43 billion it spent on affordable housing for low-income renters in FY2019.³⁶

How the government spends its limited budget for affordable housing is inefficient, as well. Evidence suggests that public control over housing supply—through public spending at the stage of housing production and democratic forms of ownership—is more successful at improving affordability, compared to providing vouchers and subsidies for renters after production is complete.³⁷ But current policy largely emphasizes giving renters assistance to pay rent—to for-profit landlords, *after* market-rate rents have already been set, *on* buildings that were constructed through a process dominated by for-profit entities, mostly leaving intact housing prices driven by speculation and for-profit development.

Where the government has retreated from intervening effectively, ordinary residents pay for these failings. Even before the pandemic, nearly half of all U.S. renters were cost-burdened, forced to pay over 30 percent of their income in rent.³⁸ Most low-income homeowners in the U.S. are cost-burdened.³⁹ In contrast, residents of countries with robust social housing have enjoyed significantly greater affordability: in 1974, at the height of Sweden's social housing production and the completion of a historic campaign to build 1 million public housing units, families with children spent 16 percent of their income on rents; while in Vienna, average rents in 2013 were almost half of those in other European cities.⁴⁰



* Constant 2001 dollars

* Includes mortgage interest tax deduction as well as tax breaks on property, capital gains, and investment

Source: Cushing N. Dolbeare, "Changing Priorities: The Federal Budget and Housing Assistance, 1976-2002" (National Low-Income Housing Coalition, May 2001), 5. The 2001-6 data are estimated figures from the Budget of the U.S. Government.

To create a more equitable housing system, we must massively expand social housing: a public option for housing that is permanently affordable, protected from the private market, and publicly owned or under democratic community control. All levels of government must create public, non-profit means of housing finance, construction, management, and ownership to counter real estate speculation—rather than using our public funds to enrich for-profit speculators, private developers, and corporate landlords. Government policy should develop and maintain social housing by employing organized labor and creating union jobs. And we must ensure that systems of democratic accountability center low-income communities of color, renters, and the most marginalized residents in decision-making and control over resources. The implementation of social housing must redress inequity and exclusion; only through accountability to marginalized communities will social housing programs truly serve their interests.⁴¹

To guarantee social housing is deeply affordable for all, social housing must prioritize the needs of lower-income residents and communities of color first—even as we aim for a scale that will cover everyone in need and more. Extremely low-income households, especially Black, Brown, Indigenous, and immigrant households, are the most excluded and have the least options in our current housing system.⁴²

Public housing—social housing that is publicly owned and affordable to the poorest—is critical for ensuring housing options exist for the lowest-income households. The federal government must repair, green, and modernize our existing public housing stock. It must dramatically expand public housing with new construction. When we build social housing that begins with prioritizing the most marginalized, and do so at scale, the impacts can reverberate through our whole housing market. However, we must redress our country’s history of racist neglect and punitive treatment of residents in public housing.⁴³ It is critical we transform public housing into high quality, modernized homes under genuine democratic management by residents.

Already, steps are being taken in this direction at the local, state, and federal levels. A landmark bill, the Homes for All Act introduced by Rep. Ilhan Omar, would allocate \$1 trillion over 10 years to construct 12 million new public and social housing units.⁴⁴ California is considering a state-wide budget measure to fund the preservation of buildings as social housing for low- and moderate-income households.⁴⁵ Across the country, strong tenant unions, demands for tenant and community opportunity to purchase homes from corporate landlords, and takeovers of vacant or corporate-owned buildings to transform them into permanently affordable housing are increasing.

Building on the organizing and policy campaigns underway, this report lays out our vision for a robust social housing system. It considers the history of public housing in the U.S. in order to learn from both our housing policies’ failings as well as potentials. It then outlines the key principles and components that must be in place and steps policymakers can take to move toward social housing, drawing on lessons and actual practices from around the world.

The transformations we envision will require a massive redirection and increase of public spending, towards federal and local investment in permanently and deeply affordable housing. The far-reaching benefits and tremendous returns to our communities are well worth it. By ensuring everyone has a home, widespread social housing will allow our communities to thrive. Social housing enables gains in racial and gender equity, household savings, workforce development and union jobs, broadly shared economic vitality, educational attainment, stability and genuine security, peace of mind, health, and other invaluable societal benefits that come from realizing **housing as a human right.**

WHAT IS SOCIAL HOUSING?

Social housing is a public option for housing that is permanently affordable, protected from the private market, and under democratic community control. It can be owned by public entities or non-profits. It may be occupied by renters as well as homeowners who have formed cooperatives or who live on community land trusts. Social housing includes public housing for the lowest-income and most marginalized residents, as well as affordable options for low- and moderate-income households.

Public Option: Much like how universal, government-funded health insurance is often called a “public option” for people to select within the broader health insurance marketplace, we see social housing as a public option that intervenes in the broader housing marketplace to improve access and affordability overall. It ensures quality, affordable housing is available for those who are priced out or strained by the housing costs in the private market, and it ensures no one will be unhoused.

As housing justice organizations across the U.S. that organize low-income residents and communities of color, we define social housing as follows:

- **Socially owned:** Social housing is owned by the public or under democratic community control. Owners can include public entities like municipalities, cities, counties, states or the federal government, as well as non-profits, such as cooperatives and community land trusts.
- **Permanently affordable:** Social housing is kept deeply affordable for the entire life of the building.
- **Permanently decommodified:** Social housing is protected from the private market and the role of for-profit investors is minimized. It cannot be privatized or transferred to ownership by a for-profit entity.
- **Socially financed, produced, and maintained:** Social housing must be financed through public funds and non-profit financial entities. It is built by public or non-profit developers and construction companies, employing union labor and worker cooperatives. Its maintenance is publicly financed and carried out by public sector, unionized workers.
- **Under democratic community control:** Social housing is developed, owned, managed, and operated through entities that are democratically accountable to the public, residents, and communities. Residents should have a direct role in management and decision-making. Tenant unions, rent boards, and other structures should be in place to ensure accountability to low-income residents.

To ensure social housing is permanently protected from for-profit entities and speculators, many social housing programs strive to comprehensively decommodify every aspect of ensuring that affordable housing exists—from its finance and creation, to its ownership, management, and maintenance.

Social housing works: examples from across the globe show that governments have successfully solved massive housing shortages and affordability crises by expanding social housing. Social housing is the foundation of successful efforts to reduce homelessness at scale. It is the solution to tepid and insufficient affordable housing production. It can help rectify long-standing racial inequalities, as well as make our housing stock more sustainable and green. It is cost-effective and saves public money designated for housing from going to line the pockets of wealthy elites.

Finland's Path to **ERADICATING HOMELESSNESS**

Finland is the only country in the European Union where homelessness is decreasing.⁴⁶ It has recorded consistent declines in homelessness since 1987, when it began keeping records.⁴⁷ This is due not just to its renowned “Housing First” policy for unhoused people, which gives people an apartment and counseling as soon as they need them with no preconditions (see p. 32). Finland also has a strong social housing program that ensures affordable homes are available for move-in, to begin with.⁴⁸

Most land in Helsinki, Finland, is owned by the municipal government.⁴⁹ It leases this land to build social housing.⁵⁰ Social housing units are roughly 16 percent of Finland's total housing stock, and Helsinki has 50,000 municipally owned housing units.⁵¹ In contrast, Detroit and Portland, which are cities of comparable size, have just 3,700 and 450 public housing units respectively.⁵²

Finland is ramping up its efforts to construct even more social housing, which constituted 22% of all residential completions in 2017 when it added 9,000 dwellings.⁵³ The municipality of Helsinki runs its own construction company.⁵⁴

Local government—rather than non-profits—is the largest owner and provider of social housing in Finland.⁵⁵ Priority access is given to homeless applicants and those with urgent housing needs; but households can remain in social housing regardless of changes to their financial circumstances over time.⁵⁶

A public bank, Munifin, is the main investor in social housing and provides loans for housing development.⁵⁷ Munifin is owned by state and municipal governments, as well as Finland's public sector pension fund.⁵⁸ The state agency for social housing, Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland (ARA), also provides financial support for social housing by providing guarantees on loans, interest subsidies, and grants for energy upgrading.⁵⁹

To counter segregation based on class, Helsinki maintains a strict housing mix in each new district of 25 percent social housing, 30 percent subsidized purchase, and 45 percent private sector.⁶⁰ It invests in homelessness prevention through tenant protections and anti-eviction measures.⁶¹ Finland also maintains safety nets such as social assistance and housing allowances, while healthcare is free or affordable for all.

Finland's Constitution includes the right to housing and healthcare. Moreover, its social housing is often high quality. Many apartments for “Housing First” beneficiaries are 1- or 2-bedroom, with amenities such as private balconies, a gym room, and a sauna.⁶² Yet the program is cost-efficient: a study found that providing housing for one unhoused person saves €15,000 yearly due to decreased spending on emergency healthcare and law enforcement.⁶³

An apartment in Vainölä, a social housing development for formerly unhoused people in Espoo, Finland. (Photographer: Vilja Pursiainen; Y-Foundation)



SOCIAL HOUSING WORKS: Ending Homelessness in Finland

Finland is the only country in the European Union where **HOMELESSNESS IS DECREASING**. It plans to end homelessness by 2027.

↑
Welfare & rental assistance

↑
Housing First: Unhoused people get apartments and counseling, with no preconditions

↑
Tenant protections

SOCIAL HOUSING: 16% of Finland's housing stock and growing

A public bank finances most social housing development. Finland's social housing agency helps by providing loan guarantees, interest subsidies & grants.

The government owns most land in Helsinki, which it leases for social housing development.

A public construction company builds social housing.

Local government owns most social housing.

↑ Constitutional Right to Housing

Sources: Jon Henley, "It's a Miracle: Helsinki's Radical Solution to Homelessness," The Guardian, June 3, 2019, sec. US news, www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jun/03/its-a-miracle-helsinki-radical-solution-to-homelessness; Juha Kaakinen and Saija Turunen, "Finnish but Not yet Finished—Successes and Challenges of Housing First in Finland," European Journal of Homelessness 15, no. 3 (2021): 81-2; Y-Foundation, A Home of Your Own: Housing First and Ending Homelessness in Finland, 10-12; Lawson and Hannu Ruonavaara, "Land Policy for Affordable and Inclusive Housing: An International Review" (SmartLand, 2020), 32-3, <https://smartland.fi/wp-content/uploads/Land-policy-for-affordable-and-inclusive-housing-an-international-review.pdf>; Julie Lawson, Hal Pawson, et al., "Social Housing as Infrastructure: An Investment Pathway," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, November 15, 2018), 50, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3284910>; Peter Gowan and Ryan Cooper, "Social Housing in the United States" (People's Policy Project, 2018), www.peoplespolicyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SocialHousing.pdf

Social Housing is Cost-Effective, Equitable, and in the Public Interest

Truly creating the deeply affordable housing that is needed in the U.S. will require significant public investment. While such direct public financing requires upfront capital, it is ultimately more cost-effective than our current approach to financing affordable housing. And from a public interest and social justice standpoint, it is far more equitable and redistributive.

