

Ohio's hidden housing crisis

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Columbus, Ohio is known for being “the most average city,” located in the center of the state considered a political bellwether in the nation. Ohio is a hub of auto and steel production, chemicals and plastics, and other key industries. Numerous business organizations recognize the state as being one of the “best places to do business.”

Over the past three decades, however, the living standards of Ohio workers have been subjected to a sustained assault even as the region has registered economic growth. With the onset of the current economic crisis, the assault on the wages and conditions of workers has been intensified and public services decimated. Municipal revenues have plummeted and state outlays for social provisions have been slashed.

As a result, Ohio's many sizeable metropolitan areas—including Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, Toledo and others—have registered skyrocketing rates of impoverishment, joblessness, and home foreclosures. The Brookings Institution ranks three Ohio cities—Toledo, Dayton and Youngstown—among the 10 worst in the nation in terms of the growth of concentrated poverty over the past five years.

In Columbus, one in five residents was below the poverty line in 2010, according to the most recent Census data. Among other hardships confronting poor families, rent is often an excessive burden. The city has a higher than average renter population, with rented homes or apartments accounting for half of all occupied housing units (compared to one in three nationally). The scale and pricing of the rental market is heavily influenced by Ohio State University, one of the largest universities in the country, which is located in Columbus.

Not surprisingly, homelessness is on the rise. Columbus shelters saw 3,331 clients in need of shelter between July and September of 2011, most of them

newly homeless families. It is estimated that over the course of a year as many as 7,800 residents of the city go through a period of homelessness. Some 1,700 Columbus children were homeless last year, according to the Columbus Community Shelter Board, though advocates have stressed that the number is likely a vast undercount.

“The sharp rise in demand for emergency shelter has shifted from a temporary surge to prolonged distress,” the board states in a recent report. “Although no family is ever turned away from shelter, the family shelters have run out of room. Two years ago there were 56 times that families needed shelter when there were no beds in our regular shelter capacity. Last year there were 3,312 times this happened. The result was a rise in overflow shelter use and costs of more than 5,000 percent.”

The average monthly income for families entering shelters is only \$480, while the average market rent in the city is \$780 per month for a two-bedroom apartment.

Mary Loritz, program coordinator for the Columbus Coalition for the Homeless, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the need for housing in the central Ohio city, as shelter providers face budget cuts.

“We had to cut back on staff over the summer,” Loritz said, explaining that the agency had been relying on unpaid workers through the federal AmeriCorps Vista program. “But AmeriCorps funding cuts, combined with record numbers of [organization] applicants, led to our loss of the workers.”

Loritz explained that one of the drivers of the housing crisis locally is the shift in focus on the part of the federal Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD) from improving access to housing for the poor to “deconcentrating” poverty. “HUD has also been dealing with funding cuts, and they are trying to get out of the housing business,” she said. “They have a lot of

buildings that have fallen into disrepair. But now it's about 'urban development'—making them part of the machine to displace poor people."

Beginning in the 1990s, the government has worked to vacate and demolish public housing projects across the country. Throughout Columbus, six housing projects are slated for demolition, half the city's stock. Among the targeted buildings is the 10-story Poindexter Tower, one of the nation's first public housing complexes.

"Some projects were redeveloped as 'mixed income' housing," Loritz said, "open to applicants within 30 to 80 percent of the median income. But that means if you're homeless and you don't have a job, you are ineligible.

"Then they give Section 8 vouchers to former tenants of public housing. This effectively subsidizes landlords. HUD helps promote the line that public housing contributes to the 'concentration of poverty,' that we need to deconcentrate poor people. It is disturbing, and it is a way to skirt the real issue, which is poverty. It's basically saying, 'Pull yourself up by your bootstraps!'

"But the reality is that Section 8 vouchers are accepted only in poor neighborhoods anyway," she added.

Fewer vouchers are issued than the number of housing units that are demolished. The Columbus housing authority has closed the Section 8 waiting list for years. Presently, applicants must wait two to five years to receive help with rent. Those who do receive the vouchers are often compelled to rent in areas outside of the city, where the lack of bus lines or other access to city services increases the cost of living, further destabilizing vulnerable households. As a result, former residents of public housing face the real possibility of becoming homeless.

"At the federal level, there's not nearly enough funding for homeless programs," Loritz said. "The stimulus funds of 2009, which ran out, helped prevent many people from becoming homeless—but now it's going to get worse. Shelters are preparing for the end of state, federal and other funding streams.

"There aren't enough shelter beds. The focus in Columbus is more on permanent housing for the disabled, veterans. It is similar to public housing, but more expensive because of the cost of additional support, like staff for counseling, treatment, educational

services.

"The problem is that homelessness is rising and it's so expensive to build the supportive housing at the expense of the shelter beds."

As a result, Columbus shelters have begun turning away people seeking help. "The shelters have a policy of accepting everyone only if it's colder than 25 degrees," Loritz explained. "They will often turn people away. There is no guarantee of shelter in the city."

At the same time, the city has been demolishing homeless camps on the city's outskirts, where hundreds of people have lived in tents and flimsy lean-tos. Backers of the board overseeing Columbus shelter provisions include banking and business representatives who would like to push the homeless population out of downtown.

"They sleep in camps, on the sidewalk, or in a car, in an abandoned building or house," Mary said. "New policies stipulate that a person can stay in a shelter for only 30 days at a time, unless their case manager finds that they have made adequate progress toward finding a job.

"We've seen shelters turn people away not only when the shelters are full, in an attempt to divert people back to relatives or friends. Typically, shelters are the last resort, so it may push people into abusive situations."

Loritz continued: "The diversion rate for families has been 30 percent. The family shelter has been consistently at double or triple capacity in the past year. They've been trying to find ways to divert people. There are all these requirements—Social Security cards, birth certificates, 'proof of homelessness,' such as a letter from the previous house saying they can't stay there anymore, or eviction notices—but a lot of people can't get that kind of documentation.

"At the single adult center a lot of people are kicked out for minor infractions, like if they don't show up before curfew. Then you have to go into intake again, to try to get back in to get a bed."



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