

## The Shrinking Geography of Opportunity in Metro America

May 10, 2022

By Thai Le, Edward Muña, Sarah Treuhaft, and Rasheedah Phillips\*

### Contents

1. Introduction
2. Data and Methods
3. Interactive Map: Neighborhood Affordability for Renters in Metro America
4. Findings
  - Renters in Metro America Face Shrinking Maps of Affordable Neighborhoods
  - Black Households Have the Fewest Neighborhood Choices
  - Black Renters Experienced the Steepest Declines in Affordable Neighborhoods
  - The Majority of Neighborhoods Affordable to Low-Income Households Are Lower Opportunity
  - Black and Latinx Renters Have Very Limited Access to Prosperous Neighborhoods
5. Expanding the Geography of Opportunity Is Key to Shared Prosperity
6. Conclusion
7. Authors
8. Acknowledgments

## Introduction

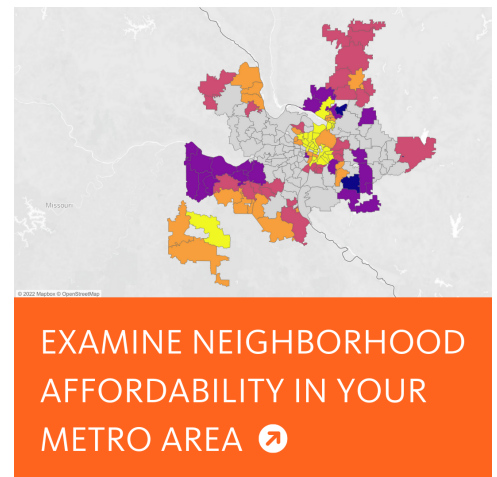
The coronavirus pandemic continues to both illuminate and deepen the challenges of structural racism and housing inequity in the United States. While rent relief programs are sunseting and rents are skyrocketing, millions of renters negatively impacted by the pandemic's economic fallout face crushing rent debt, eviction, and homelessness. And the renters who have been hit the hardest are disproportionately people of color and people living on low incomes. This extreme precarity stems from a housing crisis that has plagued communities for decades. At the onset of the pandemic, there was not a single state, region, or county in the US where a full-time worker earning the minimum wage could afford a two-bedroom rental home, and nearly half of Black and Latinx renters (and more than a third of all renters) were paying unaffordable rent.

Not only is there an overall shortage of affordable rental homes, but they are rarely located in “high-opportunity” neighborhoods that have high-quality schools, safe streets, clean air, parks, reliable transit, and proximity to jobs, retail, and services. Instead, they are concentrated in disinvested neighborhoods that lack these “opportunity structures” and are often replete with harms ranging from polluted air to decrepit infrastructure to excessive surveillance and police violence. The overcrowding of affordable homes in lower opportunity neighborhoods and lack of affordable homes in higher opportunity neighborhoods have significant negative consequences for people living on low incomes. Decades of research underscore that living in a neighborhood lacking critical opportunity structures negatively affects health, access to educational and economic opportunities, and life outcomes — especially for children.

This uneven “geography of opportunity,” or access to neighborhood conditions that influence positive life opportunities and outcomes, is a defining hallmark of American metropolitan regions — and it is one that is deeply rooted in systemic racism. In the past, racially discriminatory policies, including redlining, urban renewal, and government-backed home loans (almost exclusively for white homebuyers), created geographic concentrations of opportunity and disadvantage throughout regions. Today, policies that are not explicitly discriminatory yet have racially inequitable impacts (e.g., exclusionary zoning), maintain these patterns of spatial inequality — effectively locking many people of color out of educational and economic opportunity.

This analysis is the first in a series exploring the changing geography of opportunity in American metropolitan regions, building from our earlier analysis of the San Francisco Bay Area. In that study, we found that only 5 percent of census tracts in the region had median market rents that were affordable to a renter household of two full-time workers each earning \$15 per hour. Those affordable neighborhoods were located on the outskirts of the region, and 92 percent of them were “low opportunity,” according to the Child Opportunity Index produced by researchers at Brandeis University. Our findings underscored the pattern of regional resegregation in the Bay Area described by Urban Habitat, in which tech-driven growth has been pushing low-wage service-sector workers out of core cities to the outer parts of the region.

