

Overcrowded Housing and No Place to Go

T

he diversity challenge facing local government in the United States and other developed nations is greatly impacted by global immigration trends. A result of increasing immigration and diversity is overcrowded housing. Because new arrivals living in overcrowded conditions can rapidly transform neighborhood and community character as well as strain government services, the issue of overcrowded housing threatens to polarize communities. In fact, community concerns about overcrowded accommodations often represent more generalized and emotionally charged fears about diversity itself.

Part

Of the

Diversity

Challenge

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Certain Realities

High levels of occupancy occur when families double up, relatives and friends move in, or multiple renters sublet space to cut costs. It occurs among certain immigrant groups whose values promote extended families living together. Landlords and managers have at times tolerated these situations in order to derive more income, maintain full occupancy, or perhaps follow the path of least resistance.

Overcrowding exists because there is insufficient low-cost housing available to certain segments of our society. In addition, much of the older affordable housing that exists is being replaced by upscale development that is more "desirable" to the majority of the community. Because nearby, and often better established, residents complain that overcrowded housing is "ruining" their neigh-

borhood or community, local governments often take unproductive approaches similar to the ones described below to solve the perceived problem.

- One city government recently conducted early morning raids with its own building inspectors and police officers, as well as federal Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents to catch immigrants living in overcrowded apartments. While some undocumented immigrants were arrested, the apartment complex remains overcrowded and the incident has had an emotional impact on the community.
- Another city government worked to condemn several overcrowded and blighted apartment complexes. Some of the low-income housing has been demolished, while other units are vacant and boarded up. The displaced tenants have created new overcrowding elsewhere.
- Several councils in urban and suburban communities in southern California have passed ordinances restricting the number of occupants according to the unit's square footage or number of bedrooms. Tenants feel discriminated against, litigation has been costly, and most ordinances have been struck down as unconstitutional.

Before elaborate efforts are developed by communities to deal with overcrowded housing, it makes sense to recognize certain realities:

- Residents in overcrowded housing are often large or extended families, multiple individuals, or combinations;
- Many residents in overcrowded housing are conservative, law-abiding, work ethic-oriented, recently arrived immigrants;
- The residents often are low-income ethnic minorities, and many speak little or no English;

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- This population of workers is essential to the vitality of urban economies; they are willing to take low-paying jobs in a variety of service sectors.
- Higher levels of overcrowding strain existing neighborhood infrastructure and municipal services;
- Immigration patterns are often beyond the power of local governments to control; immigration will continue regardless of hostile rhetoric and onerous ordinances aimed at curbing it; and
- The courts have struck down city ordinances aimed at limiting the number of people who can live under one roof.

Divergent Perceptions

It is also important to understand that there are divergent perceptions of the high-occupancy issue. While tenants would obviously appreciate better housing, they often can only afford to live in high-occupancy or overcrowded units. From their per-

spective, high occupancy is simply a rational strategy to meet the most basic of needs. They recognize that living in crowded conditions is hard on their children but better than living on the streets.

Neighbors may perceive the ethnically different residents of overcrowded housing as a threat to the quality of local education, or a safety threat to their children. In addition, they often believe that their property values will go down due to the "ghettoization" of their area. Elected officials often receive complaints from constituents that shape their perception of the problem. Council members may perceive the issue in terms of the deterioration of a neighborhood, a drain on local government services, and the changing socioeconomic and ethnic makeup of their community.

Building owners and managers may acknowledge the deterioration of their units as a problem, but they respond to the marketplace in allowing high occupancy. They may feel ineffective at solving problems on their own, but may be interested in collaborative efforts with the city, police, and residents to upgrade their properties. Law enforcement agencies may be pressured to solve this social problem with their police powers. They may perceive the high-occupancy housing as a haven for criminals. In fact, residents of high-occupancy housing may live in substantial fear of local law enforcement and may therefore be at the mercy of criminals.

Church, nonprofit, and social service organizations often assist low-income residents in dealing with the problems associated with overcrowding. Local government staff may feel conflicting pressures to upgrade neighborhoods without displacing low-income workers and families; limit the drain on city services without alienating struggling ethnic families in high-occupancy housing; ease the pressure on the infrastructure

while not eliminating scarce, low-cost housing; cut occupancy levels without increasing homelessness; and confront this issue without facing costly legal challenges from advocates for the poor.

Guidelines for Dealing with High-Occupancy Housing

Public officials may wish to consider the following general guidelines in addressing issues related to high occupancy:

- Building officials should avoid being overly restrictive on numbers of people per square foot of living space. Minimal standards are included in the Uniform Building Code. Going beyond these minimal standards may not stand up legally.
- Local government agencies should not wait for this population to go away. People are being drawn to our communities by global trends and pressures that are not within our control.
- Passing restrictive laws and bringing in police will result in less cooperation by law-abiding, hard-working immigrants, who may be offended by the enforcement tactics and stereotyping. In addition, heavy-handed code enforcement techniques may create divisive and lasting fissures in the community while draining limited resources.
- Local government representatives need to work with landlords and tenants to identify and solve problems.
- The best general approach is to empower residents so that they will take care of their own problems. Local government can encourage resident organizations, negotiate with leaders, provide assistance, and show respect for all members of the community.

