

Lack of Affordable Housing

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Lack of affordable housing is one of the underlying social issues in urban and contemporary America. Since 2000, rent expenses have been on the rise leading to an increase in the number of families and people in need of affordable places to live (Capps, 2015). Paul (2013) notes that significant social issues include poverty, homelessness, educational disparity, and healthcare. However, with growing concerns over the extent of the social problem, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Planning defines house affordability by a cost not more than 30% of a family's income, and at 50% the family is heavily burdened (HUD USER, 2019). U.S. HUD notes that the housing expenses should remain below 30% of the income, to ensure that the households have enough resources to pay for other nondiscretionary costs such as childcare and meals (HUD USER, 2019). However, recent analyses point out that only 28 of them every low-income families could afford their home (NLIHC, 2018). The metrics and background information highlights a current social issue that affects low-income families. Lack of affordable housing is a fundamental social issue as it snowballs into other social issues such as poverty, homelessness, education disparity, and healthcare.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) (2018) underlines that the U.S. has a national shortage of more than 7.2 million affordable and available rental homes for families in most needs. This is a significant rise from the shortage of 5.8 million reported in 2000, and an indicator of a ballooning crisis that affects the less fortunate in society. The NLIHC (2018) report also indicates that more than 71% of low-income families are severely cost-burdened and are only one financial setback away from eviction and homelessness. These findings converge with those established by a study on ten metropolitan cities conducted by Brookings's Freeman, & Schuetz (2019) on poor and lower-middle-class households. The study

shows that low-income families spend up to 60% of their income on housing, and the lower middle class spends up to 40% on housing as of 2019 (Freeman, & Schuetz, 2019). This was an increase in the number of households struggling with affordability by 25% from the last decade (Paul, 2018). Lack of affordable housing is a growing problem that requires immediate policy attention. The social problem affects low-income households severely as well as lower-middle-class households.

Lack of affordable housing has huge impacts on the foundations of most households. One of the subsequent problems is the eviction crisis that has been looming in America. Badger, & Bui, (2019), on the eviction crisis, notes that low-income women of color, victims of domestic violence, and families with children face the highest risk of eviction. The NPR reported that in 2016 alone, 2.3 million legal evictions were filed with issues of rent payments being more prominent (Badger, & Bui, 2019). The effects of the evictions, for low-income families and lower-middle-class households. Further, legal evictions are often accompanied by a court order which limits households from getting better housing. While some receive assistance and find new houses, most households are uprooted and destabilized, leading to homelessness as they lose their possessions.

One of the effects of the lack of affordable housing is homelessness. U.S. HUD, defines homelessness as “an individual who lacks housing without regard to whether the individual is a member of a family, including an individual whose primary residence during the night is a supervised public or private facility (e.g., shelters) that provides temporary living accommodations, and an individual who is a resident in transitional housing.” (HUD, 2019) Lack of affordable housing is one of the significant contributors to homelessness in contemporary America. While the rate of homeless for households decreased by 5.2% in 2018, the rate of

homelessness is still high, with the lack of affordable housing being one of the underlying instigators (Paul, 2018).

Lack of affordable housing is a social problem whose effects are extensive and can be long-term. As social workers, our mandate is to help individuals, households, and groups of people cope with problems facing them and improve their lives. As aforementioned, the lack of affordable housing paves the way for a plethora of social issues that affect individuals, households, and groups of people (Paul, 2018). According to the National Housing Trust Fund, affordable housing provides vulnerable families with the stability they need to thrive, to improve their health, education, and economic outcomes (Vega, & Wallace, 2016). While housing instability increases the likelihood of job loss, eviction, and homelessness, negatively affecting a family's physical and mental well-being throughout their lives (Herbert, Hermann, & McCue, 2018). By advancing discussions on the social problem, social workers can address an underlying social issue.