Expanding our lens to the largest 100 metros, in this analysis we ask three questions: First, how does



---

 Last Name
 

---



---

 Organization
 

---



---

 Email
 

---

affordable rental housing in a metro) and the cost of an affordable rental unit in a metro (in other words, the affordable rental unit of median-income renters, which tends to have lower rents.) Second, given that a median means that half of the rents are below it and half are above it, this is a summary measure of neighborhood affordability, not a precise measure. So, affordable rentals might exist in a specific neighborhood, but they are not plentiful.

To examine affordability by race/ethnicity, we define an affordable zip code as one with a median market rent that is affordable to households at the median household income for that racial/ethnic group within that metro. For example, in 2019, 13 of 350 zip codes were affordable to Black households at the median income for all Black households in Chicago (\$76,394) and 48 zip codes were affordable to Latinx households at the median income for all Latinx households in Chicago (\$101,643). In the proceeding analysis, the terminology “median-income Black households” and “Black households at the median income” refer to Black households at the median household income for Black households within that metro. This is true for Latinx and white households as well.

---

## Data and Methods



Our key findings include the following:

- Working-class households face a shrinking geography of opportunity in metro America.** Across the 100 most populous metropolitan areas, the number of zip codes where the median market rents are affordable to low-income households declined 50 percent between 2013 and 2019 (from 17 percent of zip codes to 8 percent). The trend of declining affordability was widespread: the number of neighborhoods with affordable median market rents shrunk in 81 metropolitan regions, remained approximately the same in 16 of them, and increased in only three regions.
- Black and Latinx households have the fewest choices when it comes to affordable neighborhoods.** In 2019, only 7 percent of zip codes in the top 100 metros had median market rents affordable to Black households at the median income for all Black households in the metro. For Latinx households at the median income, just 16 percent of zip codes had affordable median market rents.
- Black households experienced the steepest declines in affordable neighborhoods in the years preceding the pandemic.** Between 2013 and 2019 — even as the economy was recovering and median incomes increased for households of all races and ethnicities — the number of zip codes with median market rents affordable to median-income Black households decreased by 14 percent.
- The majority of neighborhoods affordable for Black, Latinx, and low-income households are lower opportunity neighborhoods.** Among the zip codes with affordable rental housing for the median-income Black household, 82 percent were either “low” or “very low” — the bottom two quintiles on the Child Opportunity Index — while only 38 percent of zip codes affordable for the median-income white household were “low” or “very low” opportunity.

While the rental affordability crisis is affecting all households, it is disproportionately impacting low-income renters and renters of color. As market rents have increased, the number of neighborhoods affordable to working-class households in American metros has declined dramatically, contributing to growing economic segregation and further limiting choice, access, and opportunity for the very same people most harmed by exclusionary and discriminatory policies. Black renters, in particular, face an extremely limited — and diminishing — number of neighborhood choices. Shrinking neighborhood affordability in many large metros is both reinforcing longstanding patterns of racial segregation and creating new ones in which low-income Black and Brown working-class households are confined to neighborhoods on the outskirts of prosperous cities.

Although this analysis is based on pre-pandemic data, all signs indicate that the trend of shrinking housing opportunity continues, and, if anything, conditions have worsened. In 2021, **rents increased by at least 10 percent in 149 metropolitan regions**, whereas only three metros experienced that level of rent growth in 2019. Lower income renters, low-wage workers, and small businesses serving communities of color were hardest hit by the pandemic’s economic fallout. Nearly **six million renter households** are currently behind on rent — about **double the pre-pandemic baseline**.

Achieving racial equity and a just economy requires changing this paradigm and ensuring that households living on low incomes can live in affordable homes in neighborhoods that support their health and economic success. This requires a multipronged approach to invest in equitable recovery strategies and enact transformational policies. We recommend four broad arenas for policy action:

- Keep renters in their homes by making eviction protections and rental assistance programs permanent, and stabilizing rents
- Preserve and expand affordability in all neighborhoods, including high-opportunity and gentrifying areas
- Open up access to high-opportunity neighborhoods while investing in the neighborhoods where working-class renters of color already live
- Improve neighborhood quality where housing is affordable and invest in spatial reparations

