

**Culture of Health
Sentinel Community Insights:
Brief Report**

Housing Justice



About This Report

The [Sentinel Communities Surveillance project](#) began in 2016 and has been monitoring activities related to how a [Culture of Health](#) has been developing in each of 29 diverse communities around the country. The purpose of the project is to learn more about how each community is working within its own historical context and current landscape to communicate about health and well-being, develop systems that promote health, and address health equity. Information on each Sentinel Community's work is summarized in community [reports](#), as well as cross-community [insights reports](#) on emerging themes, including this brief report on **housing justice**.

This report includes examples from Allegheny County, Pa.; Baltimore, Md.; Butte, Mont.; Danvers, Mass.; Finney County, Kan.; Harris County, Texas; Louisville, Ky.; Maricopa County, Ariz.; Midland, Texas; Milwaukee, Wis.; Mobile, Ala.; Monona County, Iowa; New Haven, Conn.; North Central Nebraska; San Juan County, N.M.; Tacoma, Wash.; Tampa, Fla.; and Toledo, Ohio.

The information in this report was obtained using several data collection methods, including key informant telephone interviews; an environmental scan of online and published community-specific materials; review of existing population surveillance and monitoring data; and collection of local data or resources provided by community contacts or interview respondents. Interviews were conducted with individuals in the community representing several organization types (for example, grassroots, government, for-profit) working in a variety of sectors (for example, health, business, education, faith-based, and environment). Information collected through environmental scans includes program and organizational information available on internet websites; publicly available documents; and media reports. Population surveillance and monitoring data were compiled from publicly available data sets, including the American Community Survey (ACS); Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS); County Health Rankings (CHR); and other similar federal, state, and local data sources.

Introduction

Access to safe, secure, stable, and affordable housing is critically important for the health of people and communities.¹ Decades of research has identified the health impacts of substandard and unsafe housing and crowding on infectious and chronic diseases, lead poisoning, injuries, and mental health.^{2,3} In communities across the country, many families struggle to afford housing—forgoing healthy food or medical care to pay rent or mortgages, and experiencing stress at the threat of eviction or foreclosure—all impacting physical and mental health.⁴ Neighborhood factors including air and water quality, walkability, safety, and access to amenities like healthy food and recreational activities contribute to health outcomes, prompting a widely adopted understanding that one's zip code is as important as one's genetic code.^{2,5} Such neighborhood factors also contribute to other aspects of one's community known to influence health and well-being, including trust, social cohesion, and collective efficacy.⁶

Yet, who has access to safe, secure, and stable housing is not equitably distributed. Many people, in particular Black, Latino, and Indigenous people, often face housing inequities due to generations of discriminatory housing and lending practices, including redlining and housing segregation.⁷ Gentrification and a lack of safe and affordable housing options have

contributed to displacement. Land use policies⁸ and environmental injustice⁹ have also shaped economic trajectories and opportunities for wealth-building, as lower-income individuals and families are priced out of the housing market and forced to move to lower-resourced or less-healthy communities in search of affordable housing. Such communities, however, often have fewer high-quality jobs and may lack a robust public transportation system, making employment and housing stability difficult to maintain.

This report discusses housing justice in a sample of the Sentinel Communities, including specific housing challenges individuals and communities face; how communities are addressing these challenges; the role of federal and state dollars and policies in shaping housing justice within the communities; and barriers and facilitators to housing justice locally. The report provides insight into the issues related to housing justice in these communities but is not intended to be representative of the full extent of challenges people and communities are facing or the solutions being implemented. The insights for this report come from environmental scans and stakeholder interviews conducted for the Sentinel Communities Surveillance Project.

Housing Justice in the Sentinel Communities

Communities reported challenges and barriers to housing justice including a lack of safe and affordable housing; housing stock that was older or in disrepair; an eviction crisis that in some cases began before the COVID-19 pandemic; and policies and practices that have contributed to housing segregation and inequities.

Many communities are challenged by a lack of safe and affordable housing.

- **North Central Nebraska** struggles with a lack of affordable housing and widespread population decline, which often makes building new houses not economically viable. Much of the existing housing stock is in a state of disrepair, but many owners lack the resources to upgrade their houses.
- **Monona County** also has old housing stock, some with lingering damage from a tornado, but low population growth has been a barrier to redevelopment.
- While many across **Finney County** were aware of housing shortages before the pandemic, stay-at-home orders revealed the extent to which county residents—primarily immigrants and refugees—were living in substandard conditions and without access to running water.
- Affordable housing is an issue in **Butte** as housing costs continue to rise in the region,¹⁰ and homelessness and a lack of affordable housing have been long-standing issues in **Tacoma**.

Rising rental prices coupled with a loss of income due to the pandemic has resulted in an increase in evictions, displacement, and lack of housing stability.