Government investment benefits residents and drives housing costs down. Simply put, when profiteering is taken out of housing provision, savings are passed down to residents, who no longer have to pay for the excess profits of landlords, developers, investors, and construction companies, in addition to the actual costs of land, materials, and labor.⁶⁴ If government exercises its oversight and regulatory powers to carry out the tools described in this report, it is also well-poised to make use of economies of scale, access to public resources, price-setting mechanisms, and more to drive housing costs down. And whereas private development slows down with recession, public construction can continue to provide jobs and housing in hard times.⁶⁵

Social housing nips a vicious cycle of rising rents that other subsidies can inadvertently feed. Money paid to private landlords through government tax incentives, operating subsidies, and rental assistance can fuel housing price inflation, speculation, and rent increases: it simply goes towards paying for-profit landlords who keep raising rents, rather than dampening and limiting housing prices. Historically, as countries have privatized social housing and increased reliance on rental assistance payments, their spending on rental assistance has increased—but without stabilizing housing affordability.⁶⁶ Instead, housing prices and rents have only grown increasingly unaffordable as corporate landlords thrive. In contrast, widespread social housing programs dampen price inflation.⁶⁷

Social housing ensures spending goes towards lasting solutions. Tax credits and subsidies for private landlords—such as those offered by the U.S.’s main vehicle for producing affordable housing, the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program—are recurrent expenses for the public that do not create permanent value or a permanent portfolio of social housing.⁶⁸ But direct public investment in publicly owned housing creates lasting affordability, since affordability restrictions will not expire.

Upfront public funding creates deeper affordability. Some models of social housing rely on a mixed-income approach that is revenue neutral: upper-income tenants paying higher rents subsidize the units for lower-income tenants, who are charged lower rents. However, mixed-income approaches that rely on cross-subsidization tend to be less deeply affordable.⁶⁹ Essential human services like public education and health are not required to generate surpluses or be cost-recovering. Neither should affordable housing.

Housing the homeless is humane, effective, and saves public resources that can be utilized for other critical services. Numerous studies show that preventing homelessness by providing affordable social housing saves more public money than the public costs of homelessness. In the past ten years, Finland spent €270 million constructing, purchasing, and renovating housing as part of its “Housing First” program. This is far less than the cost of homelessness on the healthcare, law enforcement, and judicial systems, and it is actually effective in ending homelessness.⁷⁰

Social housing has far-reaching economic benefits, which reverberate throughout society. Its construction and maintenance can create union jobs. Stable housing contributes to educational attainment, workforce development, and improved public health.⁷¹ Savings to residents from affordable housing costs will boost local economies and reduce racial inequity. When low-income households gain income, they are more likely than wealthy households to spend those extra funds on their needs, which can create local business activity, employment, and tax revenues.⁷² Money garnered from rents would not go to profiting remotely-located shareholders and the wealthy, or be channeled into housing speculation, but instead be reinvested towards maintaining permanently affordable housing for the public good.⁷³



KEY TERMS

Decommodify: To provide or distribute a resource, good, or service according to human need rather than whether it is profitable. To create a system where access is based on need, not profit. To ensure shared public access to vital resources, rather than having these be controlled by for-profit actors who limit or steer availability to make a profit. Decommodification recognizes that markets can fail to meet human needs because powerholders and for-profit exchange exclude people who can't afford a good or service, or who suffer institutionalized discrimination or bias.

Speculation: To gamble on whether an asset will be worth more at a future time. The process of buying land, housing, or financial products derived from real estate assets—with the intention of treating these as an investment vehicle whose value will increase even without further productive effort.⁷⁴ These investment strategies—which include everything from flipping properties to predatory direct investment to trading obscure financial products based on mortgage or rental securities—often operate on a global scale and work against local housing affordability and stability.

To “socialize” or make “social:” To increase social security by placing the production, distribution, and exchange of a vital resource or service under the ownership and regulation of, by, and for the community, public, or public interest. This is as opposed to being under the control of a limited, exclusive handful of for-profit actors. Examples of socialized resources include public education, Social Security, the postal service, and more.

Solidarity economy: An economy organized based on democratic ownership and control of vital resources to ensure everyone's human needs are met—rather than being organized primarily according to the drive of private entities to make a profit. The solidarity economy includes social housing, housing cooperatives, and community land trusts, as well as worker cooperatives, buying cooperatives, public banks, and more.

Community wealth building: An approach to community development that works for shared economic prosperity, racial equity, and ecological sustainability, by minimizing the extraction of resources from communities to profit wealthy elites. It instead keeps wealth in the hands of local residents and marginalized groups through democratic ownership, decision-making, and control.⁷⁵ It includes expanding the solidarity economy and changing systems to redirect wealth back to local economies.

Cooperative: A group where members cooperate to buy, own, produce, distribute, or exchange a resource or service, so that by banding together they increase access and affordability, while also sharing benefits and returns democratically. In housing cooperatives, tenants jointly own property and preserve affordability by limiting rents as well as how much the property can be resold for.

Community land trust (CLT): A non-profit, community organization that owns land on behalf of a community and protects it from market pressures, often to provide long-term housing affordability and sustainable development. To ensure community stewardship of land, CLTs may be governed by elected boards consisting of CLT residents, community members, and representatives from the public or non-profit sector. CLTs separate ownership of land from ownership of buildings on the land but impose affordability restrictions on the latter. While a CLT holds land in perpetuity to take it off the market, for instance, it can lease the land at low-cost and on a long-term basis to homeowners, enabling stable and affordable homeownership. The homeowners build wealth on a shared equity or limited equity basis, but are deed-restricted as to how much profit they can resell their homes for, so that the housing stays affordable. CLTs also host limited-equity cooperatives and affordable rental properties, as well as community gardens, daycare centers, office space for non-profits, and more.⁷⁶

Tenant union: A renter-led organization of, by, and for tenants, that seeks to fight for their collective interests and rights, improve housing conditions, build renter power, and push for renter-friendly policy change. Members of a tenant union may share the same landlord and building, or have different landlords and buildings but work in solidarity across their neighborhood, city, or geography. Tenant unions also build infrastructure to organize beyond geographic boundaries. They are critical for stopping displacement and enforcing tenant protections.⁷⁷

Rent board: A government entity that administers and enforces rent control regulations, providing oversight. The rent board may be empowered to conduct and hand down decisions on rental arbitration hearings, mediations, and investigations, as well as to hear tenant and landlord complaints. Rent boards can consist of elected commissioners, including tenant representatives.⁷⁸

GOVERNMENT DIVESTMENT FROM PUBLIC HOUSING IN THE U.S.

Public housing is the main form of social housing in the U.S. and has been a cornerstone of housing policy since the 1930s.⁷⁹ Government-owned public housing is a critical source of deeply affordable housing for the lowest-income households. Today, 1.2 million families nationwide live in public housing.⁸⁰

But as a direct result of government policy, public housing has suffered decades of disinvestment and much is in extreme disrepair. Residents are criminalized and over-policed. They often suffer hostile treatment by management and have little voice over living conditions, despite regulations requiring structures for resident input and participation.⁸¹ Before charting a course for robust social housing in the U.S., we must first consider both public housing's potentials and the reasons for its failings.

The current state of our public housing is rooted in the U.S.'s history of racist housing policies. During World War I and World War II, the federal government built public housing as a temporary measure for war workers and their families. Early public housing favored white households, as well as lower middle-class families, rather than the poor.⁸² It typically excluded Black people, and if not, was racially segregated. As part of the New Deal, the 1937 Housing Act enabled further public housing construction but tied it to the clearance of low-income people's existing homes.⁸³ The very construction of public housing often resulted in the demolition of Black residents' homes and integrated neighborhoods specifically, and systematically intensified segregation; many displaced Black families could not qualify for public housing and were further ghettoized.⁸⁴ As a result of Black organizing demands, housing authorities later loosened limitations against people of color in public housing. But segregated units for Black residents were poorly constructed and less durable compared to those for white residents, which could be of high quality.⁸⁵



Left: Avalon Gardens, a public housing project in Los Angeles that was 99 percent white and zero percent Black in 1944. Right: Western Terrace, a public housing project for war workers, also in Los Angeles, was 26 percent Black and 65 percent white in 1945. Source: Don Parson and Kevin Starr, *Making a Better World: Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 70-1. (Louis C. Stoumen & Esther Mipaas, Housing Authority Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library)

After WWII, the real estate industry bitterly fought against public housing and campaigned for its demolition. As a result of this organized opposition, in the 1950s, many localities abandoned plans to build more public housing units, and some demolished projects primarily occupied by Black people.⁸⁶ Across the country, real estate interests and middle-class white communities mobilized, at times violently, to bar the construction of public housing in their areas and to concentrate public housing projects in poor neighborhoods of color.⁸⁷ At the same time, federal housing policy favored homeownership and heavily subsidized white households to move into suburbs—which were exclusively white because of government-backed racially restrictive covenants that barred Black people from home purchase in these neighborhoods.⁸⁸

Federal and state governments have increasingly divested from public housing, at the same time that its racial demographics have shifted. As white families were able to benefit from government policies that enabled them to become homeowners, they left public housing; meanwhile, due to the lack of other housing options as well as “urban renewal” demolitions, most public housing applicants after WWII were Black.⁸⁹ To protect the real estate industry, federal reforms lowered income limits, and housing authorities evicted white families when their incomes rose above these limits.⁹⁰ By the 1960s, public housing residents were disproportionately Black. Median incomes in public housing have plummeted, from 57 percent of the national median income in 1950, to 29 percent by 1970, and 17 percent in the 1990s.⁹¹