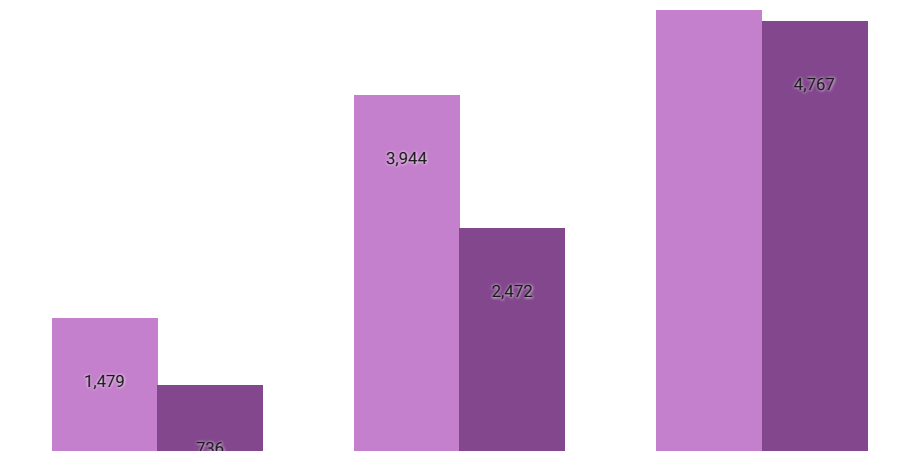
## Renters in Metro America Face Shrinking Maps of Affordable Neighborhoods

Across the 100 largest metros, the number of neighborhoods with affordable rental housing for low-, median-, and moderate-income households declined between 2013 and 2019. The steepest decline was for low-income households, who saw a 50 percent drop in zip codes with affordable median market rents (about 750 zip codes) — leaving less than 10 percent of zip codes in the 100 largest metros affordable to these renters. The number of neighborhoods affordable to median-income renter households declined by 37 percent (nearly 1,500 zip codes). Neighborhoods with affordable median market rents for moderate-income renter households decreased by 22 percent.

Last Name

Organization

Email



## Moderate Income

Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 2013 and 2019 Zillow Rent Index and 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Looking exclusively at neighborhoods affordable to low-income households, we find the following:

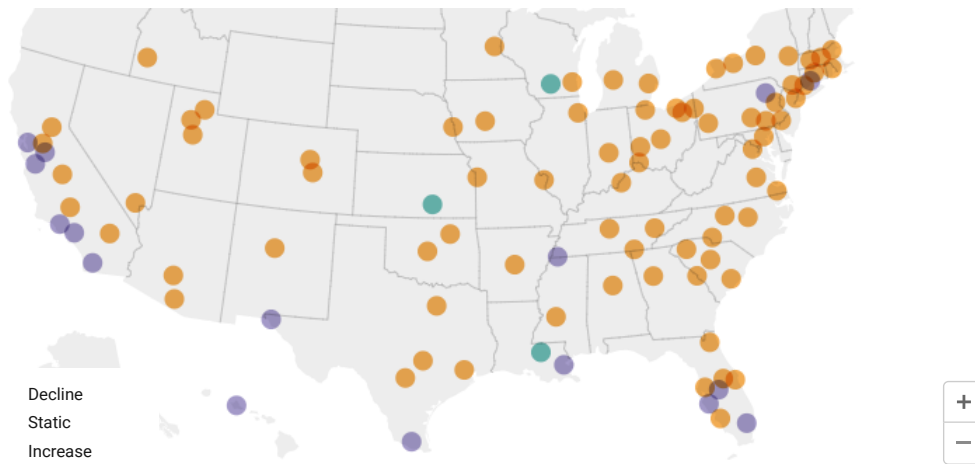
**The number of metros with no affordable zip codes tripled.** Between 2013 and 2019, the number of metros with zero zip codes affordable to these working-class renters increased from 14 to 42. The majority of these unaffordable metros are in California and Florida. Among California's 11 large metros, only Riverside has any zip codes where the median market rent is affordable to residents making 80 percent of the area median income, and since 2013, the share of affordable zip codes in this region has declined by 75 percent.

**Eighty-one of the 100 most populous regions in the United States saw a decline in affordability.** This decline ranged from a 48-percentage-point drop in Boise, Idaho (where 48 percent of zip codes were affordable in 2013 but none were affordable in 2019), to a decline of three-fourths of a percentage point in the Boston metro area (from 0.75 percent to 0 percent of zip codes being affordable). On average, these 81 regions saw a 12-percentage-point decrease in the proportion of affordable zip codes. Twenty-eight of these metros became entirely unaffordable with zero affordable zip codes in 2019. In 64 of these metros, zip codes located in principal cities became unaffordable, signaling possible gentrification and displacement of lower income people of color to the outer areas of regions.

