CARVING A PATH TO HOUSING SECURITY

Leading Challenges and Solutions for Oregon’s Most Overlooked Communities
Home should be our safest space - a place that can serve as a core foundation of our health and where our families can thrive. Increasingly, the quality and stability of our housing is determined not only by our economic circumstances, but by our race, ethnicity, and immigration status. The current housing crisis impacts all Oregonians, but due to systemic barriers, some communities are impacted more than others.

For immigrants, refugees, and people of color, additional challenges include discriminatory rental practices, linguistic and cultural barriers, high mobility, lower levels of trust in public agencies, and under-reporting of poor conditions. For people of color and rural communities, systemic barriers emerge not only from profit-driven development, but also from poor housing placement, substandard farmworker housing, and regressive housing policy.

Houselessness looks different for many of our communities. Our cultures do not allow families to be without a home, and this reality has forced people into overcrowded apartments, exacerbating poor living conditions and impacting tenants’ willingness to request repairs and fight rent increases. In low income rural communities that are experiencing housing shortages, poor public transportation infrastructure compounds this dynamic.

These community voices are often left out of the affordable housing debate, and those who experience some of the highest economic disparities, such as farm workers, are nearly always left out of policy solutions.

As communities of color continue to grow in both Oregon’s rural and urban areas, we believe that a strong racial justice strategy can give policymakers and community advocates the tools to house and protect the communities driving Oregon’s economy. Comprehensive and long-term housing solutions begin with data collection that is consistently updated and disaggregated by race, ethnicity and country of origin and incorporate improved health and economic security goals.

Solutions must be interconnected and cross-cultural: apartment developments that build culturally appropriate community spaces, include multi-generational or large family options, have a sufficient supply of decent, safe, and affordable units to protect against overcrowding and inadequate living conditions; community development plans that tie affordable housing to improved, employee-subsidized transportation solutions, and job training and placement programs; repair and maintenance reform that address the effects of past and current discriminatory practices on tenants’ willingness to report repairs.

This brief will highlight both the experiences of our often overlooked communities as well as the components of a racial justice housing agenda. Here we begin to lay the groundwork for solution-making that can reach the most vulnerable Oregonians.

![Figure 1: Oregon Demographics 2014](image-url)
For our communities, especially for immigrants and refugees, data collection is the first barrier to tracking progress. For example, Middle Eastern and Slavic populations are considered “White- Non Hispanic” according to the American Community Survey Counts, but they identify as communities of color locally. Additionally, African immigrants and refugees are categorized as African American in the census, but have unique experiences that can inform culturally-specific solutions.

We need readily accessible data. Currently, we rely on individual reports that are periodically released. What we have learned through these reports and continue to see firsthand in our work is unsettling and requires comprehensive and strategic data collection and tracking.

Immigrant and refugee individuals and families place a high value on strong, well-connected communities that promote holistic health and well-being, and support educational and economic opportunity. However, our communities face higher economic insecurity and are much more likely to rent—and therefore more vulnerable to Oregon’s volatile housing market. A number of indicators are relevant to tracking housing progress. In Multnomah County, communities of color comprise 44% of the population in poverty. In Multnomah’s East County, where many of our communities are being displaced to, 56% of those in poverty are people of color.

Health inequities also persist. People of color are much more likely to experience food insecurity, and they are less likely to have health care coverage. Additionally, overcrowding and poor housing conditions place stress on families, significantly impacting their health. We have seen similar outcomes in Washington County, Southern Oregon, and across immigrant and refugee communities. Although people of color comprise a growing percentage of the state population, they still make up a small portion of the total population in suburban and rural areas. This can cause racial disparities to be less visible to policymakers and practitioners.

FIGURE 2: POVERTY RATES

2014 Share of Oregonians Living in Poverty by Race & Ethnicity, OCPP analysis ACS data

[Bar chart showing poverty rates for different racial and ethnic groups.]

CONTINUED...
Migrant and year round workers also face issues of extreme overcrowding. There is currently not enough farmworker community-based housing. High quality farm worker housing is stable and provides a foundation for improved health and better education outcomes for children. This housing offers services to address health hazards, such as washing machines to remove pesticides from clothing. Improving data collection for farm workers, including accurate demographic counts, is especially important as we advocate for sufficient, high quality community based housing. Community-based housing is an effective avenue through which to advocate for improved regulations, specifically around heating, ventilation, and proximity to worksites that have high levels of pesticides. It also provides another vehicle through which we can improve educational opportunity and improve outcomes for children and youth.

**MULTNOMAH COUNTY SNAPSHOT**
- 25% of Multnomah County’s foreign-born population is in poverty.
- African communities experience 67% child poverty rates and 30% in Slavic communities.
- Latino family poverty levels are 152% those White families.
- African immigrant unemployment rates are 80% higher and Native American unemployment is 70% higher than that of Whites.
- 21.4% of Latino people and 21.5% of American Indian/Alaska Native communities experience food insecurity and are less likely to have health care coverage (compared with 7.8% White).