From its inception, public housing in the U.S. has been strained by cost-containment measures in the 1937 Housing Act, which limited construction costs per unit. These limits resulted in shortcuts such as shoddy materials and high-rises with elevators stopping only every other floor. While lessening upfront expenses, poor construction and design also caused high operating costs in the long-run and rapid building decline. On top of this, the 1937 law did not provide funds for maintenance but has relied on rents to cover these costs. As residents’ incomes fell, funding for repairs has dwindled while policymakers failed to allocate sufficient maintenance funds.⁹²



California renters call for a statewide rent cap and just cause eviction protections, September 2019. (Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment)

From the 1970s onwards, officials used decrepit conditions and repair backlogs to justify the privatization and destruction of public housing. In the 1980s, together with rollbacks in social welfare generally, the Reagan administration cut funding for subsidized housing by over 80 percent, causing homelessness to skyrocket.⁹³ In 1998, the federal Faircloth Amendment capped the number of public housing units at 1999 levels. Funding for new public housing through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), excluding mixed income redevelopment programs like HOPE VI, has been zero since 1996.⁹⁴ Instead, government policy has shifted towards subsidizing private, for-profit landlords to provide affordable housing, such as through Section 8 vouchers, created in 1983, and the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program (LIHTC), founded in 1986.⁹⁵ In 1992, HUD launched the HOPE VI program, which demolished public housing in favor of building mixed-income developments. Throughout the country, however, more units were destroyed than created, displacing residents.⁹⁶

The “War on Drugs” during the 1980s and beyond has influenced public housing policy, expanding mechanisms to scapegoat and criminalize residents of color.⁹⁷ Federal “one-strike” laws allow housing authorities to evict public housing residents if anyone “associated” with a household engages in criminal activity on the premises or drug-related behavior anywhere. In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Oakland Housing Authority’s evictions of elders because a relative or caretaker of theirs had been caught with drugs. The court ruled that tenants can be evicted even if unaware of the drug activity.⁹⁸ Police subject public housing residents to violence and terror, and coordinate with housing authorities to facilitate eviction.⁹⁹

Public housing residents have fought back by organizing against rent hikes, arbitrary eviction, poor maintenance, hostile management, and more. In the late 1960s and 1970s, rent strikes successfully pushed back against rent increases and won slight funding allocations for repairs.¹⁰⁰ As a result of their organized protests, residents won the right to participate in local management decisions.¹⁰¹ Beginning in 1970, the federal government required housing authorities to create guidelines for residents’ roles or lose federal funding for modernization.¹⁰² Local housing authorities established democratically elected tenant councils and other channels for tenant representation in decision-making.¹⁰³ Since the 1980s, HUD has allocated funds for resident engagement and participation.¹⁰⁴ In response to advocacy, in 2002, HUD also adopted regulations which affirm tenants’ right to organize in HUD-subsidized buildings that are not public housing.¹⁰⁵ HUD regulations require public housing authorities to recognize resident councils that provide input on operations.¹⁰⁶ While resident associations are often inactive or lack political independence from management, they offer channels through which tenants can potentially pressure for greater democratic accountability.

Moving forward, we must learn from how public housing has been hampered by racist policymaking and rollbacks pushed by the real estate industry. Public housing must be quality housing, built to last, with long-term funding streams. It must be deeply affordable and habitable. It must be built in well-resourced neighborhoods to break down segregation and exclusion.

To rectify racial disparities and the history of racist housing policy in the U.S., government policy must dramatically shift gears and usher in a new framework for housing policy: one that prioritizes social housing which is accountable to, in service of, and generously redistributes wealth to, low-income communities of color. Towards this end, we must expand and activate meaningful structures of tenant power and governance. The following sections lay out principles and components of a vision and path forward for our housing system that strives to accomplish all of these things.

A Timeline of Public Housing Cuts



Federal Housing Act authorizes public housing construction, but with limits on construction costs per unit and with no funds set aside for maintenance. Public housing excludes poor households and is racially segregated, with low-quality units for Black residents.

Nixon imposes a moratorium on all public housing programs. Congress establishes the **Project-Based Section 8 program**, which withdraws from public ownership of affordable housing, and instead relies on private landlords and developers.

Reagan cuts funding for subsidized affordable housing by over 80 percent, causing homelessness to skyrocket.¹⁰⁸ From 1978 to 1983, the HUD budget authority shrinks from \$83 billion to \$18 billion.¹⁰⁹

Congress creates the **Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program** (see p. 20).

The **HOPE VI program** begins. It demolishes tens of thousands of public housing units, only replacing half.¹¹¹ Between 1995 and 2011, HUD dismantles 290,588 units of public housing and 360,000 Section 8 units.¹¹²

The federal **Faircloth Amendment** freezes the number of public housing units at 1999 levels.

1937

1950s

White flight to the suburbs. Public housing residents are increasingly Black and extremely low-income.

1974

1976

The high point of federal housing assistance.¹⁰⁷

1980s

1983

Congress creates **Section 8 vouchers**, which subsidize very low-income renters to find landlords in the private rental market. Many vouchers go unused annually because landlords refuse to accept Section 8 tenants.¹¹⁰

1986

1988

The federal **Anti-Drug Abuse Act** imposes “one-strike” rules on public housing residents, which authorize their eviction if any “associate” engages in drug-related behavior.

1992

1996

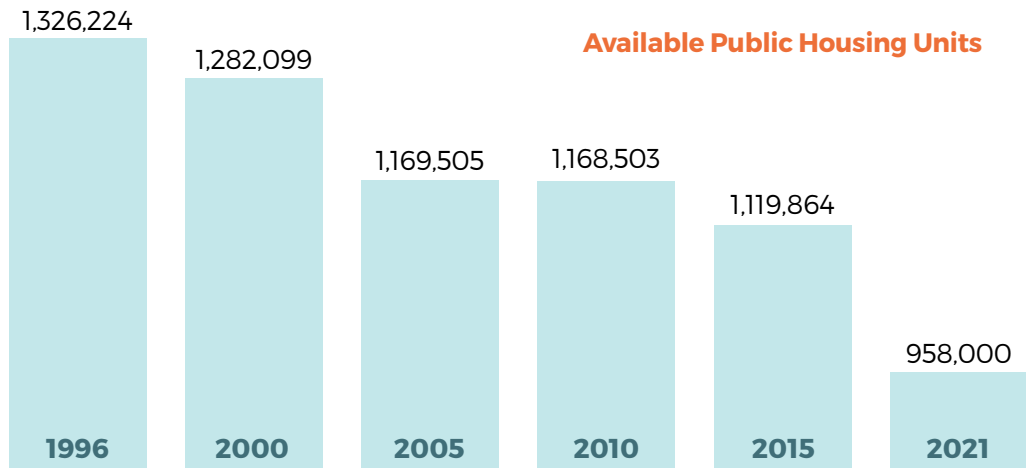
HUD funding for new public housing has been zero since 1996.

1998

2012

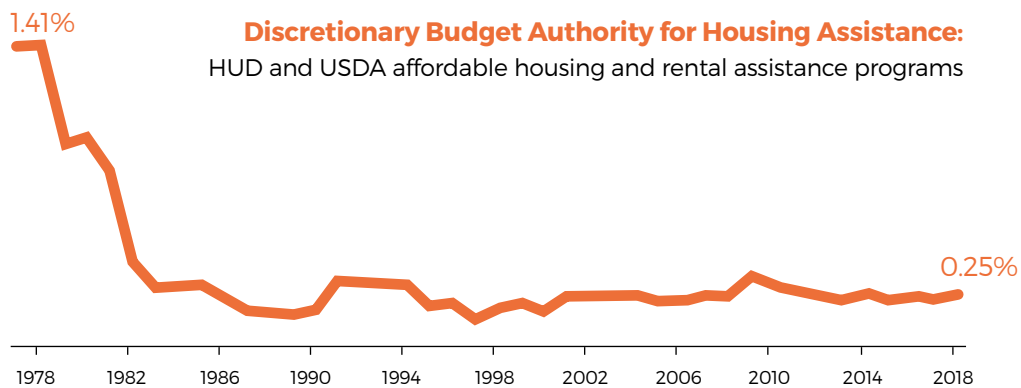
The **Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD)** program, which privatizes public housing, begins.¹¹³

The U.S.'s Shrinking Public Housing Stock, 1996–2021



Sources: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Policy Basics: Public Housing,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 16, 2021, www.cbpp.org/research/public-housing; A Picture of Subsidized Households (HUD).

Decreased Federal Allocations for Affordable Housing, as a Percentage of GDP, Since the 1970s



Source: OMB Historical Tables 5.1 (Budget Authority by Function and Subfunction) and 10.1 (Gross Domestic Product and Deflators Used in Historical Tables: 1940-2024).

What's Wrong With the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) Program?

Created in 1986, the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program has grown to replace public housing as the U.S. government's primary vehicle for producing low-income rental housing. LIHTC seeks to incentivize affordable housing construction by offering developers a 10-year tax credit. The affordability restrictions it mandates expire after 30 years (while for LIHTC properties developed before 1990, restrictions expired after just 15 years).¹¹⁴ Affordability restrictions on LIHTC housing are less stringent than those for public housing or project-based Section 8.

In effect, LIHTC gives for-profit investors a tax break to invest in lower-income housing. The tax break often ends up benefiting for-profit investors without creating true affordability that meets the needs of low-income tenants. National data suggests that less than half of LIHTC households are extremely low-income. Those who are extremely low-income typically only afford their LIHTC rents by layering on additional federal rental assistance, such as Section 8 vouchers.¹¹⁵

LIHTC is not an economically efficient method of producing affordable housing.¹¹⁶ Even when developers are non-profit, LIHTC drives them to pursue for-profit private investment to front development costs; the program does not directly offer upfront public funding, and tax credits only reduce taxes for businesses that pay taxes in the first place.¹¹⁷ The lack of upfront public funding burdens non-profit developers: it forces them to pull together an additional 3.5 funding sources on average and in some cases as many as 11 other sources, which raises costs and slows production.¹¹⁸ And rather than promoting permanent affordability, LIHTC incentivizes for-profit investors to buck affordability restrictions on properties they control. A large proportion of LIHTC units have been converted into market-rate housing after affordability restrictions expire, contributing to gentrification and displacement.¹¹⁹

The U.S. government is overly reliant on for-profit investors to create affordable housing. Because of LIHTC, billions of dollars in public funding are wasted annually on subsidizing the profits of wealthy investors.¹²⁰ Direct investment of public funds in social and public housing would more efficiently target public money to generate the kind of deep affordability we need.



PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL HOUSING

TO UNDERLIE ALL ASPECTS OF DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION



DECOMMODIFICATION OF LAND AND HOUSING Housing should be treated as a human right, not a commodity for the highest bidder.