Last Name

Organization

Email



Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 2013 and 2019 Zillow Rent Index and 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

**Sixteen metro areas saw no change in the number of zip codes affordable to low-income households.** The vast majority of these metros (14 out of 16) already had no affordable neighborhoods in 2013, and still had no affordable neighborhoods in 2019. They include many large California metros (Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose); Honolulu; El Paso and McAllen, Texas; New Orleans; Little Rock, Arkansas; and several Florida metros, including Miami and Sarasota.

**Affordability increased in just three metro areas.** Only three metro areas saw an increase in zip codes affordable for low-income households: Baton Rouge, Louisiana, (from 2 to 7 percent affordable); Madison, Wisconsin (20 to 24 percent); and Wichita, Kansas (37 to 48 percent). In these three metro areas, there were moderate declines or increases in rents leading to increased affordability. In the case of Wichita and Madison, median household income decreased at a slightly lower rate than rents.

Last Name	Organization	Email	
Boise City-Nampa, ID*	48%	0%	-48
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta, GA*	47%	7%	-40
Lancaster, PA *	33%	0%	-33
Louisville, KY-IN	43%	10%	-33
Youngstown-Warren-Boardman, OH-PA	70%	37%	-33
Grand Rapids-Wyoming, MI *	37%	5%	-32
Cincinnati-Middletown, OH-KY-IN *	46%	14%	-32
Ogden-Clearfield, UT *	32%	0%	-32
San Antonio, TX *	29%	0%	-29
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ *	30%	4%	-27
Buffalo-Niagara Falls, NY*	39%	13%	-26
Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord, NC-SC*	34%	10%	-24
Nashville-Davidson--Murfreeseboro, TN *	24%	0%	-24
Harrisburg-Carlisle, PA *	34%	11%	-23
Cape Coral-Fort Myers, FL*	22%	0%	-22
Kansas City, MO-KS *	47%	26%	-22
Raleigh-Cary, NC *	37%	16%	-21
Columbia, SC *	38%	18%	-21
Greensboro-High Point, NC *	38%	18%	-21
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX *	22%	2%	-20

\* denotes metro areas where housing affordability shrank because neighborhoods in their principle cities became unaffordable.

Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 2013 and 2019 Zillow Rent Index Data and 5-year American Community Survey data. • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

## Black Households Have the Fewest Neighborhood Choices

Extreme racial inequities in income contribute to the persistent economic and racial segregation that has long characterized metropolitan housing markets in America.

---

Last Name

---

Organization

---

Email

*Data represents the percentage of zip codes for which the median market rent is less than or equal to 30 percent of the median household income by race.*  
 Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 2019 Zillow Rent Index and 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Examining neighborhood affordability by race and ethnicity across the largest 100 metros reveals that Black households have the fewest neighborhood choices by far: In 2019, just 7 percent of neighborhoods were affordable to median-income Black households and only 16 percent of neighborhoods were affordable to median-income Latinx households. In contrast, the median-income white household could afford 69 percent of the neighborhoods.

## Black Renters Experienced the Steepest Declines in Affordable Neighborhoods

Black households experienced the steepest declines in affordable neighborhoods in recent years. During the economic upswing between 2013 and 2019, the number of neighborhoods affordable to Black households decreased by 14 percent in aggregate across the largest 100 metros.

Looking at variation among metros, affordability declined for Black households in 39 of the 100 largest US metros, while affordability only increased in 25 of them. In 2013, there were 40 metro areas where no zip codes were affordable to Black households at the median income, increasing to 48 metros in 2019.