High-occupancy housing poses a variety of complex and perplexing

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problems for communities and their leaders. While there are no easy answers, case studies suggest several practical strategies for addressing these problems.

Strategies

Property owners have the responsibility to maintain facilities, provide management, monitor occupancy rates, and communicate with tenants or tenant organizations. Citizens have the responsibility to keep units clean, report maintenance problems, and call police when suspicious behavior is observed. Local governments also have a role to play. Effective strategies for cities and counties may include the following:

Outreach. Send out bilingual teams of staff and volunteers to go door to door listening to concerns expressed by new arrivals as well as established residents. Build rapport first; show that local government cares. Base further efforts on information from all the groups involved.

Meetings with stakeholders. Schedule the mayor, manager, police chief, and community development director to discuss the problems of overcrowding with apartment residents, owners, and managers. Insist that owners live up to their legal responsibilities to provide safe and decent housing. Encourage new arrivals to recognize and be sensitive to community standards through outreach visits and classes on community survival skills.

Positive imagery. Use positive imagery (e.g., high-occupancy housing, neighborhood preservation, new arrivals) to help all participants focus on productive approaches.

Technical assistance. Offer such assistance as removing inoperable vehicles, providing graffiti abatement programs, arranging added trash collection days, and providing model rental agreements.

Alliances. Forge alliances with ministerial associations, social service agencies, advocacy groups, apartment associations, and business organizations to focus attention on progressive solutions.

On-site management. Require (through ordinance, financial agreements between public agencies and owners, or as a condition for settlement of code violations) that apartment complexes over a certain number of units have on-site managers. Similarly leverage or encourage owners of smaller complexes to share managers. Managers should be bilingual if the situation warrants.

Training. Train code enforcement inspectors to be "problem solvers," not just regulators.

- Ensure that code enforcement staff identify health and safety violations and work with owners, managers, and residents to suggest ways of dealing with the problems;

- Empower building code personnel to grant permits on site for routine repairs that require city permits; and
- Educate code enforcement staff about available resources so that they can link apartment owners, managers, and residents with appropriate services.

Rehabilitation. When setting the code for rehabilitation, recognize building codes that were in existence at the time of construction so that the costs of rehabilitating complexes are not prohibitive.

Occupancy control and maintenance provisions in any financial agreement. If the city uses CDBG funds, redevelopment funds, or other monies to help finance rehabilitation of units or other improvements, ensure that the agreement with the owner includes occupancy control provisions; incorporates requirements for preventive maintenance and for a reserve account for long-term or capital maintenance; and requires training of on-site or "shared" managers.

Community survival skills. Enhance community survival skills of new arrivals.

- Arrange "survival skills" training (for example, how to use the bus system, cash a check, and pay bills) and English As a Second Language classes through adult education, churches and synagogues, or non-profit community agencies;
- Emphasize community standards through outreach and education to help orient new immigrants to urban life;
- Work with property owners/managers and other resources to hold housekeeping training sessions to deal with topics including food storage, pest control, and the use of vacuum cleaners, range hoods, garbage disposals, heaters, and air

conditioners; and

- Develop a job center to remove day workers from local streets and thereby minimize the community impact of day laborers.

Public safety programs. Form neighborhood watch, block parents, and other self-help safety programs.


- Involve new arrivals as well as established residents; and
- Use bilingual police officers with community relations skills to help new immigrants perceive police as resources and allies.

Neighborhood preservation. Involve well-established residents and new arrivals in solving neighborhood problems.

- Assign neighborhood liaison and support functions to a specific department in local government and provide resources to assist troubled neighborhoods;
- Help create or support grassroots neighborhood organizations to improve conditions;
- Make immediate improvements (such as added street sweeping) and then build on that momentum;
- Minimize problems associated with high-occupancy housing (for example, coordinate resources to transform a vacant lot into an ad hoc neighborhood playground);
- Focus on self-help projects like neighborhood cleanup;
- Develop outreach programs for at-risk youth using school, church, scouting groups, boys' and girls' clubs, and other groups;
- Facilitate opportunities for positive interaction between new arrivals and well-established residents (for example, living room "dialogues" held in neighborhood centers, churches, or people's homes); and
- Utilize other resources such as county human relations commissions, religious leaders, apartment

associations, and nonprofit community organizations.

No Simplistic Solutions

The issue of overcrowding must be viewed as part of the larger diversity challenge facing local governments. Using ordinances to "outlaw" overcrowding, demolishing dilapidated high-occupancy units, or assigning limited police resources to immigration control activities will not work. In fact, they may create more conflict in our pluralistic communities. Local government must involve all affected parties in long-term efforts to effectively address the complex issues related to overcrowding. 

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