SCALE Public investment should create social housing on a mass basis, so it constitutes a majority or near majority of the housing stock.

DEEP AFFORDABILITY Social housing development should first prioritize providing housing that is deeply* and truly affordable to the lowest-income residents. Affordability guidelines should consider neighborhood median incomes, and prioritize extremely low-income residents of neighborhoods which a development seeks to serve.



UNIVERSALITY, WHILE PRIORITIZING THE MOST MARGINALIZED Social housing at scale should be universally available to all low- and moderate-income households who seek it, though to begin with, production and preservation should first prioritize meeting the needs of the lowest-income households, communities of color, and other marginalized groups.



QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY Social housing must be high quality and built to last. Developments should be accessible to persons living with disabilities, and planned with residents' needs for transportation, healthcare, education, jobs, and more in mind. They may include amenities like clinics, cooperative kitchens and laundries, community gardens, cooperative restaurants and supermarkets, daycares, playgrounds, and more.



DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITY CONTROL Social housing should be under permanent public or non-profit ownership and democratic control, so it is developed, owned, managed, and operated through entities that are democratically accountable to the public, residents, and marginalized communities.

TENANT UNIONS AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING Tenant unions should have a legally recognized right to collectively bargain over rents and living conditions. Rent boards and other structures should ensure tenants have a collective voice.



TENANT PROTECTIONS AND STABILITY Residents must enjoy security of tenure and protections against displacement. They should live without fear of evictions.



RACIAL AND GENDER JUSTICE Social housing must be designed with the goal of promoting racial and gender equity, and ending displacement of communities of color. Immigration status and criminal record should not disqualify people from residence. Social housing must be accessible and deeply affordable to low-income residents of color, women-headed households, families with children, LGBTQ people, people living with disability, immigrants, unhoused people, people with records, and others marginalized in the housing market. These groups should have a meaningful voice in decision-making and management.



SPATIAL EQUITY AND DESEGREGATION Social housing developments should be sited to promote desegregation and access of lower-income people to wealthier neighborhoods. They should be planned with convenient access to transportation, jobs, healthcare, education, recreational facilities, markets, and other amenities, or include these facilities on their grounds.

REPARATIONS Social housing should be resourced and developed as a form of reparations, designed by and for Indigenous, Black, Brown and other communities of color who have suffered institutionalized discrimination and lack of housing access.



DIVESTMENT FROM HARM, INVESTMENT IN CARE Social housing is a critical aspect of care infrastructure. It should be actualized in a manner that expands resources for, and decreases the criminalization of, communities of color. The design, development, and management of social housing should advance divestment from exploitative institutions and industries including police, prisons, surveillance, and fossil fuels.



CLIMATE JUSTICE Social housing should be built through green construction methods, according to energy efficient design, and created through renovation and energy retrofitting of existing buildings. Affordable mass transit can be incorporated into development plans. Low-income communities and communities of color disproportionately impacted by natural disasters and displacement caused by climate change should have input on development plans and be prioritized for housing.

SOLIDARITY ECONOMICS Social housing must help strengthen a larger interconnected cooperative economy—including labor unions, worker cooperatives, public banks, and more—that is organized around meeting human needs, rather than profit.



* Technically, "deeply affordable housing" means housing that is affordable to extremely low-income (ELI) households, because it does not cost more than 30 percent of household income. ELI households are defined as those whose household incomes do not exceed 30 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI).

COMPONENTS OF A STRONG SOCIAL HOUSING SYSTEM

How do we actualize the above principles to create a robust social housing system? Around the world, government policies, tenant unions, and local municipalities are doing just that. Below, we discuss vital components of strong social housing systems, drawing on actual examples in practice as illustration.

First, we describe how we can carry out housing production and preservation in a manner that decommodifies land and housing. But just as important as these aspects of its technical design, social housing must center the people and communities who will benefit—especially the lowest income residents of color. It must reinforce, and be guided by, renter power. So next, we explore how the key principles of affordability, scale, prioritizing the marginalized, and democratic accountability can be put into practice in ways that do so. Finally, we outline essential components of social housing systems which complement other supports and protections to advance housing as a human right.

A Pipeline for Decommodified Housing

To create a robust social housing system, every stage in the process of housing production—as well as preservation—must be accounted for. From land acquisition to financing, from construction to maintenance, each step of creating and actualizing affordable housing must be protected from speculation and profiteering.

In the U.S., our government policy now largely waits until the last stage of the housing production pipeline before intervening to improve affordability for the lowest-income residents.¹²¹ After housing has already been constructed and put up for rent, the government offers limited rental assistance to a small portion of renters in need, in the face of widespread unaffordable rents. As noted, this is a far less effective approach to promoting affordability than intervening at earlier points of housing production and preservation.¹²²

Instead, social housing policy must address every step of the housing supply chain. Here's how.

Land banking for social good

Land banking is the acquisition of land by public entities, so that it may be leased or used at low-cost for affordable housing construction. Building housing is expensive and carries large upfront costs, which are higher if land is overpriced. Government policies must ensure that quality land in good locations is readily available at a low or reasonable price for creating social housing. Whereas in the U.S., land banks have supported affordable housing development on a small scale and usually sell off acquired land to private developers rather than preserving public stewardship,¹²³ other countries have used public land banking as a powerful vehicle to greatly expand social housing.

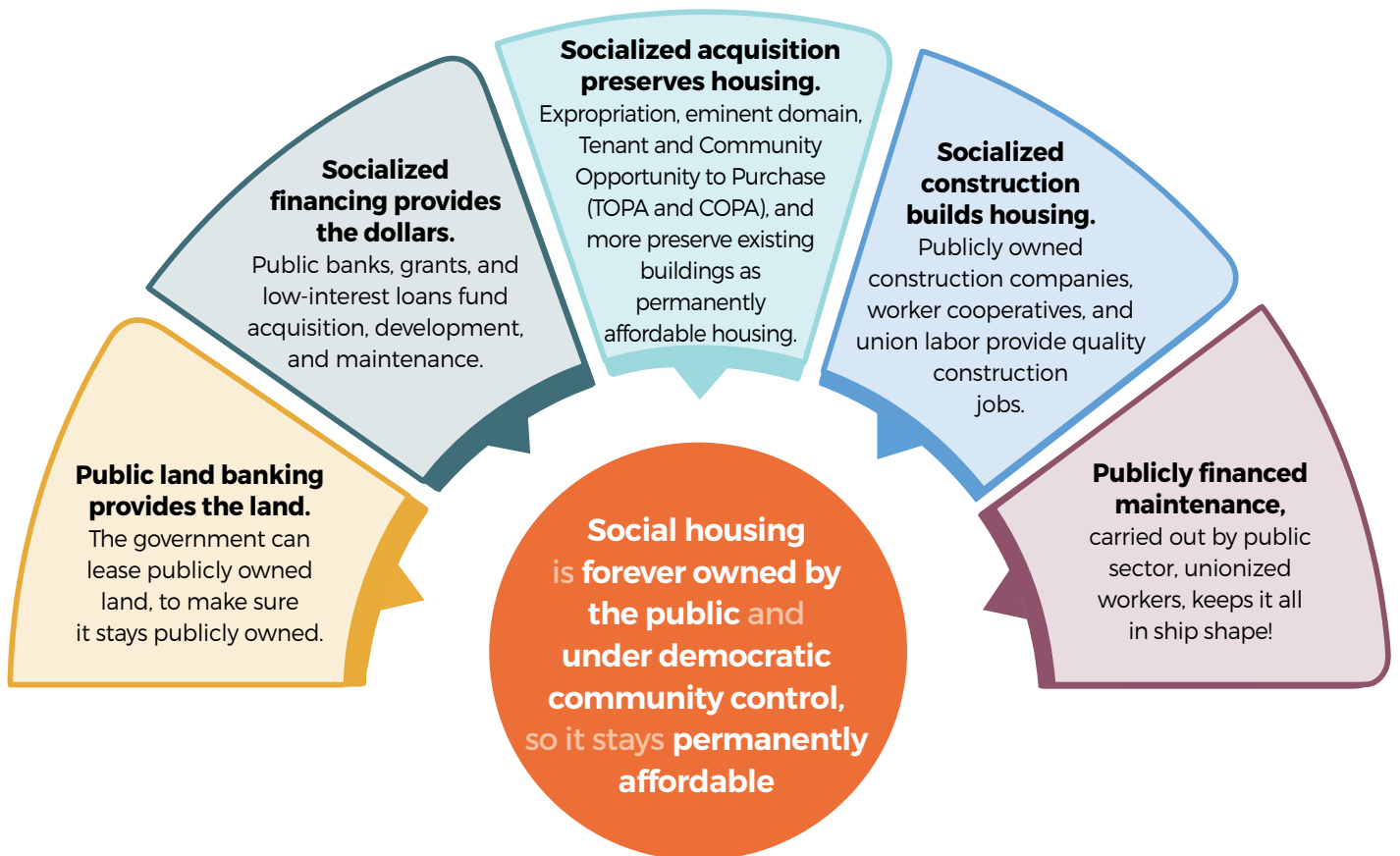
After land banks assemble land, public ownership or stewardship of the acquired land ensures its price or leasing fee remains low for affordable housing developers. This in turn lowers development

costs, allowing for the savings to be passed on to renters in the form of decreased rents. What's more, when public entities aggressively land bank to remove large swaths of land from the for-profit market and then use that land for affordable housing, they have achieved land monopolies that lower housing prices across the entire market. Around the world, land banks have used their control over land to steer development in ways that limit speculation and to mandate that developers and landlords on public or subsidized land abide by affordability requirements and tenant protections.¹²⁴

To support social housing, public land banks in other countries have acquired land through purchase, eminent domain, or even land reform laws, at times with legally mandated limits on purchase prices, as in Vienna or Singapore. In the U.S., land banks are mainly authorized to take over tax-delinquent, vacant, or distressed properties, which has comparatively limited their scope and power to advance racial, economic, and redistributive justice.