- **Harris County** was experiencing an eviction crisis prior to the pandemic, but this became an even bigger challenge as the pandemic progressed. In May 2021, roughly 37 percent of survey respondents in the Houston metro area reported being somewhat or very likely to have to leave their current house in the next two months due to eviction.¹¹
- With increasing rental prices and a lack of affordable housing, community-based organizations in **Danvers** have observed new populations on the verge of homelessness. The community has seen an increase in the number of working families and even those with substantial incomes seeking housing assistance because they are no longer able to afford housing costs in the wake of the pandemic.

Discriminatory housing and lending practices have resulted in racial segregation and inequities in housing and health that continue today.

- In **Louisville**, persistent patterns of segregation in the city have created a legacy of economic, educational, and health-related inequalities between the city's Black and White residents.¹²
- In **Allegheny County**, discriminatory practices such as redlining systematically excluded Black people from specific neighborhoods by denying mortgages to Black residents. This has permanently imprinted structural inequities into the county's makeup and has resulted in high unemployment rates, lack of generational wealth, lack of transportation, and profound health disparities in many low-income neighborhoods.
- **Baltimore** is one of the first cities to have implemented redlining in the 1930s, resulting in housing segregation that has led to disparities in access to quality housing, transportation, economic opportunities, and health, which still affect Black Baltimoreans today.
- Redlining and residential segregation in **Toledo** has resulted in health inequities as the city sees higher rates of lead poisoning and asthma in neighborhoods traditionally home to people of color and those experiencing historic disinvestment.

How Sentinel Communities are Promoting Housing Justice

Communities have responded to these challenges in a variety of ways, including increasing the number of affordable housing units; improving the health and safety of existing housing; leveraging partnerships to strengthen data on housing justice; and developing action plans. Other communities have focused on zoning laws and the establishment of governmental offices to address housing challenges. Nonprofit and other community organizations have also been instrumental through the provision of resources, funding, and legal aid to help tenants understand their rights and avoid eviction.

Communities are actively working to improve affordable housing options, but it will take time.

- Over the past two years, **Monona County** has focused on demolishing damaged homes and stakeholders anticipate bringing in new housing developments soon. The local government has also applied for grants to improve water infrastructure, transportation routes, and housing stock.
- In 2020, Phoenix's Neighborhood Services department committed to combatting the housing shortage by creating or preserving 50,000 homes by the year 2030 in **Maricopa County**.¹³
- In **Milwaukee**, the Mayoral 10,000 Homes Initiative started in 2018 with a goal to improve affordable housing opportunities over 10 years. As of 2020, it has successfully helped create almost 800 new housing units; preserved and improved 1,294 existing housing units; and assisted more than 730 individuals in homebuying.¹⁴
- In **Midland**, the city's Office of Community Development successfully facilitated a public-private partnership between the city and Michaels Construction, where a 124-unit apartment building serving families with low and moderate incomes would be significantly upgraded in exchange for a tax break for the company.¹⁵ The Developing Dreams Project plans to build five additional duplexes for the Family Transitional Housing Program, doubling its current capacity.¹⁶
- The West River Redevelopment Plan is a 10-year plan led by the **Tampa** Housing Authority that will include over 1,600 new residential units with a mix of market-rate, workforce (people earning 60% of the area median income), and income-based housing. In 2020, construction began on the first phase of development. Affordable housing will comprise over 80 percent of the first 371 apartments.¹⁷ Residents temporarily displaced by the redevelopment will have right of first refusal, helping to ensure that those who want to return to their neighborhood are able to do so.

Task forces, coalitions, and other partnerships have been established to promote housing stability through comprehensive plans and funding.

- Within **Allegheny County**, there have been various efforts that not only create new housing stock, but also establish ongoing streams of funding for residents, such as the Housing Opportunity Fund, to assist with housing stabilization.¹⁸
- In **Harris County**, a Housing Stability Task Force has been working since June 2020 to address affordable housing challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, particularly for residents with low incomes and communities of color.¹⁶
- The **Tacoma** Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness engaged with Pierce County to develop the 2021 Comprehensive Plan to End Homelessness.¹⁷
- In **Baltimore**, 10 local hospitals came together to implement an anti-homelessness project. The consortium committed a total of \$2 million for two years in order to help homeless families and individuals get connected to permanent housing and supportive services.¹⁹
- In **Butte**, St. James Healthcare continues to work on the Frequent Users System Engagement (FUSE) Initiative to study frequent users of emergency rooms and jails, and how to better address their needs. In 2019, these efforts were expanded to provide permanent supportive housing for individuals,^{20,21} in coordination with Action Inc., the Public Housing Authority, and the Health Department.

Housing policies, including those for zoning and public housing, are improving access and creating healthier living conditions.

