

Pghdsa
housing.pghdsa@gmail.com

What to do about your

Slumlord Scum



Pghdsa
housing.pghdsa@gmail.com

To our community, comrades,
and the people of Pittsburgh:

Shelter from the elements allows humans to carry out our lives. These sheltering structures facilitate our social relationships and build our communities. Housing is among the most immediate human needs and is the foundational element to free, healthy communities and people. It is universal to humans, and therefore housing must be a human right for all those in our global community.

We believe it is morally corrupt and grossly exploitative that humans must toil just to hold on to their living space. Americans have little control of their housing as renters, while landlords control and profit from housing for so many. As a result of this unilateral desire for profit, speculation and gentrification continue to ravage and displace marginalized communities and communities of color. We see and reject this immoral, even violent, process.

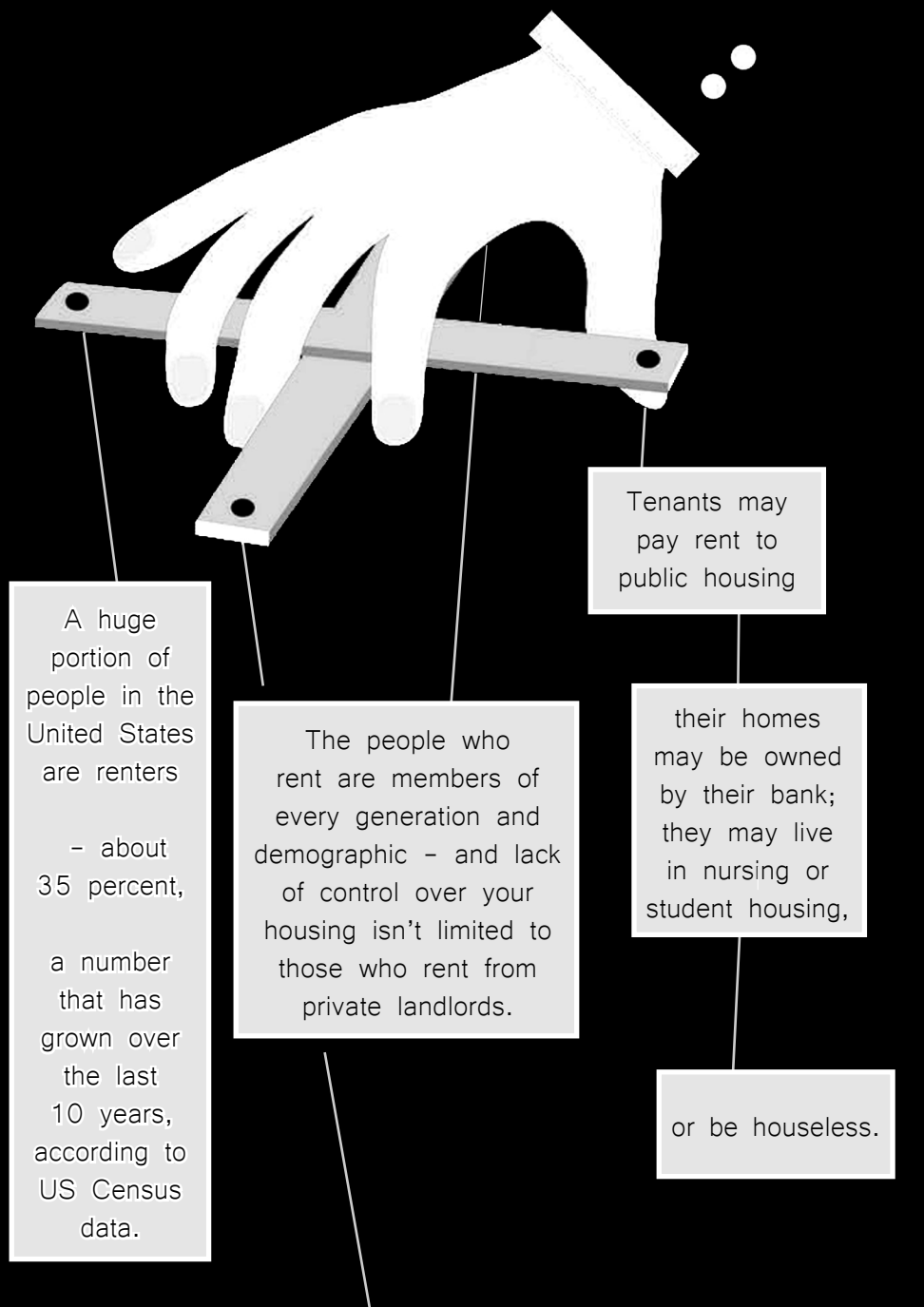
We know it is possible to have beautiful, quality, affordable housing that is controlled by the people who live in it. We not only believe that housing is a human right, but that we all have the right to quality housing. Too often, people are too financially or logistically strained to find safe, secure, affordable, and quality housing - and all too often end up with a slumlord. Slum property is not legal, and city law says it may be dealt with by repair, rehabilitation, demolition, or removal. We want to provide resources to renters with exploitative landlords - as well as making others aware of slumlords who take advantage of renters, so that all renters understand their rights, as well as the actions they can take. We hope this zine gives voice to this knowledge and adds the Pittsburgh DSA Housing committee's voice to those in the Pittsburgh community demanding and fighting for affordable, just housing.