- In **Finland**, homelessness has steadily decreased. As mentioned, this is due not just to its renowned “Housing First” policy for unhoused people (see p. 32) but also to its strong social housing program that ensures affordable homes are available. The city of Helsinki utilizes both public land banking and land leasing: it owns 70 percent of land, which it leases for social housing construction.¹²⁵

SOCIAL HOUSING: HOW TO DECOMMODIFY OUR HOUSING PIPELINE



- The city of **Vienna** in Austria boasts among the lowest rents in Western Europe—and has ranked repeatedly as the city with the highest quality of life in the world, partly due to its quality affordable housing.¹²⁶ Most city residents, about a million people, live in social housing.¹²⁷ The municipal government has a land monopoly: its land bank is the main provider of land to developers. It acquires land years in advance to sell on a subsidized basis for social housing construction to developers that are mandated to meet affordability requirements. Laws cap the sale price of land.¹²⁸
- In **Singapore**, 80 percent of residents live in government-developed housing. Quality affordable apartments are available to low-income households for roughly USD\$19 to USD\$56 per month.¹²⁹ After Singapore gained independence from Britain, its government acquired the land for public housing development through a 1966 land reform law that enabled eminent domain. The law capped compensation to landlords at land values during the time of the reform’s announcement, rather than anticipated future appreciation.¹³⁰



Karl-Marx-Hof, a social housing project in Vienna built by its city council in 1927-30, with over 1,300 units, gardens, and balconies. Its premises have included nurseries, a youth center, advice center for mothers, library, post office, dental and health clinics, pharmacy, shops, eateries, meeting rooms, and more. (Photographer: Philipp Oberhaidinger; CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Socialized financing through public banking and grants

Socialized financing is not-for-profit investment that is subject to public accountability to ensure it equitably serves human needs. It includes government grants and low-interest loans, as well as loans from public banks. Socialized financing helps limit the role of for-profit investors in housing. It is crucial because reliance on for-profit funding sources for housing development, such as Wall Street investors, speculators, and for-profit bank loans, is linked to decreasing housing affordability. Since investors seek to invest in assets that return high profits, this has incentivized rent increases on renters, and predatory lending directed at would-be homeowners.¹³¹

In the U.S., most people bank with for-profit banks that are closely tied to Wall Street. The banks repackage mortgage debt into financial products, which they sell to Wall Street investors who in turn

trade them on global financial markets.¹³² As a result, rapid speculation on real estate assets in global financial circuits has ballooned. This Wall Street investment in real estate, and the deregulation of banking, helped drive the subprime lending boom and the 2008 foreclosure crisis.¹³³ The federal government's erosion of separations between banks' mortgage lending and global financial markets meant the foreclosure crisis snowballed into a much broader economic recession.¹³⁴ In contrast, in Germany, most people bank with local public banks, which served 50 million customers in 2019, or non-profit cooperative banks.¹³⁵ These financial institutions prioritize banking and borrowing with local communities, while regulations help separate their assets from global financial markets. The local public and cooperative banks were relatively insulated from the foreclosure crisis and able to continue their lending activities through it.¹³⁶

Public banks and non-profit cooperative banks can be mandated to focus only on providing the public with core banking services: payments, savings, and loans. They can be banned from participating in the speculative activities of investment banking that circulate real estate assets on global financial markets. Public banks should be governed by mechanisms for transparent oversight and democratic accountability and mandated to invest their funds in affordable housing and other public infrastructure through low-interest loans. Capital for public banks should be sourced partly through government revenues and progressive taxation.



Other forms of socialized financing which the government can provide to fund social housing include: public grants such as capital grants and direct operating subsidies; interest rate subsidies; and loan guarantees. Revenue can be generated through progressive taxation and by channeling investment from public pension funds. Municipalities that are short of funds can leverage small government grants to issue municipal bonds that raise greater revenue. The Federal Reserve should purchase and guarantee these bonds. Secondly, low-interest loans should be made available from for-profit banks, with restrictions on the profit rates that investors may extract. These methods all limit the role of for-profit investment. In contrast, financing schemes that rely on giving tax credits to private developers and investors, such as the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program, should be avoided.

- **Vienna** constructed 65,000 public housing units in the 1920s and 1930s, a period known as “Red Vienna,” when socialists were elected to government. They financed public housing construction by instituting new luxury taxes on private villas, cars, domestic servants, and other high-end consumption.¹³⁷ Today, Vienna funds its social housing mostly by using government loans with low interest rates, and private bank loans that are subsidized through tax incentives to provide low interest rates.¹³⁸
- As mentioned, **Finland** makes use of low-interest loans from a public bank, grants, loan guarantees, and interest rate subsidies to finance its social housing.¹³⁹
- From 1965 to 1975, **Sweden** launched an ambitious effort to create public housing for not just the poorest but a large swath of the population, and it succeeded in constructing over 1 million affordable homes owned by municipalities and cooperatives. Sweden has a lengthy history of tenant and cooperative organizing. Its National Tenant Union, founded in 1923, went on to create its own banking and housing cooperative, a national “Savings and Building Society” for tenants, soon after. The savings society funded the construction of cooperative housing.¹⁴⁰

Acquisition strategies for expanding social housing through preservation and conversion

Acquisition strategies are legal tools and processes for acquiring and converting existing properties into social housing. Especially in the face of affordable housing shortages, acquisition strategies are necessary because housing construction may take years. Converting existing buildings into social housing is faster, cheaper, and often more environmentally sustainable than new construction.¹⁴¹

Social housing systems have benefited from powerful tools to achieve scale by acquiring property that is unused, hoarded, or monopolized for the profiteering of a few, for conversion into social housing. For instance, hundreds of thousands of units go empty every year, in part and increasingly because of speculation.¹⁴² In many cities, these vacant homes exceed the number of unhoused people.¹⁴³

Acquisition strategies can include the expropriation of holdings owned by the largest corporate landlords, to decommodify these buildings; as well as eminent domain to create affordable housing for people of color and marginalized groups. They also include Tenant and Community Opportunity to Purchase Acts (TOPA and COPA), which give residents, non-profits, and/or housing authorities the first right of purchase over property put up for sale if they plan to convert that property into cooperatives, community land trusts, and permanently affordable housing. However, these acquisition strategies are less effective since they necessitate that residents or non-profits secure financing to purchase buildings. TOPA and COPA are better paired with government accelerator funding for purchases.¹⁴⁴

- In 2021, **Berlin** residents passed a historic referendum to expropriate the property of corporate landlords who own more than 3,000 apartments—about 250,000 units total.¹⁴⁵ The referendum calls for expropriated property to be managed as social housing in a participatory way, through a democratically controlled public institution. Advocates propose that the city could compensate landlords at below-market rates, according to the highest possible loan it could take out for compensation and repay using income from rents, keeping these at affordable levels.¹⁴⁶



Berliners collect signatures for a 2021 referendum which successfully passed, to expropriate the property of large corporate landlords. (Photographer: Ian Clotworthy)

- In 2016, the **Catalonia** region of Spain made it legal for municipalities to seize corporate-owned apartments left vacant for over two years and rent these out to low-income tenants as affordable housing for four to ten years, before returning them to the owners. In 2019, Catalans passed a measure allowing cities to buy such apartments at half the market rate. In 2020, the city of Barcelona warned 14 corporate landlords with 194 vacant apartments that if they did not rent these out within a month, the city would expropriate the properties and convert them to social housing.¹⁴⁷
- Across the **U.S.** in 1990, the National Union of Homeless took over vacant HUD properties in eight cities simultaneously, during a national campaign to demand that these be made available for unhoused people to live in. They forced HUD to promise to increase allocations for the poor. In Minneapolis, unhoused families and their supporters took over 15 buildings, causing the city government to hand over millions for a housing program run by unhoused people. In Oakland, the campaign won \$2 million in land for another “Dignity Housing” shelter run by the homeless. In Philadelphia, the mayor agreed not to evict homeless families occupying HUD properties.¹⁴⁸

Socialized housing construction

Socialized housing construction means that construction is carried out by worker cooperatives and/or unionized labor employed by public or non-profit entities. Socializing construction enables the jobs and economic activity generated through housing development to benefit workers, local residents, and low-income communities as much as possible—rather than primarily serving to enrich the wealthy owners of large, for-profit corporations. Unlike for-profit development, which slows during recessions, public construction companies help ensure that the housing supply is maintained and construction jobs continue on, despite recessions.¹⁴⁹

For-profit developers have failed to create affordable housing at scale. But history shows that worker cooperatives and public entities have successfully carried out the rapid construction of large quantities of affordable housing.¹⁵⁰ Public construction companies and worker cooperatives can be formed explicitly to build social housing, ensuring that the employment generated creates quality, union jobs. These not-for-profit construction companies can be required to implement hiring benchmarks and percentages that ensure people from marginalized groups such as people of color, women, unemployed people, immigrants, low-income people, formerly unhoused people, formerly incarcerated people, local residents, and others have access to jobs.

- In **Sweden** during the 1940s, building workers’ unions and unemployed construction workers formed a cooperative, called Riksbbyggen, which sought to revitalize the construction industry by building public and cooperative housing.¹⁵¹ In late 1980s, this cooperative managed 180,000 units, and as of 2019 cooperative housing was 24 percent of Sweden’s housing stock.¹⁵²



Maintenance

Maintenance strategies are required to ensure that social housing stock is properly preserved and usable for generations. Maintenance and major capital improvements should be publicly financed: public investment in social housing should account for and cover maintenance and improvement costs in the long-term, rather than funding these through unaffordable rent hikes. Social housing should be governed by democratic community control, so that residents have oversight and input on maintenance, upgrading, and renovations including their timeliness, frequency, and cost. Policies can mandate that maintenance in social housing is carried out by unionized worker cooperatives, public, or non-profit maintenance workers.

Actualizing Key Principles

Next, we discuss in greater detail how to actualize the following key principles of social housing.

Scale

Scale means that social housing constitutes a majority of the rental stock—or a large enough proportion of the total housing stock that it is able to lower housing prices and dampen speculation throughout. Social housing at scale can influence prices across the housing market, because it becomes a major player which private landlords must “compete” against. When social housing that offers lower rents is widespread, this pressures private landlords to lower their rents to remain attractive. Government policy must ensure scale through mobilizing adequate public resources to support each stage of the housing production and preservation process.



- In the **U.S.**, subsidized housing—including public housing, other HUD housing, and LIHTC—is only 4 percent of our total housing stock.¹⁵³ Researchers have found that constructing subsidized housing appears to reduce displacement pressures in its vicinity.¹⁵⁴ But overall our public stock is too limited to influence most of the private rental market, and it operates in parallel rather than in direct competition.