Lack of affordable housing is not a new social issue in America. However, upcoming trends are known as gentrification, and the rising prices of houses are increasing the occurrence of the social issue. NLIHC (2018) contextualizes the issue of affordable housing as one that involves finance, politics, economics, and social services. The first policy formulation resulting from a convergence of ideas was in 1934. The Federal Housing Administration aimed at assisting recovering from the great depression get affordable homes and also improve the conditions of homes (Marcuse, 2015). However, the challenge of affordability of the houses once again rose in the 1960s, and U.S. HUD established subsidies to public housing agencies (PHAs) that would help make up the difference between revenue from rents and the cost of adequately

maintaining the housing (Herbert, Hermann, & McCue, 2018). During this duration, HUD also established the 30% mark of affordability that exists to date.

Again to address a high rate of homelessness and lack of affordable houses in the 1980s, the McKinney-Vento Act was instituted, creating new housing and social service programs within HUD specially designed to address homelessness (Marcuse, 2015). However, one of the underlying challenges, lack of affordable housing was not sufficiently addressed. Today, one of the subsequent programs is the National Housing Trust Fund (NHTF), which was developed to build, preserve, rehabilitate, and operate housing affordable to extremely low-income people (Howell, 2016). However, the program has been crippled by a lack of sufficient funding to help it perform its activities.

At the state and local levels, the devolution of local governments meant that local jurisdictions have a greater responsibility for planning and carrying out housing programs. One of the programs includes the creation of emergency and ongoing rental assistance programs that help low-income residents in the communities (Howell, 2016). However, funding from the federal government has been critical in facilitating these programs and making them accessible. Besides, most state and local institutions have taken an effort to address issues affecting affordable housing, such as gentrification. For instance, in New York, the city's leadership has centered on creating a system of subsidized developments that allow gentrification to occur, but the rates after redevelopment to remain affordable (Jan, 2019). Most cities are facing a housing shortage, and in New York, the deficit is more severe. The mayor's plan to subsidies housing and them makes them affordable to most people can be a means of improving neighborhoods, creating more and better housing units, and bringing change to the narrative of most

communities, such as ramping up security. However, the question is on the affordability of the houses to low-income families who lived in the older houses.

The approaches used throughout history to address the issue of affordable houses have always revolved around offering houses to low-income families at subsidized costs. However, contextual issues in the 1960s helped shape policy to accommodate housing programs in black and Latino neighborhoods and prevent discrimination of races on both private and public housing (Howell, 2016). Consequently, the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 introduced programs that foresaw the development of block programs in low-income neighborhoods and geared to accommodate low-income and lower-middle-class groups (Howell, 2016). Secondly, the rise of homelessness in the 1980s as a result of mental health deinstitutionalization and poor economic times led to the establishment of temporary shelters which to date, support the homeless and offer temporary housing solutions to low-income households.

In analyzing the topic, one of the factors that stands out is the correlation between private and public entities. There is a true partnership between the public and private sectors in delivering affordable houses to low-income households (Metcalf, 2018). However, public funding for new affordable housing is low but in high demand. Hence to leverage the gap of affordable houses, private financing has been used to provide funds for more affordable houses. Existing partnerships between public and private entities have included mixed-income buildings where a certain number of units are for people making no more than 30-60% of the area's median income (Metcalf, 2018). The federal government then recoups developers through tax credits, grants, and vouchers. Other programs include housing vouchers, where families only pay 30%.

However, the private v. public collusion has been on the acquisition of private facilities in affordable areas and redevelopment into higher rent houses. Private entities are taking up gentrification as a means of acquiring houses in low-income areas and remodeling for middle-class households (Capps, 2019). While the public emphasizes affordability, few measures have been taken to safeguard the low-income neighborhoods from the rising costs. One of the measures is rent control, which allows states to decide the rates (Jan, 2019). Rent controls check the private sector by limiting the frequency and amount by which rent changes.

Current policies fail to fully account for the impacts of not having enough affordable houses. Measures such as rent controls are only applicable in select cities and can be subject to manipulation. They are insufficient and prove that the problem of affordable housing will continue to persist. By addressing the issue through these frameworks and a growing dissonance between public and private entities, social work practice has to shift to provide systematic assistance to low-income households through systems such as shelters, casework, and advocacy for the plight of the low-income households. Other programs that could prove influential include identifying families to benefit from housing vouchers and partnering with private entities to improve the house conditions for most low-income families. Affordable housing is a social issue that underlies many other issues. Sufficiently addressing the issue in low-income communities can help minimize other social issues such as homelessness and poverty.

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