### For median-income Black, Latinx, and white households, affordability decreased in more metros than it increased.

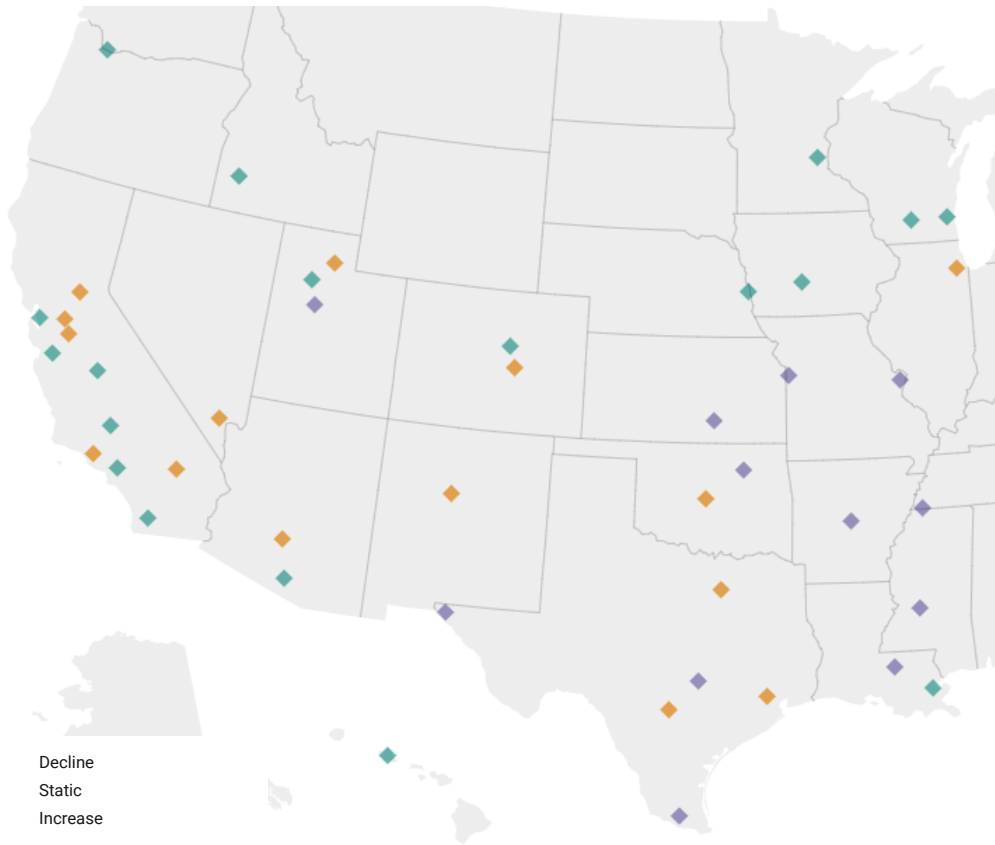
Change in neighborhood affordability by race/ethnicity, 100 largest metro areas, 2013 to 2019

Race/Ethnicity	Affordability Decreased	Affordability Stayed the Same	Affordability Increased
Black	39	36	25
Latinx	39	23	38
White	52	13	35

Last Name

Organization

Email



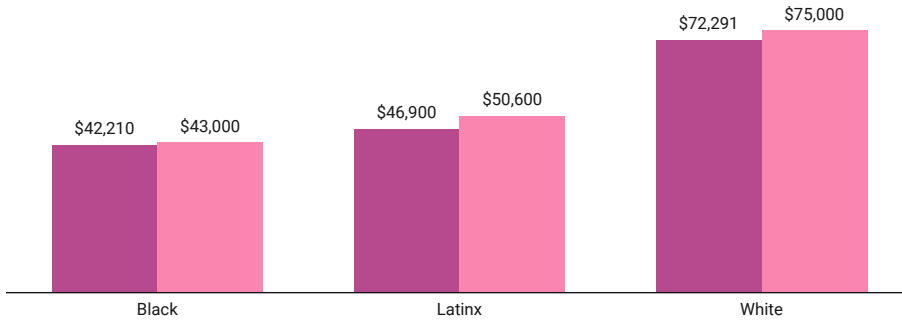
Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 2013 and 2019 Zillow Rent Index and 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA.

Growing racial income gaps — along with rising rents — have contributed to this decline in access to affordable neighborhoods for Black households. From 2013 to 2019, after adjusting for inflation, the median household income of Black households increased by just \$800 compared with about \$3,000 for white households and \$3,700 for Latinx households.

## Racial inequities in income growth have compounded housing unaffordability, especially for Black and Latinx households.

Median household income by race/ethnicity, 100 largest metro area, 2019 (\$2019)

2013 2019



Note: Figures have been adjusted for inflation and are in 2019 dollars.

Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 2013 and 2019 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. [Get the data](#) • Created with Datawrapper

GET EMAIL UPDATES.