SOCIAL HOUSING VITAL STATS

The U.S. Compared to Robust Systems

VIENNA, AUSTRIA

220,000 public housing units directly owned and managed by government

200,000 subsidized affordable housing units, heavily regulated

46% of homes are social housing

3 in 5 residents of Vienna, about 1 million people, live in social housing

HELSINKI, FINLAND

22% of new construction is social housing

50,000 public housing units

16% of Finland's homes are social housing.

PHILADELPHIA

Roughly comparable in size to Vienna.

Has the 4th largest public housing authority in the U.S.

12,850 public housing units

13,640 units subsidized through Project-based Section 8, LIHTC, and more

DETROIT

Comparable in size to Helsinki.

3,700 public housing units

4% of homes in the U.S. are subsidized affordable housing,* much of it in fact owned by **for-profit** landlords.

* Such as LIHTC, public housing, Project-Based Section 8, and other HUD-assisted housing
Sources: Peter Gowan and Ryan Cooper, “Social Housing in the United States” (People’s Policy Project, 2018), <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SocialHousing.pdf>; City of Vienna, “Vienna’s Population 2021 - Facts and Figures on Migration and Integration,” 2022, <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/social/integration/facts-figures/population-migration.html>; Philadelphia Housing Authority, “Philadelphia Housing Authority: Agency Overview” (Philadelphia Housing Authority, July 2020), http://www.pha.phila.gov/media/189728/pha_fact_sheet_2020_july_10.pdf; U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, “Philadelphia Housing Authority,” HUD.gov / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), December 21, 2021, https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/mtw/philadelphia; U.S. Census Bureau, “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Philadelphia City, Pennsylvania,” 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/philadelphiacitypennsylvania/PST045221>; Detroit Housing Commission, “Public Housing,” Detroit Housing Commission, 2022, <https://www.dhcmi.org/PublicHousing.aspx>; Detroit City, Michigan, “2021,” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/portlandcityoregon,bostoncitymassachusetts,detroitcitymichigan/PST045221>; City of Helsinki, “About the City,” welcome.helsinki, 2021, <https://welcome.helsinki/about-the-city-of-helsinki/>; Julie Lawson and Hannu Ruonavaara, “Land Policy for Affordable and Inclusive Housing: An International Review” (SmartLand, 2020), 32-3, <https://smartland.fi/wp-content/uploads/Land-policy-for-affordable-and-inclusive-housing-an-international-review.pdf>; OECD Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, “PH4.2 SOCIAL RENTAL HOUSING STOCK,” OECD Affordable Housing Database (OECD Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, 2021), 2, <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PH4-2-Social-rental-housing-stock.pdf>.

Our public housing is targeted to the lowest-income households who are already excluded from the rental market.

- After WWII, **Sweden** faced an acute housing shortage, as well as widespread poor housing conditions. In 1965, in response to a growing tenant union and cooperative movement, the Swedish government embarked on an ambitious 10-year program to build 1 million affordable homes—a goal that would bring affordable housing within reach of its entire population. By 1975, it surpassed this target, constructing over 100,000 units per year and implementing one of the highest per capita construction rates. Sweden’s multifamily housing stock went from being 80 percent owned by private enterprises in 1945, to 62 percent owned by municipalities, public enterprises, and housing cooperatives in 1979 (with municipal and public utility enterprises owning 38 percent). Private landlords were eliminated as a significant force determining rent. The quality of Sweden’s housing stock vastly improved. Most working-class people gained access to “modern” dwellings and amenities typically enjoyed by the middle-class, raising living standards for a generation.¹⁵⁵ Today, public housing still accounts for nearly 20 percent of Sweden’s housing stock.¹⁵⁶
- In **Austria**, which has a sizable renter population who are the majority in cities like Vienna, social housing comprises most—59 percent—of the rental stock. Roughly half, 46 percent, of all homes in Vienna are social housing.¹⁵⁷ Philadelphia is a city of roughly comparable size and has the fourth largest public housing authority in the U.S.¹⁵⁸ But whereas Philadelphia has about 12,850 public housing units, Vienna owns and manages 220,000 units of municipal housing—23 percent of its housing stock.¹⁵⁹ On top of this, Vienna subsidizes another 200,000 units of non-profit or limited-profit social housing subject to affordability controls.¹⁶⁰

Permanent and deep affordability

Permanently affordable housing is housing that is kept affordable and below market-rate for the entire life of the building. To ensure permanent affordability, social housing must remain permanently “off-market:” it must be owned by public entities or non-profits, including cooperatives and community land trusts; and government policies must bar its resale to private, for-profit developers. Permanent affordability is critical for countering the displacement of low-income communities of color, fostering long-term community wealth-building, and ensuring public resources do not end up profiting the wealthy few due to privatization.

Whether social housing remains permanently and deeply affordable depends greatly on who owns it and how it is financed. Examples around the globe show that public ownership—such as in the form of public housing—best protects affordability for the poorest residents.¹⁶¹ Financing social housing should not rely on for-profit investors, as in the case of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program. For-profit investment typically lowers how deeply affordable a development is, limiting access by the lowest-income renters.¹⁶²



During the COVID-19 pandemic, Swedish tenants in public and private housing unite to call for three months of no rent and zero evictions, by hanging yellow flags outside their apartments. Julia Arce and family in 2020. (Photographer: Veronica; Flagga Gult-Husby)

Unfortunately, in the U.S., government-subsidized housing such as LIHTC, Section 8, and other HUD-assisted projects may be owned by for-profit entities.¹⁶³ Even non-profit developers of LIHTC projects are typically beholden to for-profit investors that they relied on for financing.¹⁶⁴ Instead, policies should ensure adequate funding through not-for-profit investments, such as government grants, low-interest public bank loans, or bonds.

- In **Vienna, Austria**, nearly half of the city’s social housing stock is public housing, directly owned and managed by the municipality. Vienna’s other social housing is owned by “limited profit” housing associations that are government subsidized. But it is the public housing that is most deeply affordable and accessible to lower-income households.¹⁶⁵
- While recently there has been a global resurgence of policy interest in social housing, especially since the 1980s, public and social housing around the world have been under attack. Corporate landlords, wealthy elites, and predatory investors have pushed for government bodies to impose public cuts, austerity measures, and the privatization of public housing stock. These measures have affected even strong social housing systems like Vienna’s and Sweden’s, where significant public stock was sold to corporate landlords and where right-wing federal governments cut funding.¹⁶⁶ The shift away from public funding and ownership has hurt affordability. These examples show we must expand upfront, public not-for-profit investment as the best means to ensure deep affordability.

Prioritizing low-income communities of color

Social housing should be a public option that is eventually at scale and universally available to all low- and middle-income residents who choose it. But housing production and conversion to social housing takes years. Because of the urgency of our affordable housing crisis and because the shortage of affordable homes is worst for the lowest-income households, social housing production must prioritize serving the households most in need: extremely low-income people and low-income communities of color. This means that significant public resources should go towards expanding and repairing public housing, as well as preserving and producing social housing that is affordable to extremely low-income residents. Without adequate tenant protections in place, mixed-income housing production in lower-income neighborhoods can contribute to gentrification and displacement. Instead, policies should ensure development without the displacement of low-income communities of color.¹⁶⁷



Deeply affordable social housing needs to be resourced at scale, developed, and sited to deliberately combat racial inequality and to redress the historical legacy of racist housing policies. Social housing must be inclusive of migrants, non-citizens, and people with criminal records. By designing social housing to ensure impacted communities of color benefit, social housing can be realized as a powerful vehicle for racial justice. In Europe, social housing systems have had conflicted and at times weak track records on racial justice and inclusivity. For instance, while some countries like Finland, Austria, and Sweden have opened up their social housing systems to legal immigrants or asylum seekers, undocumented migrants are excluded.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, components of social housing systems can still be applied towards ensuring and advancing racial justice.

- **Finland's** robust social housing and "Housing First" programs prove that homelessness is unnecessary and can be eliminated. A wealthy country like the U.S. can and must similarly mobilize its resources to end homelessness, which disproportionately impacts Black and Indigenous people, by providing quality affordable housing. Doing so would be a form of reparations and a tremendous stride for racial justice.
- In numerous countries like **Finland** and **Sweden**, policies have attempted to locate social housing in a manner that seeks to counteract residential segregation by income.¹⁶⁹ As mentioned, Helsinki mixes social housing, homeownership, and market-rate housing in each new district. While outcomes are imperfect, inclusionary government intervention is more effective than allowing private developers and exclusionary residents to dictate siting. In the U.S., the development of social housing in well-resourced neighborhoods could serve as a conduit for low-income households of color to access resources. At the same time, supporting the cohesion of neighborhoods of color is important for their self-determination as political and cultural minorities or historically marginalized groups. In neighborhoods of color, social housing could help build community wealth and prevent displacement, to preserve rather than disperse the political power and social support networks built by residents of color.

Democratic community control

Democratic community control means that planning, development, management, operations, and ownership of social housing are placed under mechanisms for oversight, decision-making, and control by residents, community members, and the public. Social housing should be developed with community input and should serve the needs of marginalized groups such as low-income people, people of color, people living with disabilities, unhoused people, people with records, immigrants and undocumented people, women, single parents, LGBTQ people, elders, domestic violence survivors, people with low credit, and others. Residents should have a direct role in management.



Some mechanisms for resident and community control include mandating transparency and public accountability, increased legal rights for tenants, laws limiting corporate power, and formally recognizing tenant unions' right to participate in decision-making and democratic management. Elected bodies such as rent boards, which make decisions about rent increases and more, should be established and include tenant representation. Similarly, elected oversight bodies can be created over other aspects of managing social housing. Ownership of social housing by housing cooperatives, community land trusts, and public entities should be designed to maximize democratic accountability and mass involvement by residents in decision-making, while centering the input of marginalized groups.

Social Housing as a Cornerstone of Housing as a Human Right

We now discuss components of social housing systems that are geared at supporting unhoused people, tenants, and homeowners—to advance housing as a human right.

A “Housing First” approach towards homelessness

Taking a “Housing First” approach towards homelessness means prioritizing rapid rehousing, food, and supportive services unconditionally, instead of requiring unhoused people to first get a job or to follow other rules before they can access services.¹⁷⁰ “Housing First” policies have been more successful in combating homelessness than approaches focused on temporary shelters or imposing requirements on unhoused people.¹⁷¹

Finland, which has implemented a strong “Housing First” policy since 2008, is the only country in the European Union where homelessness is decreasing; it has set a goal to eradicate homelessness by 2027.¹⁷² Numerous other countries, including Portugal, France, Spain, Canada, New Zealand, and Brazil, seek to emulate its approach.¹⁷³ Finland got rid of most night shelters and short-term hostels for the unhoused and instead made it policy to provide permanent housing swiftly and unconditionally.¹⁷⁴ As discussed, the success of Finland’s “Housing First” policy, though, is due also to its robust social housing system.

