

# The Housing Crisis in the Appalachian Region

Arjun Abhilash

Ardrey Hill High School, USA

## ABSTRACT

The housing crisis in the Appalachian region has emerged as a significant issue, driven by historical disinvestment, economic shifts, and systemic inefficiencies. This research paper explores the origins of the crisis, tracing its escalation due to economic transitions and inadequate housing policies. The crisis has led to severe consequences, including increased homelessness, economic decline, and adverse health impacts. The paper examines the impacts on residents, detailing how housing instability affects economic stability, health, and community well-being. Various proposed solutions are evaluated, including maintaining the status quo, increasing funding for housing programs, establishing community land trusts, and implementing zoning reform. Each solution presents distinct advantages and challenges, highlighting the complexity of addressing the housing crisis. The research underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to mitigate the crisis's effects and improve housing access and affordability. By analyzing these factors, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the housing crisis in the Appalachian region and its broad implications.

## Introduction

The housing crisis in the Appalachian region has become a significant and multifaceted issue, deeply affecting many communities. Unlike simpler problems, this crisis resists quick fixes, largely due to a history of disinvestment and economic shifts over decades. High demand for affordable housing, paired with a limited supply, has led to severe consequences, especially for low-income families (Mather). The gravity of this crisis lies in its widespread impacts, including increased homelessness, economic decline, and adverse health outcomes. Efforts to mitigate the crisis have included attempts to boost funding for housing programs and calls for zoning reform (Mather). The key policy actors involved in addressing the crisis are local governments, federal agencies, community organizations, and residents. Prioritizing effective and equitable solutions is crucial for making meaningful progress. By focusing on increasing affordable housing, ensuring long-term affordability, and reforming zoning laws, the region can work towards alleviating the crisis and improving the lives of its residents. This research paper aims to delve into the causes and impacts of the housing crisis in the Appalachian region, evaluate potential solutions, and recommend strategies to address this pressing issue.

## Discussion

Why is there a housing crisis in the Appalachian region?

### *Growing Population in Urban Areas*

The Appalachian region has seen a significant increase in migration from rural to urban areas, leading to higher demand for housing in specific parts of the region. There has been "Increased migration from rural to urban areas, leading to higher demand for housing in certain parts of the Appalachian region" (Mather). This shift has put a strain on the

housing market, resulting in rental prices doubling over the past five years (Streetman). The growing population in these urban centers has intensified the need for affordable housing options.

### *Economic Shifts*

The decline in traditional industries, such as coal mining, has reduced job opportunities in the Appalachian region. Despite this, the demand for affordable housing remains high (Mather). Major government reports have highlighted the unfulfilled housing needs and the complex obstacles—social, economic, political, and institutional—standing in the way of meeting these needs (Deaton and Hanrahan). Economic opportunities and the need for more affordable living options continue to drive rising demand for housing in urban Appalachia (Streetman). This dynamic has created a situation where the local economy struggles to support the housing needs of its residents, further deepening the crisis. The lack of high-paying, stable jobs means that many residents cannot afford market-rate housing, which exacerbates the existing demand-supply imbalance.

### *Historical Disinvestment*

"Years of neglect and lack of investment in infrastructure have limited new housing development" (Mather). Despite the pressing nature of substandard housing illuminated in previous reports, few researchers have addressed the problem with serious analysis (Deaton and Hanrahan). Chronic underinvestment in housing and infrastructure has led to a persistent shortage of affordable housing options in many urban areas within Appalachia (Streetman). This neglect has compounded the difficulties faced by low-income residents, making it harder for them to find and maintain safe and affordable housing. Infrastructure deficiencies, such as poor road conditions and lack of public transportation, further exacerbate the challenges residents face in accessing affordable housing and employment opportunities.

## Factors Contributing to the Crisis

### *Economic Factors*

"The Region's median household income of \$45,585 is 19 percent less than the national figure of \$56,135" (Social Determinants Median Household Income Poverty Disability Education Social Associations Further Reading). High poverty rates, poor housing conditions, and limited economic opportunities have persisted for generations, further exacerbating the issue ("Housing in Central Appalachia"). Two earlier major government reports highlighted the pervasive social, economic, political, and institutional obstacles to meeting housing needs (Deaton and Hanrahan). Over the last five years, rental prices have skyrocketed, doubling and putting a severe strain on lower-income families (Streetman). This dramatic increase in housing costs without a corresponding rise in incomes has pushed many families into precarious housing situations or homelessness. The growing gap between income and housing costs means that even those with steady employment often struggle to secure and maintain stable housing.