Last Name

Organization

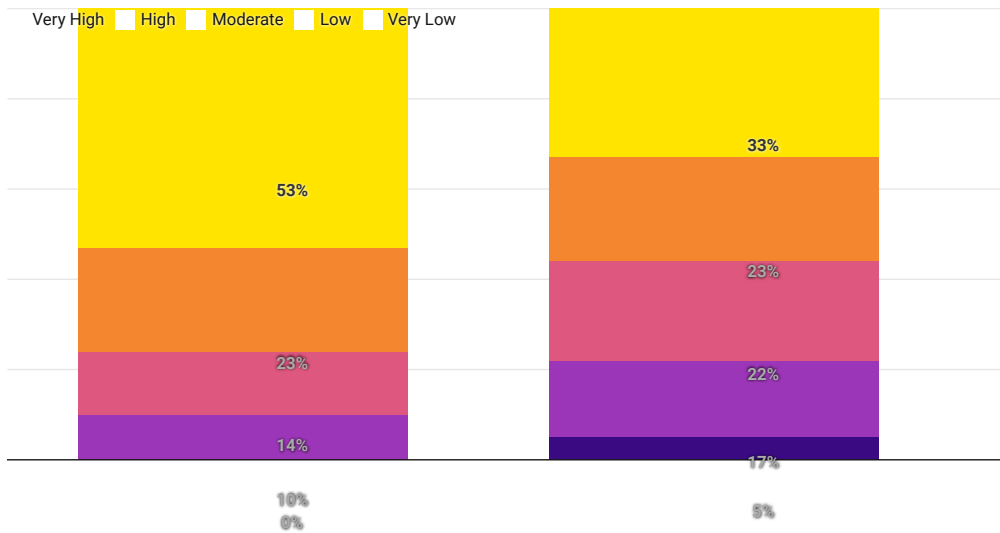
Email

Decades of research demonstrate the importance of neighborhood conditions in determining the health, life chances, and economic mobility of residents — and how Black, Latinx, and other people of color people have been locked out of neighborhoods with well-resourced schools, safe streets, parks, transportation, and other crucial ingredients for social and economic success.

Our analysis of the neighborhoods with rental housing affordable to low-income households reveals that over three-fourths of them (76 percent) were categorized as “low” or “very low” in 2019, according to the Child Opportunity Index produced by researchers at Brandeis University. Among the neighborhoods affordable to median-income households, 56 percent had low or very low opportunity levels. And among neighborhoods affordable to moderate-income households, 43 percent had low or very low opportunity levels. Despite the economic resurgence at the time, there was growth in the number of affordable zip codes falling into the very low category across all income groups from 2013 to 2019, especially for low- and median-income households who saw the number of affordable zip codes in the very low opportunity category rise by 7 percent.

## The majority of neighborhoods affordable to low-income households are low or very low opportunity.

Distribution of affordable zip codes by household income level and neighborhood opportunity levels, 100 largest metro areas, 2019



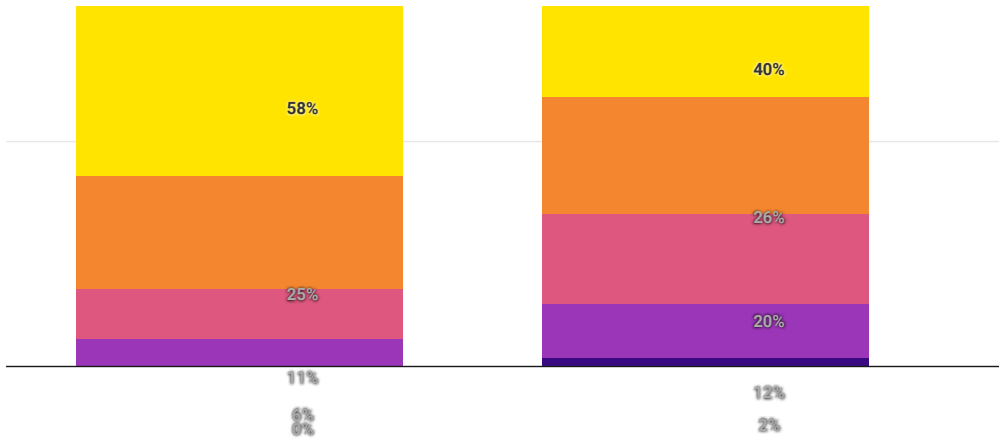
## Black and Latinx Renters Have Very Limited Access to Prosperous Neighborhoods

Our analysis also revealed racial disparities in access to neighborhoods that are affordable and opportunity-rich. In 2019, just 6 percent of zip codes affordable to the median-income Black households were high-opportunity zip codes and none were very high-opportunity, while 14 percent of zip codes affordable to the median-income Latinx household were high- or very high-opportunity neighborhoods. This starkly contrasts with affordability for white households for whom just over 40 percent of affordable zip codes were high and very high-opportunity zip codes.