Rent control and renter subsidies

Rent control policies are regulations that limit rents and rent increases. They can include mechanisms for democratic oversight and enforcement, such as elected rent boards that monitor implementation and handle disputes between tenants and landlords; as well as processes that involve tenant unions in setting fair rents. Renter subsidies are rental assistance payments from the government such as Section 8 vouchers, which help renters pay rent and are often targeted based on need or income.



Rent control and rental assistance are complementary to social housing policies. In the context of social housing systems, they help make sure high quality social housing is truly accessible to the most vulnerable and poorest residents. In private sector rental housing, rent control dampens speculation, immediately increases affordability, and prevents displacement.¹⁷⁵ Many countries with robust social housing have far stronger rent control for both private sector and subsidized housing, as well as more general and widespread rental assistance, compared to the U.S.¹⁷⁶ Researchers on best practices for rent control around the world agree that policy should include open-access landlord registries; limits on rent increases both between and within tenancies; and mechanisms for enforcement and democratic oversight by elected tenant representatives.¹⁷⁷

Unlike the production of social housing, rent control and rental assistance do not directly address supply. Rather, these policies improve housing affordability by alleviating prices for renters after housing has already been created. By itself, rent control can mitigate but not completely uproot the pressures that drive housing unaffordability: the for-profit structure of our housing system, for-profit ownership of land, and increased role of Wall Street in fueling speculation. And when paid to private for-profit landlords, rental assistance can reinforce speculation and inflated prices. However, when paired with not-for-profit social housing and implemented on a strong and widespread basis, they enhance the affordability of social and private sector housing.

Community wealth generation and debt cancellation

In the U.S., individuals are steered into investing in homeownership as a means to achieve financial stability and build long-term wealth. But many people are financially barred from becoming homeowners. For low-income people of color especially, this model of wealth generation has proven elusive.¹⁷⁸ Even when they become homeowners, most people of color shoulder mortgages and many are rendered highly indebted “bank tenants,” while low-income communities of color are subject to high interest rates and predatory lending.¹⁷⁹ Black homeownership rates have been stagnant since the late 1960s, and even as property values rose through the 1990s, Black homeowners found themselves with increased debt and less housing equity.¹⁸⁰ With the foreclosure crisis, Black and Latinx wealth was cut by over half.¹⁸¹

The solution is to diversify and divest from a model of homeownership based on real estate speculation as our primary or sole vehicle for wealth-building. Community land trusts (CLTs) offer a sustainable model of homeownership for lower-income households: in a CLT, land and housing cannot be resold for profit or higher prices. This limits speculation and keeps prices affordable in perpetuity for new families moving in. Homeowners on CLTs build limited equity and are guaranteed affordable housing costs for the long-term. They are unlikely to experience foreclosure.¹⁸²



Government policy should also invest in additional forms of socialized wealth generation that benefit the public, especially low-income people of color and other marginalized groups. This includes encouraging public pension investments in social housing. It also includes increasing Social Security, universal healthcare, free higher education, subsidized childcare and eldercare, and more.

Debt cancellation or forgiveness can be applied to rental and mortgage debt, medical debt, student loans, or other debts. It recognizes that the largest corporate entities and wealthy elites frequently enjoy bailouts, subsidies, and extremely low tax rates, while predatory lending and high interest rates have targeted low-income people of color and the most economically vulnerable. Periodic debt forgiveness helps counter growing disparities. It strengthens communities and boosts local economies by increasing the purchasing power of lower-income people, who are most likely to spend extra funds on basic needs; and by increasing people's capacity to do voluntary care labor.¹⁸³

- In **Spain**, during the 2008 foreclosure crisis, homeowners facing eviction founded the organization Platform for Mortgage-Affected People (PAH) and took direct action to demand mortgage debt cancellation as well as the transformation of vacant bank-owned homes into social housing, by squatting in empty homes and occupying banks.¹⁸⁴ Today, PAH and tenant organizations are fighting Blackstone, which has acquired 100,000 real estate assets and mortgages in the country and is the largest real estate agent in Spain. Blackstone is responsible for a high rate of evictions and rent hikes.¹⁸⁵

Nationally recognized tenant unions with collective bargaining rights

Tenant unions are organizations of, by, and for tenants that ensure they have a collective voice about living conditions and that take action to improve access to quality affordable housing, curb abusive landlords, and advance tenant rights. Empowering tenant unions helps to ensure our housing system is democratic, accountable, and designed to serve residents' needs. In the same way that labor unions have collective bargaining rights so that employers are legally required to negotiate with them, tenant unions should have legal recognition, protections for organizing activities, and the right to collectively bargain with landlords, developers, and real estate investors. They must not only be entitled to a seat at the table to negotiate rents, housing conditions, and more, but should also have legally mandated decision-making input. Additionally, expanding tenant protections like just cause eviction, right to counsel, freedom from nuisance eviction, and more is necessary for promoting security of tenure and preventing abuses by landlords.



- In **Sweden**, the 1968 Rent Act makes collective bargaining between tenant associations and landlords mandatory. Sweden's National Tenant Union was founded in 1923 and has been instrumental in winning tenant rights and helping establish the country's public housing policies. The National Tenant Union has annual negotiations with landlord organizations to set rent increases in both public and private housing stock, according to a government-recognized process, within the bounds of a strong national rent setting system. Swedish rent setting regulations limit rents while pinning allowable increases to characteristics of the housing stock, according to its "utility value." Negotiations happen from the local to national level. Tenant unions have oversight to monitor whether rent increases, including those for renovations, are actually necessary and fair, while court processes adjudicate disagreements with landlords.¹⁸⁶ Through the above process, rents increased an average of 0.8 to 2.8 percent annually in the past decade.¹⁸⁷

HOW WE GET THERE

Below are actionable steps which policymakers, tenants, and community members can take right now to move towards a robust social housing system. Efforts are already underway, and policymakers should expand and support these.

Organize a National Tenants Union

Strong tenant organizing is necessary to push for social housing policies and ensure implementation is effective and accountable to low-income residents and communities of color. A National Tenants Union can be built from local, regional, and state-wide tenant unions. Organized tenants can push for policies that allow bargaining rights, recognition, and decision-making power over housing conditions.

In San Francisco, a dozen tenant and labor organizations, including the Housing Rights Committee, have worked with city supervisors to introduce and approve an ordinance that requires landlords to recognize tenants' right to organize and meet with tenant associations up to four times per year. The ordinance applies to tenants in buildings of five or more units. If landlords refuse to meet, tenants may file for a rent reduction with the city's Rent Board.¹⁸⁸

Support social housing and public banking legislation at the local and state levels

The California and Maryland state legislatures have been considering bills and proposals to support the development of social housing. In California, tenant organizations and labor unions are calling for \$1 billion in the state budget to fund a Social Housing Accelerator Initiative that would preserve buildings as permanently affordable social housing for low- to moderate-income households.¹⁸⁹

The budget request builds on momentum from a 2021 bill that proposed creating a statewide social housing authority to develop mixed-income rental and owner-occupied housing, kept affordable and off-market through limited equity cooperatives or long-term leaseholds.¹⁹⁰

In Maryland, a bill to finance publicly owned, mixed-income affordable housing built by union labor has been reintroduced since 2019; proposals for funding this housing have included a millionaire's tax, bonds, and a real estate transfer tax on luxury properties. Maryland's housing authority in Montgomery County is already engaged in building publicly owned, mixed-income housing on a smaller scale.¹⁹¹ It plans to use high-rent units to subsidize a minority of affordable ones. While this allows financial independence from state and federal funding, less than half of the units produced will be deeply affordable. Instead, legislation can establish financing schemes through grants or progressive taxes to ensure sufficient deeply affordable units for lower-income households.



Due to advocacy by a broad coalition of labor, community, and environmental justice groups, California passed legislation in 2019 to permit public banking, kicking off a flurry of local government activity to explore establishing municipal public banks.¹⁹² In October 2021, California enacted legislation to create a state-wide public banking option.¹⁹³ North Dakota has the nation's oldest statewide public bank, established since 1919, with \$8 billion in assets geared towards providing public-interest loans.¹⁹⁴ Public banking should be expanded and leveraged as a funding source for social housing through low-interest loans.

Cities and municipalities can all pass measures to create public banks, land banks, acquisition funds, housing trust funds, accelerator funds, and more, to support the development of social housing. They can finance these through progressive taxation, real estate transaction and anti-speculation taxes, issuing bonds, and channeling investment from public pension funds—financing methods that strive to redistribute wealth or to avoid speculative, for-profit investment that threatens affordability.

Repeal the Faircloth Amendment and support a Green New Deal for Housing

At the federal level, Congress should repeal the Faircloth Amendment, which prevents new public housing construction by capping the number of public housing units across the country at 1999 levels. Congress should support and pass the Green New Deal for Public Housing Act, which would invest \$180 billion over ten years for repairs and retrofits in existing public housing.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, Congress must pass the Homes for All Act, which would allocate \$1 trillion over ten years to build 12 million new permanently affordable public and social housing units; make operating and capital expenses for public housing into mandatory spending; and create a new HUD fund for programs to combat displacement and expand community-controlled social housing.¹⁹⁶ Government funding should go towards public and social housing whose development is coordinated by a Social Housing Development Authority, which would swiftly purchase distressed and other assets using grant money, for conversion into permanently affordable housing.¹⁹⁷ Grant funding for permanently affordable housing should be favored instead of development through the LIHTC program.

Use public land for permanently affordable housing and establish public land banking and leasing programs for that purpose

Public land should be used for developing permanently affordable housing, thereby lowering production costs. Moreover, public land can be leased at low-cost to affordable housing developers to ensure it is not resold in the future but is permanently set aside for social housing. Federal and state governments can finance land banks run by municipalities to aggressively acquire land and property for conversion to social housing.

Public and non-profit land banks have already helped channel land for affordable housing construction on a small scale. In Minneapolis, the non-profit Land Bank Twin Cities helped tenants who organized a rent strike in five buildings against a corporate landlord to assemble the financing to purchase the properties; the tenants have established Sky Without Limits Cooperative, which will own the homes as permanently affordable housing.¹⁹⁸ In New York City, a 1975 program that authorizes city takeover of vacant properties with property tax liens allowed the East Harlem-El Barrio Community Land Trust to acquire four apartment buildings for \$1 each.¹⁹⁹ Such efforts should be expanded.