This publication was created by members of the Housing Committee of the Pittsburgh chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), with contributions from housing experts and organizations from around the Greater City of Pittsburgh. We are a group of people trying to arm ourselves with the knowledge to control our housing in our communities. As such, we would like to clarify that while this publication was researched and fact-checked to the best of the writers' abilities, we are not lawyers. This publication, or any publication that follows it, does not constitute or substitute for legal counsel. We do hope that this zine serves as an educational resource to all who need or read it.

In every issue, we seek to take an intersectional approach to housing issues across Pittsburgh. If you would like to contribute thoughts, art or experiences, please contact housing.pghdsa@gmail.com. We are aware, and would like to clarify, that the first issue(s) of this zine were created and produced predominantly by middle-class white people. We seek to highlight the voices of marginalized populations, especially people of color and gender-nonconforming people. Housing injustice disproportionately affects these populations, and Pittsburgh is no exception. If you have suggestions for future zine topics, questions, feedback, or stories, please email us as well.

In solidarity,
PGH DSA Housing Committee



All these tenants share a common situation: their housing is under someone else's control.

The Problem of Housing in Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh has been heralded as a "livable city," but livable for whom? Pittsburgh is among the most segregated cities in the United States, and in recent years, mostly white, affluent workers from around the country have begun to flood into Pittsburgh, driving up rents. In a capitalist housing market, there is no way to secure housing as an individual consumer in "affordable communities" without the high risk of displacing others.


Homeownership is the most common way to "secure" your housing, but the homeownership gap between white people and black people is *wider today than during Jim Crow* because of discriminatory lending, which forces otherwise qualified individuals of color into the rental market. These practices displace generational residents away from their communities, accelerating segregation along racial lines as well as class lines. This must end. Speculators continue to gobble up land and produce luxury housing, which can sit vacant for years in the midst of a housing supply crisis. Pittsburgh lacks upwards of 20,000 units of affordable housing for regular citizens. Developers ensnare more and more land, foreclosing upon "livability" for the majority of Pittsburghers.

One need not be in the clutches of - or running from slumlords forever. We believe that through strong coalitions of aggressive tenant unions, community land trusts and renter cooperatives, people can take control of their housing, stop forking over their earnings for someone else's profit, and improve their lives together.

Solidarity, friends!