**WASHINGTON COUNTY SNAPSHOT**
- In Washington County, the average family size for communities of color is 11.3% larger than the overall average.
- 41.7% of people of color populations live in cost-burdened households (spending 35% or more on rent), Beaverton Disparity Study.
- People of color make up about 23% of Washington County’s total population, but are over 36% of its population in poverty.
- Hispanic or Latino residents make up less than 19% of the County's population, but are more than 40% of the population in poverty. ACS Analysis Dept of Housing Services.

“In many cases, employers and landlords are the same people, leaving families more vulnerable and less likely to report inadequate housing conditions.”

- Washington County Organizer
Rural communities in Oregon are yet another overlooked population in the housing crisis with unique challenges. In Jackson county alone, vacancy rates hover at 1-2%. The low housing inventory and a lack of knowledge of landlord-tenant law combined with high unemployment and poverty rates have created an untenable and unsustainable housing crisis. A reliance on low-wage, service-based employment combined with poor or non-existent public transportation and safety net programs creates additional burdens on rural communities.

Many of our communities are subject to housing discrimination. Perceived immigration status is used to screen applicants and exploit tenants in violation of Fair Housing law. Students, families with children, families with low credit scores or perceived low economic status also experience discrimination and push-out by landlords. A lack of knowledge and few resources for community education about landlord-tenant law and tenant rights can result in unintentional and/or intentional tenant exploitation. It also leaves these communities vulnerable to scams that defraud people through requesting money for application fees, credit checks, or background checks for nonexistent rental properties. Additionally, application and related fees have increased. Property management company practices including abuses are not adequately monitored. This lack of transparency and accountability creates a dangerous imbalance of power.

Sufficient affordable housing is not available to meet community needs, and the limited affordable housing that exists is often located far from job opportunities and public assistance. First, we need to expand the reach of inclusionary housing as a regulatory tool for small and medium sized municipalities across the state struggling to increase the affordable housing inventory through public investment. Many transitional regions, such as Washington County, Hood River, etc. can enact inclusionary zoning policies now. Currently, cities and counties may request that builders include affordable units in the relatively few new projects that are proposed, but the imbalance of power between builders and municipalities suggests that few, if any, affordable housing units will be produced. Inclusionary zoning policy as a regulatory tool can shift this.

For more rural communities, increased resources and affordable housing stock are urgently needed, as is improved transportation infrastructure, which is essential to ensuring residents are able to access high wage jobs. Transportation investments likewise ensure that low-income communities are not centralized and therefore vulnerable to divestment. Housing opportunity should be an integral component of regional growth.

"The added challenge of an underfunded, and sometimes non-existent, public transportation system creates nearly insurmountable barriers for low income families."

-Jackson County Organizer

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**FIGURE 4: MEDIAN GROSS RENT**  
(2010 - 2014 $)

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**FIGURE 5: RURAL OREGON**

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Many of the issues raised here stem from institutional and structural inequities and racism. Our organizers have learned this firsthand, but at times lack the resources and tools to translate this work into policy change. Conversely, policy makers often do not fully understand how racial inequities play out in our communities.

Community surveys are a powerful tool for multiple reasons. First, they fill in data gaps and help make the case for expanded data collection. They provide an opportunity for organizers to engage with residents and have in-depth conversations about the challenges they face on a daily basis specific to their neighborhood and communities as well as culturally responsive solutions.

This method of community engagement and information gathering can also help to curb displacement and gentrification. As new developments and large housing planning processes emerge, the results from these conversations and surveys help us advocate for culturally appropriate services and developments that will lift up communities most impacted by the housing crisis. Finally, they provide the research and background needed to effectively inform local policy change to improve housing conditions and landlord-tenant relationships.

In 2015, we conducted a community survey of our residents in Washington County. Unite Oregon serves immigrants, refugees and people of color in Washington County and in response to community feedback, we began to advocate for improved housing conditions. In order to effectively advocate for improved housing conditions, we needed more specific data verifying the issues most pressing to our communities. This community survey aimed to capture data about the quality of housing, tenants’ willingness and ability to report needed repairs, and landlord responsiveness to tenant requests.

 WHAT WE LEARNED

The survey found that 53% of respondents reported needed repairs and maintenance issues when they first moved into housing. Of the 30% who reported delaying asking for a repair because they feared the landlord would ask them to leave or raise their rent, 71% were people of color and/or identified as an immigrant/refugee. Sixty-seven percent reported having their rent increased since moving in housing. Issues with mold, water/moisture, appliances and plumbing or sewage appeared to be the most serious issues in respondents’ apartments/houses.

WHO WE SERVE
COMMUNITY SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

We interviewed a diverse set of over 180 individuals in Washington County, representing eleven different ethnic communities, speaking 13 languages.

• Over a third of the participants interviewed had been in their homes for six months or less.
• 63% had been in their apartments for over 3 years.
• More than 63% of respondent households were larger than the County average.
• 64% were people of color and over half of the respondents were foreign born.
• More than 84% of respondents were below median household income, with a quarter reporting a household income of less than $11,500/year. Washington County’s 2014 Median House Income was $65,272. (ACS 2010-2014 in 2014 dollars.)