In Los Angeles, during the height of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, homeless families known as the Reclaimers occupied 13 vacant homes owned by the state transportation agency, Caltrans, and

demanded they be made available for housing the unhoused immediately. Caltrans owned 460 residential homes, which it had bought to make way for freeway extension plans that were canceled; hundreds sit vacant.²⁰⁰ As a result of the Reclaimers' direct action, Caltrans transferred 25 vacant homes to the Los Angeles Housing Authority to use in a two-year transitional housing program that provides emergency shelter during the pandemic.²⁰¹

Expand Community Land Trusts and cooperative housing

Currently, over 225 community land trusts (CLTs) exist across the U.S.²⁰² The largest, the Champlain Land Trust, consists of over 3,000 units and controls about 7.6 percent of Burlington, Vermont's housing stock.²⁰³ It includes rental, owner-occupied, and cooperative housing, with half of units affordable to extremely low-income households and 18 percent affordable to people experiencing homelessness.²⁰⁴ Champlain Land Trust enjoys its large size due to government support: launched through the help of then-mayor Bernie Sanders, it received a seed grant, pension fund loan, as well as HUD funds, and is sustained by ongoing funding from a small property tax increase.²⁰⁵ CLTs should be expanded around the country through similar policies. On a smaller scale, cities have funded acquisitions by CLTs using bonds and through setting up "small sites" funds aimed at acquiring apartment buildings of under 25 units.²⁰⁶

Tenant and Community Opportunity to Purchase Acts (TOPA and COPA), which provide tenants, non-profits, and housing authorities the first right of purchase over properties to convert them to permanently affordable housing, can help enable the formation of CLTs and limited equity cooperative housing owned by tenants. When backed by the rights granted through TOPA, tenants who are organizing gain added leverage to win repairs and force negotiations with their landlords. To make property transfer and conversion into social housing a reality, however, government grants must be made available to assist CLTs and cooperatives with purchases; and better yet, legislation should mandate below market-rate prices. In New York, Housing Justice for All is calling on the governor to fund TOPA acquisitions in the state budget.²⁰⁷



A press conference outside the home of a San Diego resident, to defend her from eviction, November 2021. (Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment)

Federal funds from the Neighborhood Stabilization Program and American Rescue Plan could be directed towards supporting CLTs.²⁰⁸ However, too often for-profit corporations and investors have harnessed the land trust form to further for-profit development and condo conversions. It is essential that public funds support CLTs which are set up with structures of transparency and democratic accountability, and genuinely aim to create deeply affordable housing.

Strengthen rent control and tenant protections

In November 2021, residents of St. Paul, Minnesota, passed the strongest rent stabilization ordinance in the country via ballot measure. It caps rent increases at 3 percent annually for all rental units including new construction and applies even if tenants move out (a protection critical to long-term effectiveness, known as “vacancy control”).²⁰⁹ The measure harkens to tighter rent controls that existed in California, New York, and Massachusetts in previous decades—before real estate industry organizations like the National Council of the Multi-Housing Industry (NCMHI) and National Apartment Association (NAA) pushed states to roll back renter protections in the late 1970s and again in the 1990s.²¹⁰

Strong rent control with vacancy control should be expanded throughout the country to keep low-income families in their homes. Rent control immediately promotes affordability and housing stability, at scale; and it disproportionately benefits low-income renters, renters of color, and women-headed households.²¹¹ Rent control regulations should include democratic structures for implementation such as rent boards with elected tenant representatives, who have decision-making power over allowed rent increases.²¹²

Tenant protections such as just cause eviction and right to counsel must be enacted universally. In New York, advocates are seeking a good cause eviction bill that includes a mechanism for tenants to challenge rent increases above 1.5 percent of the consumer price index. Rent relief should also be expanded and paired with debt cancellation. New York is considering a bill to create a statewide rental assistance program that would include undocumented people.²¹³

Rein in speculation and corporate landlords

Federal and local policies must counter speculation and rein in corporate landlords. The federal government can tighten regulations over real estate speculation in financial markets by ending rent securitization, limiting mortgage securitization, and restoring strong divides between investment and commercial banking.²¹⁴ Bond rating agencies should not be allowed to grant high bond ratings to rental securities. All levels of government can institute anti-speculation taxes, such as value uplift taxes at point-of-sale, property flipping taxes, out-of-state investor and transaction taxes, and vacancy taxes on investor-owners.²¹⁵ All levels of government can institute transparency requirements for corporate landlords and LLCs, such as through rental registries and landlord licensing policies, and penalize landlords for harassment, code violations, and tenant rights violations.²¹⁶ The Federal Housing Administration, Freddie Mac, and Fannie Mae should curtail their support of private equity and Wall Street landlords.²¹⁷ Finally, all levels of government can target vacant corporate-owned properties for conversion to social housing.

Across the country, campaigns are fighting to close tax loopholes that subsidize luxury development and corporate landlords. In New York, Housing Justice for All is pushing for the repeal of 421-A, a tax break for real estate developers to construct new multi-family apartments, thus subsidizing

market-rate and luxury construction. This giveaway cost New York City over \$1.7 billion in FY2021 alone, larger than city or federal spending on public housing, tenant vouchers, or subsidized housing development in the locality.²¹⁸ Advocates demand that this money is instead used to provide deeply affordable housing for working-class and low-income residents. In San Francisco, voters passed Proposition I in 2020, which increased a real estate transfer tax on luxury sales to generate funds for rent relief and affordable housing.²¹⁹

In Minneapolis, as mentioned, tenants in Inquilinx Unidxs won a campaign to acquire and convert their homes, previously owned by a corporate landlord, into permanently affordable housing.²²⁰ In Oakland, Moms 4 Housing's occupation of a vacant home owned by the corporate landlord Wedgewood led to the transfer of its ownership to Oakland CLT.²²¹ In 2021, New York passed the Housing Our Neighbors with Dignity Act (HONDA), which allows for the purchase of distressed hotels and commercial spaces, for conversion into affordable housing for unhoused people.²²² However, developers largely have not taken steps to implement conversions. Advocates are calling for the governor to allocate funding for HONDA in the state budget.

Divest from harm, invest in care

Public housing residents are criminalized, and suffer police violence and eviction, in the name of fighting drugs or crime.²²³ As discussed, the federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 imposed “one-strike” rules that allow the eviction of public housing residents if anyone associated with a household engages in criminal activity on premises or drug-related behavior anywhere.²²⁴ Under federal law, housing authorities deny admission to those with criminal legal records. The federal government must repeal the above laws, as well as the laws and rule-making that penalize mixed-status families by restricting their subsidies.²²⁵

Through the 1990s, draconian eviction practices expanded from the public housing stock to the private rental market, through “nuisance” and “crime-free” ordinances.²²⁶ Nuisance ordinances have resulted in the eviction of tenants for noise complaints, hanging laundry out of windows, calling the police, or domestic violence.²²⁷ Such evictions concentrate in neighborhoods of color.²²⁸ White neighbors have also enacted and deployed these ordinances to collaborate with police in harassing residents of color and suspected Section 8 voucher recipients.²²⁹ Police have targeted Section 8 recipients for raids that attempt to catch them in violation of Section 8 regulations, to facilitate their eviction.²³⁰ These laws and policing practices which promote the criminalization, harassment, and eviction of public housing residents, Section 8 recipients, and communities of color should be repealed and ceased.

Social housing offers an opportunity to provide reparations and accountability to low-income Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. Money that is spent on overblown police or prison budgets should be redirected towards ending homelessness and providing deeply affordable housing that is accessible to the lowest-income residents of color, to people with records, and to people without papers.²³¹ Impacted communities of color must be centered in this planning and decision-making, to ensure solutions work for them.

CONCLUSION

Across the country, tenants, unhoused people, and community members are organizing towards a new housing system: one based on housing as a human right. It is time for policymakers to support these efforts by creating social housing that is deeply affordable, permanently decommodified, and under democratic community control.

Social housing production is how we can solve our worsening and widespread lack of available, affordable housing. For-profit developers cannot build the affordable housing we need at scale. Around the world, the historical record shows that public investment in housing for people, not profit, has succeeded where the private market could not, generating massive numbers of affordable homes. Prioritizing upfront public financing for public construction—not tax breaks to private developers and investors such as through LIHTC—is the only way we will produce the amount of affordable housing we need.

Social housing that truly prioritizes low-income communities of color, on a sweeping scale, is how we can correct the impacts of past racist housing policy and take strides towards racial justice.



Social housing will help stop displacement and can protect residents of color from evictions, predatory lending, and foreclosure. It will generate tremendous savings for households of color, and construction can create millions of union jobs. But to fulfill this promise, policymakers must include mechanisms for tenant power, democratic accountability, and oversight that ensure the voices of low-income people of color are central in decision-making.

When putting social housing into practice, policymakers must limit the role of profit in our housing system at every level: from finance, to construction, to ownership and preservation. Policymakers should favor public ownership. Examples show that subsidized housing is much more deeply affordable when it is owned by public or non-profit entities, under mechanisms of democratic oversight—not when it is privatized or under public-private partnership. Moreover, to truly protect our homes from speculation and acquisition by corporate landlords, policymakers must transform housing finance. Government regulations must untie real estate from global financial markets, and shift to public financing that is not beholden to for-profit investors.

The above transformations are enormous—but they powerfully address the roots of our housing crisis and offer lasting solutions. We envision a country where homelessness is rare. Where families of all backgrounds have access to quality, stable housing regardless of their household members' economic circumstance, race, gender, immigration status, physical and mental ability, or criminal legal history. Where all children have a safe and habitable home for study, play, and growth. Where anyone can choose professions of social work, teaching, or care labor without worrying they will lose a roof over their heads as seniors. Where corporate landlords do not dominate poor neighborhoods of color, and where eviction is not a normal facet of life—but instead our communities are thriving.

We have the resources. Policymakers can and must redirect the exorbitant funding which the government already spends on subsidizing corporate landlords and wealthy elites, as well as on policing and militarization, towards housing for low-income and working-class people. We must increase federal spending on guaranteed social housing for all.

Tenant organizing will be at the center of how we achieve these transformations. And democratic accountability is crucial to how we implement them. **The most impactful reforms are those that also expand democracy, strengthen the organized movement of low-income communities of color, and build renter power.**



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