- The local housing authority in **New Haven**, Elm City Communities (ECC), has managed local public housing in a way that promotes healthy environments and encourages self-sustainability. For example, all ECC properties are completely smoke-free, and in 2021 the authority received \$37 million in new U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding for lead abatement to amplify their existing efforts.²²
- Zoning policy has been a growing focus in **Danvers** over the past five years, both for preserving wetlands as well as for providing areas for affordable housing. The town's Department of Land Use and Community Services Smart Growth Development approach calls for affordable housing in 40 percent of new developments downtown.²³ The community also decided to instate an inclusionary zoning bylaw, which would require about 13 percent of multi-family developments to qualify as affordable housing.²³

Government and community programs, particularly pandemic relief funds, provide critical financial and legal support and wrap-around services to promote safe and stable housing.

- Community action agencies in **Monona** administer several federal and state programs intended to give residents access to safe and healthy housing and food and pay for utilities. For example, staff help applicants fill out paperwork for financial assistance with home weatherization and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program.
- In **Harris County**, funding from the CARES Act during the first year of the pandemic provided \$165 million including critical support for rental assistance.²⁴ Harris County also responded to the housing crisis through the provision of programs that provided wrap-around services and shelter beds for individuals experiencing homelessness. The coordinated Houston-Harris County Emergency Rental Assistance Program managed direct aid for rent payments.
- In **San Juan County**, ECHO, Inc. was responsible for managing local emergency funds in the wake of the pandemic, including those for rent and utilities assistance.
- In October 2020, officials in **Mobile** secured more than \$1.8 million in CARES Act funding, \$1.5 million of which was allocated to Legal Services of Alabama to work with people in court who are being evicted.²⁴

Federal and State Actions in Response to COVID-19

Many communities noted that state and federal action during the pandemic have influenced their ability to advance housing justice. Federal and state moratoriums on evictions helped to ensure housing stability during the pandemic, although enforcement varied. The moratorium expired in the summer of 2021, and it is not yet known if community concerns around mass evictions for those not able to pay back rent will be fully realized.

Communities also received millions of dollars through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), much of which was allocated for emergency rental assistance. HUD's ARPA HOME Supplement provided additional dollars to assist individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness.²⁴ The dollars allocated to communities varied and at the time of this report, plans for how to spend those dollars had not been finalized, although communities anticipated a mix of strategies to stabilize the housing market including helping landlords recoup overdue rent, and the development of affordable, quality housing for residents.

Barriers and Facilitators of Housing Justice

Housing justice is a critical factor that influences equity, and health equity specifically. Barriers and facilitators to housing justice in the Sentinel Communities reflect issues in financing; policy development and sustainability; and coordination across government and nongovernmental stakeholders.

BARRIERS

- Ensuring access to safe and affordable housing takes significant time, as strategic plans and housing developments often have multi-year time horizons.
- The development of safe and affordable housing also takes significant financial investment, and it can be difficult to get housing developers on board, particularly within the private sector without clear incentives.
- Addressing housing justice requires buy-in and commitment from a wide range of stakeholders at the state and local level to be successful, which can be challenging.
- Communities seem more willing to address short-term solutions to housing justice through financial assistance and housing improvements. Few, if any, were tackling more difficult aspects of housing justice related to discriminatory policies and practices.

FACILITATORS

- Millions of dollars have been provided to communities as part of the ARPA, and communities are using these dollars to develop new affordable housing options; promote housing stability for those at risk of eviction; and improve the health and safety of existing housing.
- Communities have tapped into a wide range of partner organizations to provide services and supports including short-term financial support for utilities or rent, and wrap-around and legal services for those experiencing or at risk for housing instability.
- Coalitions and task forces are using data from community needs assessments and local academic partners to inform the development of comprehensive strategic plans.

Conclusions and Implications

The examples in this report highlight the challenges Sentinel Communities face with respect to housing justice and strategies they have used to help address many of those challenges. The pandemic elevated housing justice as a critical issue as millions of people were, and continue to be, at risk for housing instability. At the same time, millions of dollars have been provided to communities to help support recovery, and communities have spent or earmarked a significant portion of those funds for housing. Going forward, it will be important to assess whether efforts related to housing justice begin to tackle deeper, more entrenched challenges related to discriminatory policies and practices that have resulted in inequities in housing and health.

