# Report shows low-cost private housing in Washington, DC virtually eliminated

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A new report released by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI) shows a massive decline of affordable living units in the nation's capital since 2002. Since the early part of the last decade, homes in the District renting for $800 or less monthly have dwindled from a stock of roughly 60,000 units in 2002 (representing 40 percent of the total housing in the city) to 33,000 as of 2013, or less than 20 percent.

The report calculates that this amount of available low-cost housing corresponds to the total number of subsidized living units currently existing in the city, which government records show to be around 36,000. "These findings suggest that there is very little low-cost housing in the private market and that subsidized housing is now virtually the only source of inexpensive apartments" in Washington, DC, the author states.

"The loss of affordable housing threatens the physical and mental health of families, makes it harder for adults to find and keep a job," it continues, adding that such a situation "creates instability for children that makes it hard to focus at school, and leaves thousands at risk of homelessness at any given moment."

Since 2002, the average monthly rent for the most affordable homes in the District have gone from an average of $350 to $400, while the income of the city's lowest quintile of the population has remained stagnant at less than $6,100 a year—meaning that without subsidies, the typical family of four in the bottom fifth tier of households spends 80 percent of their yearly earnings on housing in the District of Columbia.

The report's author notes that the stagnating pay for the majority of the city's working class is largely the product of "flat or falling wages for low-wage workers in the wake of the recession," stating that "residents without a college degree have been hit particularly hard, with these residents facing growing unemployment since 2008."

In 2013, 64 percent of families making less than $32,220 a year—or 30 percent of the area median income—were found to be "severely rent burdened," or paying more than half of their total earnings on housing. This has risen since 2002, when roughly 50 percent of such households were considered to be severely rent burdened, the report adds.

Such statistics expose the cynical character of the city's Democratic Party and trade union establishment's promotion of 2013's "livable wage" legislation. The bill, which was supported by an assortment of Democratic Party officials and hangers-on, raised the hourly rates of the city's lowest paid workers from $8.25 to $11.50—or less than $25,000 a year. Further, the Housing Production Trust Fund, the city's main local affordable housing program, has been left unfunded, despite legislation passed last year pledging $100 million annually to the program. This has been left unaddressed by the city's new Democratic mayor, Muriel Bowser.

As with the lowest tier of earners, middle-income families—those making roughly $46,000 yearly—saw an average increase in monthly rents of $250 to $1,000 per month. At the same time, homes going for this amount have disappeared as well, going from a stock of 28,000 units in 2002 to only 20,000 today. The report found that in terms of rent-to-wage increases, families in the middle income groups saw the greatest loss of spending power relative to income, as rent outstripped take-home pay by over $1,000 a year.

As available housing stocks and wage growth have collapsed for working class people, there has been a tremendous growth in both income and housing available to the wealthy and better-off. The amount of homes renting for $1,400 and over has "skyrocketed," going from a stock of 28,000 in 2002 to over 73,000—or more than 50 percent of the total housing in the city today. Similarly, while rent for those in the top fifth of the population rose by $7,900 a year, incomes grew much more sharply; increasing by roughly $14,000 for the top fifth of the population.

The Washington DC Metropolitan region is one of the most socially unequal areas in the United States. A 2012 report by the DCFPI shows that the top 20 percent of the population receives an income 29 times that of the bottom 20 percent. The top five percent, in turn, takes home an income of over $500,000 a year.

The loss of affordable housing is reflected in the city's growing homelessness crisis. After 723 families sought help in the city's shelter system during the winter of 2013-2014—representing a 13 percent increase from the previous year—the homeless population swelled this year to 897 families, outstripping the city's available resources. The majority of those seeking shelter were single mothers and children.

The difficulty for the vast majority of the population to find affordable shelter has caused a growth in poverty in the surrounding region. A report put out jointly in 2014 by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute, the Virginia-based Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis and the Maryland Center for Economic Policy found that over a third of the population in the over two dozen counties comprising the DC Metro region were determined to be "cost burdened," or paying more than 50 percent of income for rent.

The most recent DCFPI report emerges several months after an independent study conducted by the housing management firm Quadel Consulting urged the city to end its main sustainable housing program. The New Communities Initiative, which maintains affordable homes in neighborhoods affected by gentrification, was stated to be "not feasible at this time in every neighborhood."

*The author also recommends*:

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