FIGURE 6:
Respondents Rent & Repair Experience

| Home currently needs repairs | 51 |
| Delayed asking for repair b/c they feared eviction or rent increases | 30 |
| Repairs not made or negative landlord response | 30 |
| Rent Increases | 67 |
We need a new approach to the housing crisis, one that creates affordable housing built on the strengths and needs of our communities and promotes improved health outcomes and economic opportunity. A strong racial justice housing agenda seeks to support the health and safety of the communities that drive Oregon’s economy through culturally specific approaches rooted in community strengths.

**TAKE ACTION**

We continue to support overdue state and local reform with our community partners. In addition, we have identified three recommendations to assist in breaking down systemic barriers for immigrant and refugees, rural populations, and communities of color.

1. **Mandate a farm worker count to inform and increase community based housing for migrant farmworkers.** The most effective way to ensure proper maintenance, avoid overcrowding, improve safety conditions and increase educational opportunity for farm workers and their families is through community-based housing. Large employers have a responsibility to ensure quality housing conditions and adequate transportation, but they must be transparent and accountable. There are many opportunities through active transportation and affordable housing funding streams to create safer, affordable housing that aligns with fair housing requirements and increases access to livable wage jobs.

2. **Create certification and incentive program through State Office US Refugee Program that supports the placement of immigrant families in high quality housing.** Currently, due to resettlement placement requirements, limited capacity and few resources, refugee and immigrant communities are vulnerable to housing placements with unfair and abusive landlords. We advocate that resettlement services work closely with the Fair Housing Council to create an incentive and certification program aimed at landlords with equitable and fair track records to house new immigrant and refugee families. This program would also provide subsidies to small property owners and managers for repairs and maintenance.

   Resettlement case managers need additional resources to ensure the families and individuals are not only placed in quality housing, but also receive follow up and longer-term support.

3. **Expand Transportation and Reach of Inclusionary Housing to Rural Communities.** We need to strengthen and expand inclusionary housing as a land use tool for small municipalities to increase inventory of affordable housing in rural areas.

   While inclusionary zoning can work as a regulatory tool in many transitional regions, it has limited impact in rural areas. We need to shift how these regions plan and develop. Currently large developers focus on high cost housing that does not serve the communities who are ultimately driving these economies—many of whom are largely low income, women and people of color. Employers can work with local governments through active transportation and housing funding streams to ensure low-income communities have access to high wage jobs.

   This means engaging our communities in crafting solutions that will work: affordable transportation infrastructure development, such as shuttle systems, or text alert programs where transit riders can notify when and where they need a ride. In order to ensure housing opportunity is available through these rural regions, employers, developers and local government all need to work together to ensure our communities have access to economic growth and development.
OVERDUE REFORM

STATE POLICY

On a state level, we need a bold agenda that calls out basic, fundamental and long overdue housing reform:

- Enact strong rent control protections;
- Eradicate “no-cause” evictions;
- Align funding between federal and state agencies;
- Provide translation services for notices, services, etc.
- Ensure a racial justice lens is applied to Oregon’s tenant-landlord negotiations;
- Provide driver’s cards for undocumented individuals;
- Provide state funding for improved public transportation infrastructure and develop cost-effective solutions in rural regions;
- Fund state-wide, robust tenant education in rural communities.

LOCAL POLICY

On a local level, we need policy and programs that draw on the lived experience of Oregon’s people of color communities to influence reform:

- Ensure renter protections programs address the specific needs of immigrant and refugee families;
- Ensure inclusionary zoning policy does not exclude communities of color through restrictions on developments and qualifying circumstances;
- Enact stronger maintenance codes and funding for enforcement, including mold prevention programming;
- Draw upon tools, such as community benefits agreements, to increase job participation;
- Require racial impact statements for community and housing developments;
- Ensure housing developments are built to support values and culture of diverse communities, especially immigrant and refugee families, who prosper from strong community ties and networks;
- Utilize community health best practice in economic development strategies (i.e., employing community health workers to inform local development projects and more effective community engagement);
- Create and promote multilingual information on paths to home ownership.

Figure 2: Oregon Center for Public Policy analysis of American Community Survey Data 2014 (http://www.ocpp.org/2015/10/22/fs20151022-poverty-oregon-charts/)

Figure 3: Alexis D.R. Ball. “Examining Racial Disparities in Beaverton: A Report to Beaverton’s Diversity Board.” Portland State University. April 2014.

Figure 4: http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/IPE120214/41019,41029,41,41033,00

Figure 5: http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/IPE120214/41019,41029,41,41033,00]

Figure 6: Center for Intercultural Organizing Community Survey Washington County 2015, prepared by Pam Phan.

→ ADDITIONAL SOURCES

OCCP analysis of 2014 ACS data. (http://www.ocpp.org/2016/03/15/fs20160315-oregon-health-insurance-coverage/)


Multnomah County Department of County Human Services Community Services Division. “2014 Poverty in Multnomah County.” April 2014.


→ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Kimberly Armstrong at Oregon Housing Authority, Pam Phan, Oregon Center for Public Policy.
OUR MISSION

Led by people of color, immigrants and refugees, rural communities, and people experiencing poverty, we work across Oregon to build a unified intercultural movement for justice.

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