References

- 1 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (no date.). Housing and Health: housing and neighborhood conditions are inextricably linked to health and well-being. *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*. Available at: <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/collections/housing-and-health.html>. Accessed June 1, 2022.
- 2 Krieger, J., & Higgins, D. L. (2002). Housing and health: time again for public health action. *American journal of public health*, 92(5), 758-768.
- 3 Bonnefoy, X. (2007). Inadequate housing and health: an overview. *International journal of environment and pollution*, 30(3-4), 411-429.
- 4 Swope, C. B., & Hernández, D. (2019). Housing as a determinant of health equity: A conceptual model. *Social Science & Medicine*, 243, 112571.
- 5 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (Not dated). Life Expectancy: Could where you live influence how long you live? *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*. Available at: <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/interactives/whereyouliveaffectshowlongyoulive.html>. Accessed June 1, 2022.
- 6 Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *science*, 277(5328), 918-924.
- 7 Hadden Loh, T., Coes, C., & Buthe, B. Separate and unequal: Persistent residential segregation is sustaining racial and economic injustice in the US Brookings.(2020). In.
- 8 Prevention Institute. (2017). Putting land use policy to work for health equity. *Prevention Institute*. Available at: <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/blog/putting-land-use-policy-work-health-equity>. Accessed May 25, 2022.
- 9 Maantay, J. (2002). Mapping environmental injustices: pitfalls and potential of geographic information systems in assessing environmental health and equity. *Environmental health perspectives*, 110(suppl 2), 161-171.
- 10 Quinn, M. (2021). Montanans pushed out of larger cities look to Butte for homes. *NBC Montana*. Available at: <https://nbcmontana.com/news/local/montanans-pushed-out-of-big-cities-look-to-butte-for-homes>. Accessed October 26, 2021.
- 11 U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Household Pulse Survey. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=EVR&mapAreaSelector=msa&barChartAreaSelector=msa&metro=26420>. Accessed May 18, 2021.
- 12 U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates (2015-2019), Louisville, KY. Available at: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?q=1600000US2148000>. Accessed September 30, 2021.
- 13 City of Phoenix. Neighborhood Services Department. Available at: <https://www.phoenix.gov/nsd>. Accessed October 25, 2021.
- 14 HRSA. (2021). Wisconsin American Rescue Plan Act Awards. Available at: <https://bphc.hrsa.gov/program-opportunities/american-rescue-plan/awards/wj>. Accessed May 28, 2021.
- 15 Zaner, L. (2020). Michaels Set to Move Forward With Major Rehabilitation of Chaparral Apartments. *PR Newswire*. Available at: <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/michaels-set-to-move-forward-with-major-rehabilitation-of-chaparral-apartments-301077658.html>. Accessed January 27, 2022.
- 16 Lloyd, D. (2020). New task force to address Houston-area housing crisis in wake of COVID-19. *Community Impact Newspaper*. Available at: <https://communityimpact.com/houston/cy-fair/housing-real-estate/2020/06/24/new-task-force-to-address-houston-area-housing-crisis-in-wake-of-covid-19/>. Accessed September 23, 2020.
- 17 Pierce County. (2021). 2021 Comprehensive Plan to End Homelessness. Available at: <https://www.piercecountywa.gov/7309/2021-Comprehensive-Plan-to-End-Homelessn>. Accessed July 9, 2021.
- 18 Mattson, N. (2019). As home prices rise, neighborhoods turn to community land trusts to preserve affordability. *Public Source*. Available at: <https://www.publicsource.org/community-land-trusts-new-to-pittsburgh-shaped-by-pittsburgh/>. Accessed October 27, 2021.
- 19 AP News Team. (2019). Hospitals commit \$2M to Baltimore antihomelessness effort. *AP News*. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/a6516c995c274cf6a76a4fc3a025aed9>. Accessed October 26, 2021.
- 20 Pentilla, A. (2019). Butte effort to ease homelessness through supportive housing gets more funding. *Montana Standard*. Available at: https://mtsstandard.com/news/local/butte-effort-to-ease-homelessness-through-supportive-housing-gets-more/article_022f7654-7cf6-55d7-8f85-aa55ca9a0b28.htm. Accessed October 27, 2021.
- 21 SCL Health. (2020). FUSE Program making permanent housing progress. Available at: <https://www.sclhealth.org/news/fuse-program-making-permanent-housing-progress>. Accessed July 18, 2022.
- 22 Quayle, M. (2021). Elm City Communities Awarded \$3.7 million to Reduce Lead-Based Paint Hazards through U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Grant. Available at: <https://elmcitycommunities.org/app/uploads/2021/05/ECC-RELEASE-HUD-Grant-Lead-1.pdf>. Accessed January 26, 2022.
- 23 Frorman, E. (2020, February 10). Danvers remakes its downtown, electronic. *The Salem News*. Retrieved from https://www.salemnews.com/news/local_news/danvers-remakes-its-downtown/article_5d6dfd4-5f65-5661-bbdc-7aa23a0075a4.html
- 24 Housing and Urban Development. (2021). American Rescue Plan Act HOME Supplemental Allocations. *HUD*. Available at: <https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/CPD/documents/HOME-ARP.pdf>. Accessed May 29, 2021.