ATTRIBUTES OF A SLUMLORD

A slumlord is a landlord who milks a property without concern for tenants, neighborhoods or their own long-term interests. That is, they aim to profit by collecting rent while spending as little as possible on repairs or taxes. Slumlords overcharge for property that is kept in poor repair and allowed to deteriorate. Under [Pennsylvania law](#), it is a landlord's responsibility to ensure that a property is safe and sanitary – tenants can't be expected to be responsible for repairs to a property.

 Here's an example of a state statute to define slumlord property:

“Slumlord property” means residential rental property that has deteriorated or is in a state of disrepair and that manifests one or more of the following conditions that are a danger to the health or safety of the public:

- 1) Structurally unsound exterior surfaces, roof, walls, doors, floors, stairwells, porches or railings.
- 2) Lack of potable water, adequate sanitation facilities, adequate water or waste pipe connections.
- 3) Hazardous electrical systems or gas connections.
- 4) Lack of safe, rapid egress.
- 5) Accumulation of human or animal waste, medical or biological waste, gaseous or combustible materials, dangerous or corrosive liquids, flammable or explosive materials or drug paraphernalia.

In the Shadyside neighborhood . . .

“My last landlord is mostly the reason I was so excited to leave and move into my house. Which is sad, because that was a gorgeous apartment.

The lease said 'landlord will remove trash'. Trash was put out maybe every 6 weeks, so it built up and smelled awful.

It took them weeks to replace smoke detector batteries.

They let their son move into the apartment upstairs, with SIX additional people (in a 2-bedroom apartment).

Their son let whoever he wanted stay over all the time - so unknown people were coming and going every day at every hour.

And the son always left the building door unlocked.

No security deposit back yet, and it's been over a month.

(cont.)

Oh, and he let his son park in my parking spot whenever he wanted, even though my lease states that it's mine.

He also made the guy across the hall live with a HOLE in his ceiling for a week. ”

In another part of Pittsburgh ...

“ My heating/AC unit wasn't working when I moved in, so I called maintenance and they said I should expect someone to come by in a few days.

Over a week later,

a maintenance person woke me up by trying to forcefully enter my apartment, which damaged the lock, and he refused to fix it on his way out.

Also,

I spotted a cockroach in my apartment earlier this week, and when I called the landlord, the person who picked up the phone just put in a maintenance request (I'd already done so before calling) but wouldn't say when to expect an exterminator.

Yesterday when I got back from work, I found the exterminator's business card on my kitchen counter (which was kind of unsettling, to be honest, but I get why they did that).

But they didn't patch any of the small holes in my wall or in the floor that I think were letting the cockroaches in.



Another renter in the building has had problems with mice for months. She called the landlord multiple times, but they always said they didn't find anything. ”

What the landlord did:

- Put out trash very infrequently, creating an unsanitary environment (could lead to mice, rats, insects, etc.)
- Didn't replace smoke detector batteries in a timely way - unsafe!
- Slow to repair a hole in the ceiling
- Failed to honor the terms of the lease (in letting his son use the tenant's parking space)
- Sent maintenance worker who damaged the apartment lock, then refused to fix it
- Failed to address problems with mice, and did an inadequate job dealing with cockroaches, despite repeated tenant requests - not a sanitary environment!

What could you have done?

Tenants Rights:

The authority to designate a slum property rests with the city's building inspector. The city's law says that a slum property constitutes a public nuisance, and shall be abated by repair, rehabilitation, demolition, or removal.