### *Regulatory Barriers*

Zoning laws and building codes also play a crucial role in hindering new construction and the rehabilitation of existing homes in the Appalachian region. These regulatory barriers can prevent the development of affordable housing options. Despite the region's plentiful natural resources, including coal, natural gas, and timber, which played a key role in the growth of the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries, these same regulations continue to impede affordable housing development ("Housing in Central Appalachia"). Previous reports on substandard housing issues in the region highlighted the need for serious analysis, which has often been lacking (Deaton and Hanrahan). Stringent zoning laws and a lack of incentives for affordable housing development have significantly contributed to the housing shortage (Streetman). Streamlining these regulations and providing incentives for affordable housing development could help alleviate some of the pressure on the housing market. Additionally, innovative zoning practices, such as inclusionary zoning and zoning overlays, could be adopted to promote mixed-income communities and increase the overall supply of affordable housing.

## Impacts of the Crisis

### *Increased Homelessness*

The lack of affordable housing in urban Appalachian areas has led to a noticeable rise in homelessness. Reports indicate a rise in homelessness due to the scarcity of affordable housing (Mather). This issue is of major public concern and rightly so, as it affects a significant portion of the population (Deaton and Hanrahan). As the median price of rentals continues to rise, the number of people who can't afford rent increases as well (Streetman), exacerbating the homelessness crisis. The growing number of individuals and families without stable housing underscores the urgent need for immediate policy intervention to prevent further social and economic distress.

### *Economic Decline*

High housing costs have caused "out-migration, leading to further economic decline and reduced local services" (Mather). This out-migration weakens the community fabric, causing a domino effect where local businesses struggle, schools lose students, and public services experience reduced funding and support. Despite the serious nature of substandard housing highlighted in earlier reports, few researchers have addressed the problem thoroughly (Deaton and Hanrahan). Urban areas with high housing costs are witnessing an exodus of residents who can no longer afford to live there, resulting in economic decline (Streetman). The cycle of economic decline and housing instability becomes increasingly difficult to break, necessitating comprehensive and strategic approaches to revitalization.

### *Health Impacts*

"Poor housing conditions are linked to health issues, with low-quality housing contributing to respiratory diseases and mental health challenges" (Mather). These health impacts are not just individual concerns but public health issues, as they contribute to higher healthcare costs and increased strain on local health services. The nation's housing needs are a significant public concern, and housing instability and poor living conditions are associated with various health problems, including stress and respiratory issues (3, 4). Addressing housing quality and affordability is therefore not only a matter of economic and social policy but also a crucial public health intervention.

## Legal and Administrative Challenges

### *Lack of Resources*

"Many Appalachian towns face challenges in accessing federal and state funds for housing assistance" (Mather). Local governments often lack the financial resources and support needed to address the housing crisis effectively (Streetman). This scarcity of resources not only hampers efforts to develop new housing projects but also limits the maintenance and rehabilitation of existing housing, leaving many communities struggling to provide adequate shelter for their residents. Without the necessary financial backing, initiatives that could alleviate the housing crisis remain unfulfilled, contributing to a cycle of poverty and housing instability.

### *Administrative Delays*

"Bureaucratic red tape can slow down the distribution of funds for housing projects, exacerbating the crisis" (Mather). Earlier major government reports have illustrated the pervasive social, economic, political, and institutional obstacles to meeting housing needs (Deaton and Hanrahan). Unfortunately, despite the pressing nature of substandard housing illuminated in these reports, few researchers have responded with serious analysis of the problem (Deaton and Hanrahan). Bureaucratic obstacles and delays in funding distribution hinder progress on housing projects (Streetman), creating a bottleneck that prevents timely and effective responses to the housing crisis. These delays can demoralize communities and stall projects that could provide much-needed relief to those in dire housing situations.

### *Potential Solutions and Recommended Solution*

Policy actors involved in addressing the housing crisis in the Appalachian region include local governments (city councils, county governments), federal agencies (Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Appalachian Regional Commission), community organizations (housing nonprofits, community land trusts, advocacy groups), and residents (low-income families, homeless individuals, general public). The objective is to ensure access to affordable housing, reduce homelessness, and stimulate economic development. Specific criteria for achieving this goal include targeting areas with the highest need for affordable housing, tracking the number of affordable housing units created, ensuring feasible solutions within the given resources, addressing the real needs of the community, and setting a timeline for implementation and evaluation.

### *Status Quo*

Maintaining the status quo means continuing with existing housing policies, funding levels, and zoning laws. While this option requires no immediate action, it will likely result in the housing crisis continuing to grow, exacerbating the negative impacts on residents and communities. The status quo approach does not address the root causes of the crisis and may lead to increased homelessness, economic decline, and health issues. Although politically feasible, as it requires no significant changes, this option is not sustainable in the long run and may result in worsening conditions for residents.