Last Name

Organization

Email



### White

Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 2013 and 2019 Zillow Rent Index data, 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA

Looking at how access to affordable and high-opportunity neighborhoods has changed over time, we see that although the share of affordable neighborhoods with high- or very high-opportunity levels increased for Black and Latinx households between 2013 to 2019, the majority of zip codes affordable to these households were still low opportunity. In 2019, 83 percent of zip codes affordable to the median-income Black household and 66 percent of zip codes affordable to the median-income Latinx household were either low or very low opportunity.

## Despite some progress, a majority of the zip codes affordable to the median Black and Latinx household are low or very low-opportunity.

Share of affordable zip codes by opportunity level, race/ethnicity, 2013 and 2019

	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low
<b>Black</b>					
2013	4%	10%	26%	61%	
2019	6%	11%	25%	57%	
<b>Latinx</b>					
2013	10%	17%	26%	45%	
2019	12%	20%	26%	40%	
<b>White</b>					
2013	16%	24%	22%	19%	20%
2019	17%	24%	21%	18%	19%

Source: National Equity Atlas analysis of 2013 and 2019 Zillow Rent Index data, 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. Child Opportunity Index 2.0 data was retrieved from diversitydatakids.com. For more information about the index visit

## Expanding the Geography of Opportunity Is Key to Shared Prosperity

This analysis reveals how the rental affordability crisis, driven by systemic inequities and ever-widening income inequality, is disproportionately impacting working-class people and people of color. With the rise in market rents between 2013 and 2019 — a trend that has accelerated since 2021 — the number of neighborhoods affordable to working-class, Black, and Latinx households in American metros has declined. Shrinking neighborhood affordability and the dearth of affordable neighborhoods that provide the necessary conditions for health, well-being, and economic success in many large metros are reinforcing longstanding patterns of racial segregation and creating new ones.

Reversing the trend of shrinking neighborhood opportunity for low-income renters and ensuring that all residents have access to safe and affordable housing in opportunity-rich neighborhoods is crucial to reversing the racial and economic inequities that prevent equitable, prosperous regions. In this moment in which states and localities are deciding how to spend federal “recovery” resources, policymakers should invest in equitable housing strategies. In addition, the pandemic has underscored the need for new and refreshed approaches to housing justice that address the roots of systemic racial inequities, with an ethos of reckoning, repair, healing, transformation, and equity.

GET EMAIL UPDATES.

---

Last Name

---

Organization

---

Email

of color already live.

---

**4. Improve neighborhood quality where housing is affordable and invest in spatial reparations to address past harms caused by targeted disinvestment.**



## Conclusion

The crisis of housing affordability remains an urgent challenge for communities across the country, and it is being driven by both national and local forces. As our analysis shows, there is a growing gap in access to affordable housing and high-quality neighborhoods for working-class renters and renters of color. Protecting renters at risk of eviction and ensuring all households have access to safe and affordable housing is key to an equitable recovery and a strong economy built on shared prosperity.

## Authors

**Thai Le**, Postdoctoral Fellow, USC Equity Research Institute

**Edward Muña**, Project Manager, USC Equity Research Institute

**Sarah Treuhaft**, Vice President of Research, PolicyLink

**Rasheedah Phillips**, Director of Housing, PolicyLink

## Acknowledgments

We appreciate the many individuals and advisers who provided invaluable guidance and insights on this research. A special thanks to our amazing colleagues, Justin Scoggins of the USC Equity Research Institute (ERI) and Michelle Huang, Abbie Langston, and Jennifer Tran of PolicyLink, for their research and data visualization contributions to this report. We also thank Andrew Aurand and Dan Emmanuel of the National Low Income Housing Coalition and Phil Tegeler of Poverty and Race Research Action Council for their thoughtful reviews and suggestions.

[Back to Top](#)

### CONNECT WITH US



### THE NATIONAL EQUITY ATLAS IS A PARTNERSHIP OF

PolicyLink

USC Equity Research Institute

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Donor Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | © 2022 PolicyLink. All rights reserved.

GET EMAIL UPDATES.