

# Baltimore has more than 16,0 vacant houses. Why can't the homeless move in? (Posted 2015-05-12 23:55:19)

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## ABSTRACT

In their wake, a drug trade flourished in certain neighborhoods, further weakening property values until real estate agents and investors abandoned chunks of the city, giving rise to vacancies. The low-skill positions, such as restaurant gigs at the heavily developed Inner Harbor, that arrived to replace the city's high-paying steel jobs often don't pay more than minimum wage, if that.

## FULL TEXT

BALTIMORE -- Mark Council knows a thing or two about Baltimore. In his 55 years here, he's lived numerous lives. He's been a cook. He's been a mechanic. And now he's a homeless person, a position that's afforded him his closest view yet of a problem that's eating the city from the inside.

Council, a stocky man with a beard flecked with gray, sees the vacant houses on his way to the homeless shelter. The gutted facades are inescapable, he says, blanketing entire city blocks. He peers up at them and can't help but feel frustrated.

"I look at all of these vacant houses, and I'm like, 'I could be living in one of these houses,'" Council said. "I think, 'We all, all the homeless, could be living in one of those houses.' "

Council has had enough. So he's joined Housing Our Neighbors, a group that trumpets an innovative solution used across the country that it says would ensure affordable housing for vulnerable residents. Vacant housing, the group says, presents a "unique opportunity" to turn Baltimore's blight into a boon. Although the city has historically had difficulty rehabilitating poor neighborhoods and critics question the plan's feasibility, the group says the urgency couldn't be greater.

Last month, as Baltimore buckled under the weight of Freddie Gray's controversial death, the national spotlight settled on the impoverished neighborhoods that produced him. Report after report mentioned the abandoned homes. In the West Baltimore neighborhood of Sandtown-Winchester, where Gray lived, vacant buildings line nearly every street.

But the scourge of vacant housing extends far beyond Sandtown -- and far beyond West Baltimore. It is as stitched into the city's social fabric as the Baltimore Ravens. The city says there are 16,000 vacant homes in the city, but it defines vacancy only as uninhabitable. Others have a looser definition, which leads to higher counts. Housing Our Neighbors recently canvassed a slice of East Baltimore and counted 395 vacant homes -- 33 percent more than the

city's count. The U.S. Census Bureau has found 46,800 vacant homes – 16 percent of Baltimore's housing stock.

"All of Baltimore's social, economic and political issues are encapsulated by the vacant houses," said Jeff Singer, an adjunct professor of social work at the University of Maryland. "They're vacant because of economic and political forces."

Baltimore's story is a familiar one, shared by Rust Belt cities from Detroit to Cleveland. It's a tale of a city ensnared by global forces that deindustrialized its economic engine – the steel plants – and destroyed its manufacturing sector. After Baltimore's plants closed, a slow decay took hold in neighborhoods with high unemployment rates, quickening when wealthier residents fled for the suburbs or other areas amid a citywide population exodus. In their wake, a drug trade flourished in certain neighborhoods, further weakening property values until real estate agents and investors abandoned chunks of the city, giving rise to vacancies.

In Baltimore and elsewhere, vacant buildings are associated with numerous problems. One recent study showed that abandoned buildings are associated with higher rates of "assaultive violence." Another found that residents who live near vacant building have a far greater chance of falling victim to fires. And in 2008, Baltimore discovered that the cost of providing police and fire services to a block increased by \$1,472 annually for each vacant house.

While thousands of homes sit vacant, many low-income Baltimore residents have difficulty affording housing. The low-skill positions, such as restaurant gigs at the heavily developed Inner Harbor, that arrived to replace the city's high-paying steel jobs often don't pay more than minimum wage, if that. In such neighborhoods as Sandtown-Winchester, where nearly a quarter of the buildings stand vacant, median income hovers around \$24,000. For every 100 low-income households, an Urban Institute report said last year, Baltimore has 29 affordable units.

The Freddie Gray protests laid bare many of these trends. The neighborhoods with the most protesters had the highest rates of abandoned homes, bringing a pointed crescendo to a housing crisis that, stripped of historical context, would seem counterintuitive. About 3,000 people are homeless on any given night in Baltimore. More than 30,000 Baltimore residents experience homelessness over the course of the year. And yet, vacant homes dominate many of the city's neighborhoods.

"There's nothing new about the depths of how our community is affected by a large number of vacant houses," said Ty Hullinger, a pastor of three parishes in hard-hit areas and an activist. "But this has reached a critical point in some neighborhoods of Baltimore, where block after block are filled with vacant homes."

Housing Our Neighbors, made up of homeless and housing advocates, says that if the traditional housing market has become unaccessible for extremely low-income residents, they need to create an alternative.

The organization first wants the city to invest in poor neighborhoods to rehabilitate vacant houses. Then comes something called a community land trust. Successful in other parts of the country, the land trust features a nonprofit organization that owns and manages land where affordable housing is built. It would ensure that rents and mortgages remain affordable and decide which homes to demolish and which to renovate.

Nearly 260 community land trusts have been created across the country, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, which studied the issue. Communities including Boston and Durham, N.C., have had success serving low-income residents in poor neighborhoods with it.

"We've seen the story of capital flight from Baltimore, and one of the indications of that has been our vacant

housing," said Rachel Kutler, who works with Housing Our Neighbors and urges livable wages for low-income residents in addition to affordable housing. "If the problem is that the marketplace isn't working for people, we want to see an alternative to that, one with community control that's an alternative to the regular housing market."

But some experts don't agree. Barbara Samuels, managing attorney for the ACLU of Maryland's Fair Housing Project, said she's wary of plans that call for turning vacant homes into affordable ones. It sounds nice, she said, but on a "superficial level."

"In a neighborhood with a housing surplus, [rehabbing homes] can actually be counterproductive," she wrote in an e-mail. "Ultimately, people need jobs, not just housing. So I think we have all learned that bricks and mortar is not the answer."

What she's perhaps referring to is the lessons learned in Sandtown. Two decades ago, visionary developer James Rouse and city officials poured more than \$130 million into that neighborhood, long trapped in poverty. One of the initiative's major goals was to renovate or rehabilitate houses, and more than 1,000 were eventually built. But today, there are as many vacant houses as ever.

Stefanie DeLuca, a Johns Hopkins University sociologist who studied the neighborhood, said that one of the mistakes was to focus too heavily on the effect of a problem rather than the problem itself. "Solving vacant houses won't fix the problems that created them in the first place," DeLuca said. "A bedrock of the economy has shifted over time, and it wasn't favorable to affordable housing."

So does that mean people have to give up hope? Does that mean communities swarming with gutted buildings should just accept them? Does that mean the homeless should stop peering up at the vacant homes, wondering at what could be?

Of course not, said Council, who fell into homelessness after a cousin he lived with became hooked on drugs and lost his home. He'll continue looking at those vacant homes on his way to his shelter. They represent the best chance, he says, he has for someplace affordable to live.

"We need to change the system and wake up Baltimore," he said. "We need to let them know that we are human beings and that we need help. In the same way that animals also need shelter, we need affordable houses. We need that for all of us."

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## DETAILS

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