### *Increase Funding for Housing Programs*

Boosting funding for the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit and other federal housing assistance programs could help address the demand-supply imbalance and gradually reduce the crisis. This option is equitable as it targets those most in need of affordable housing. However, it faces significant political challenges, as previous attempts to increase housing funding have not always passed in Congress. While this solution may gain support from housing advocates and low-income communities, it could face opposition from those concerned about government spending. The potential strain on federal and state budgets is a notable risk, but this approach could lead to more units being built and reduced homelessness.

### *Community Land Trusts*

Establishing community land trusts can ensure long-term affordability and local control over housing developments, preventing the displacement of low-income residents. This approach is highly effective and equitable, as it maintains affordable housing stock for future generations. However, it requires significant initial investment and local government support. The need for ongoing community buy-in and financial sustainability presents a challenge. Despite this, community land trusts may gain support from community organizations and low-income residents, although property developers might oppose it. This option promotes sustainable housing solutions and long-term affordability.

### *Zoning Reform*

Reforming zoning laws to facilitate affordable housing development would help reduce regulatory barriers and encourage the construction of new affordable housing units. This option is generally equitable, promoting more inclusive communities and reducing socio-economic disparities. However, zoning reform can be contentious, facing opposition from local residents and property owners. Despite its moderate political and technical feasibility, this approach could lead to increased affordable housing development and a more balanced housing market.

### *Recommended Solution*

Considering the various alternatives, the recommended solution is to pursue a combined approach that includes increasing funding for housing programs, establishing community land trusts, and implementing zoning reform. This multifaceted strategy addresses the immediate need for more affordable housing units, ensures long-term affordability, and reduces regulatory barriers to housing development. However, there are potential downsides to this approach. Increasing funding for housing programs faces political challenges and could strain federal and state budgets. Establishing community land trusts requires significant initial investment and continuous community support. Zoning reform might encounter opposition from local residents and property owners resistant to change. Despite these challenges, the benefits of this combined approach outweigh the cons. Increasing funding for housing programs will lead to the construction of more affordable housing units, directly addressing the current demand-supply imbalance. Community land trusts will ensure long-term affordability and prevent the displacement of low-income residents, fostering stable and inclusive communities. Zoning reform will reduce regulatory barriers, facilitating the development of new affordable housing units and promoting more inclusive neighborhoods.

## **Conclusion**

The housing crisis in the Appalachian region represents a complex challenge rooted in historical disinvestment, economic shifts, and systemic inefficiencies. This crisis, exacerbated by high demand and limited affordable housing supply, has led to increased homelessness, economic decline, and significant health impacts on residents. Historical economic transitions, such as the decline of traditional industries, have further compounded these issues, affecting many communities across the region. The impacts of this crisis are severe, extending beyond immediate housing instability to broader social and economic repercussions. Proposed solutions include maintaining the status quo, increasing funding for housing programs, establishing community land trusts, and implementing zoning reform. Each option comes with its own set of advantages and challenges, with varying degrees of political and technical feasibility. Among these, a combined approach stands out as the most practical and balanced solution, offering a path to gradual improvement. This approach includes increasing funding, establishing community land trusts, and reforming zoning laws, thereby ensuring a more equitable and sustainable system that addresses both immediate needs and long-term goals. By pursuing these combined reforms, the Appalachian region can alleviate the housing crisis, restore stability, and improve the quality of life for its residents. Ultimately, addressing the housing crisis requires a commitment to thoughtful, incremental changes that balance competing interests and promote a fair and efficient housing process.

## **Acknowledgements**

Completing this paper was only possible with the help of Professor Dr. Jourdan Davis, who provided me with help and guidance that would otherwise be inaccessible. I also want to thank my parents for their help and support.

## **References**

- Mather, Mark. Demographic and Socioeconomic Change in Appalachia HOUSING and COMMUTING PATTERNS in APPALACHIA by Mark Mather Population Reference Bureau. 2004.
- “Housing in Central Appalachia.” Housing Assistance Council, 23 July 2021, [ruralhome.org/reports/housing-in-central-appalachia/](http://ruralhome.org/reports/housing-in-central-appalachia/).
- Deaton, Brady J., and Charles E. Hanrahan. “Rural Housing Needs and Barriers: The Case of Central Appalachia.” *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, vol. 5, no. 1, July 1973, pp. 59–67, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0081305200010827>

Streetman, Zeke. "Expanding the Top: Housing Shortages in Urban Appalachia | Appalachian Free Press."  
Appalachian Free Press, 20 Sept. 2023, [appalachianfreepress.com/expanding-the-top-housing-shortages-in-urban-appalachia/](https://appalachianfreepress.com/expanding-the-top-housing-shortages-in-urban-appalachia/)

Social Determinants Median Household Income Poverty Disability Education Social Associations Further Reading,  
[https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Health\\_Disparities\\_in\\_Appalachia\\_Social\\_Determinants\\_Domain.pdf](https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Health_Disparities_in_Appalachia_Social_Determinants_Domain.pdf)