

Martha's Vineyard: "Playground of the rich" wracked by poverty and social crisis

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Martha's Vineyard, off the coast of southern Massachusetts, is a resort island known for its natural beauty and is a popular destination for affluent vacationers. For its year-round population, the combined pressures of a severe shortage of affordable housing, the pandemic and inflation have produced untenable conditions that are driving some people off the island and making life increasingly onerous for many of those who remain.

Splendid vacation homes of the wealthy sit empty for months at a time while local residents scramble for housing. At the high end we find this listing on sotherbysreality.com:

"Waterfront Old Herring Creek Estate: Private waterfront estate comprised of two parcels in the prestigious North Shore neighborhood. This beautiful compound is spread over 9.5 acres of pristine land and includes over *600 feet of private Vineyard Sound beach*. Listed as a single family home with 7 bedrooms and 5+ bathrooms *at a cost of \$26,500,000.*"

A much more modest single-family home with 1 bed and 1 bath was listed on a different realty site at \$925,000—still way beyond what workers can afford. Many of those working and living on the island are forced to rent at steep prices for small apartments or rooms.

Landlords offer short-term leases to Vineyarders during the off-season, then turn them out and rent at much higher prices during the lucrative tourist season. It is not uncommon for those who do own homes to set up tents and trailers to house relatives on their properties. Other solutions include couch-surfing, sleeping in cars, or house-sitting for the wealthy during the off-season.

With the pandemic, the year-round population has increased dramatically as affluent layers have fled areas like New York City and migrated to the Vineyard to live year-round, further bidding up real estate prices. Non-resident investors, motivated solely by profit, have also

been buying properties, exacerbating an already dire situation.

Local organizations have made sincere but inadequate efforts to address the housing crisis. The Island Housing Trust is a non-profit that seeks to create and maintain affordable housing, relying heavily on grants and the beneficence of wealthy donors. Its website reports that over the past 15 years it has sold and rented 126 homes to local low- and moderate-income families. The IHT aspires to "solve nearly half of [the island's] housing needs within the next five years," presumably leaving the other half unsolved for more than five years. Meanwhile, demand vastly exceeds supply; the lucky recipients of affordable housing are chosen by lottery.

A local Housing Bank movement has undertaken to impose a 2 percent fee on most real estate transactions and use the money for affordable housing, but the first \$1,000,000 of the purchase price is exempt from this fee. In the spring of 2022, the Housing Bank proposal was approved in a local referendum by an overwhelming margin, but this draft legislation next must be enacted by the Massachusetts state legislature. In the meantime, the median home price in the Vineyard has surpassed \$1.2 million. The "affordability gap"—the difference between this median price and what the typical resident can afford—exceeds \$780,000.

The conditions inherent in a tourist economy have long been exacting a toll on the Vineyard's workers. The busy season is a period of intense pressure and overwork, alternating with off-season stretches of underemployment or unemployment. Substance abuse and mental health disorders are especially prevalent. With the current wave of inflation, combined with the further runup in housing costs, social conditions have deteriorated even further, and food insecurity has become more acute than ever.

The number of clients at the Island Food Pantry has almost doubled in the past two years, according to its

Executive Director, Rebecca Haag. Not only are there new clients; many existing clients are coming in more often than they used to. As she explains, the food budgets of low-income individuals and families are overmatched by surging inflation and housing costs. In addition to an elderly population living on meager fixed incomes and families that use the food pantry episodically, there are “new arrivals” in the form of seasonal workers who are essential to the island’s tourism-based economy. Some of these workers live in cars or on campgrounds.

Even in the face of such harsh conditions for workers, with the growth in year-round population and the influx of vacationers, the local economy demands still more labor. Help-wanted signs abound. There are businesses that have been forced to reduce their hours for want of staffing. Some services like auto repair and veterinarians are refusing new customers. According to 2020 US census data, incomes on Martha’s Vineyard are higher than in Massachusetts generally; and in Massachusetts incomes are higher than the national average for the US. But this differential in wages is more than offset by the island’s higher local cost of living.

This reporter recently went to a local food pantry to talk with its clients and staff (names have been changed to protect their identities). Their stories provide a snapshot of life on the Vineyard for those who don’t fall into the super-rich category.

- Tom, a volunteer at the food pantry, said, “it doesn’t take much to put somebody out in the street these days. And this economy is making it worse.”

- Adelia, a native of Brazil, has lived on the Vineyard for five years. She cleans houses and lives with her husband in a rented room costing \$1,200 per month.

- Paul was at the food bank to drop off a food donation. A former client of the pantry himself, he is eight years into addiction recovery and lives in a room costing \$1,000 per month. Paul predicts that inflation will make conditions worse.

- Louise is an 88-year-old Social Security recipient whose income is not enough to cover her food expenses.

Martha’s Vineyard has historically voted heavily Democratic, and the island has long been a popular destination for the elite of the Democratic Party. Chappaquidick Island, part of the town of Edgartown, was the site of the eponymous scandal in 1969, when Senator Ted Kennedy illegally left the scene of an accident in which his 28-year-old passenger Mary Jo Kopechne was drowned.

The island was also favored by the Clintons during the

Bill Clinton administration. In 2017, John Kerry bought a historic waterfront property in Chilmark for \$11.75 million.

Barack and Michelle Obama are particularly fond of the island, visiting in all but one of the eight years of the Obama administration. In 2019 they bought an estate, also costing \$11.75 million, located on nearly 30 acres in the coastal perimeter of Edgartown. The 6,892-square-foot house has seven bedrooms, eight and a half baths, a detached barn and a pool.

In 2021, Obama had planned a lavish 60th birthday party for himself and some 475 of his closest friends—celebrities in the worlds of politics, entertainment and sports—but this was scaled back to a more modest affair in light of concerns over COVID. Even so, the soirée strained the island’s resources. Private jets leaving afterwards consumed a disproportionate amount of the small local airport’s fuel supply; garbage collection for the local population was disrupted due to the amount of garbage generated by Obama’s party. The class differences between this layer and those who do its landscaping and house cleaning speak for themselves.

Inhabitants of Martha’s Vineyard genuinely like the place where they live. There is a culture of solidarity and friendliness; motorists are unusually considerate of other drivers and pedestrians. Local government and organizations have successfully defended the island from penetration by large corporations like McDonald’s, Target, Home Depot, Walmart, etc., and have made great efforts to protect its environment.

But the current social conditions and their underlying causes will not be solved by palliatives such as food pantries and marginal reforms like real estate transaction fees. The crisis can only be resolved, here and elsewhere, by a radical redistribution of wealth and the abolition of the capitalist profit system, returning places of natural beauty such as Martha’s Vineyard to workers and their families to reside and enjoy.



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