Warranty of Habitability: In 1979, the PA Supreme Court decided that landlords who rent property for people to live in must make sure such property is "safe, sanitary and fit for human habitation." If your landlord does not make the repairs necessary to insure your home is safe, sanitary and fit for habitation within a reasonable time, the Supreme Court says you can do one of three things:

- 1) Cancel your lease and move. You will have no obligation to pay any more rent to the landlord, and any clause in your lease that says you must pay a penalty for canceling the lease before the end of the lease term cannot be enforced against you.
- 2) Make the repairs yourself or hire someone to make the repairs, and deduct the cost of the repairs from your future rent payments. It is important that if you choose this remedy you keep the invoice or receipt you get from the repair person. Make sure the repair person writes on the invoice or receipt the exact nature of the problem they repaired and what they had to do to fix it.
- 3) Withhold all or part of your rent. You should only withhold all of your rent if the problem affects your entire home. Lack of heat would be an example. If the problem only affects part of your home, deduct the percentage of the rent which represents the amount of the home that you can't use because of the problem. You can make such a calculation by estimating the total square feet of space in your home and dividing that amount by the square feet of the room(s) affected by the defect.

If you use a remedy you have under the Warranty of Habitability, your landlord may try to evict you by filing a Landlord/Tenant Complaint with the Magisterial District Judge. If this happens, you will have to go to the hearing and prove that a serious problem exists in your home, that you gave the landlord reasonable notice to fix the problem, and that the remedy you chose under the Warranty of Habitability was appropriate under the circumstances.

(SOURCE: PaLawHelp.org)

Discrimination on the basis of:

- *Color/Race
- *Age
- *Religion
- *National Origin
- *Sex/Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation
- *Family Status (single, married, have kids, etc.)

Examples of Discrimination (Are you being fucked?)

1. Landlord says rent is higher than advertised after meeting in person
2. Landlord denies access to facilities because of race
3. Advertisement for property states that the property is only available to people without children

Landlord No-No's:

A Landlord Cannot Do any of the following to a tenant:

1. Take or sell your property FOR ANY REASON! Even if you're behind on rent or a deposit
2. Shut off utilities or lock you out of the property EVEN IF YOU'RE BEHIND ON RENT OR A DEPOSIT
3. Harass you: This means the landlord is disrupting your ability to quietly and peacefully exist in the space you rent. This behavior must be ongoing or at least repeated for it to be legally considered harassment.
4. Enter the property or allow others to enter the property without notice (emergencies exempt this behavior e.g. gas leaks, fire etc.)
5. Require a deposit for an assistant/service animal.
6. Cancel an existing lease of the tenant if the building is sold to a new landlord.
7. Perform "self-help" evictions, meaning they cannot take actions into their own hands to evict you.



RED FLAGS:



Fine print on your lease: lease must be written in plain language, could be illegal otherwise



Waiver of Notice to Quit Clause: This clause means the landlord does not have to provide notice of eviction. Unfortunately, in PA it is legal to include a clause of this nature, and many leases do



"Don't mind the legal jargon" --- beware fine print (they're not allowed to have fine print). Read your lease!



"I'll handle the receipts" -- Record! Keep a record of everything - you never know what you may need later



"I prefer no kids" - Discrimination based on family status



"Wire me the money and the place is yours" - Don't write any checks until you have a signed lease in hand.



"We don't allow pets" -- If you have a comfort pet, or a service animal for disabilities, they can't kick you out on this basis

RESOURCES

[Attorney General's Bureau of Consumer Protection.](#)

[Neighborhood Legal Services](#) - Provides free legal assistance in civil matters to low-income individuals and families.

[Fair Housing Partnership](#) - If you've experienced discrimination in housing, you can file a complaint with the Fair Housing Partnership. You can also review fair housing law on their website, which lists the protected classes under the law, including race, color, religion/creed, national origin/ethnicity/ancestry, familial status (having children under 18) disability, gender, age and sexual orientation.

[Know Your Rights as a Renter in PA](#) - From the Housing Equality Center of PA. Along with explaining your rights, this resource also provides templates for how to communicate with your landlord. There are sample letters you can use to request repairs, request lease termination for habitability, and address many other issues.

[Pennsylvanians for Modern Courts - Handbook on Rules and Procedures for Landlord-Tenant Relations](#) - This is a great, easy-to-read resource on how your relationship should work with your landlord.

[Pittsburgh Residents](#) - Pittsburgh Department of Licenses and Inspections (PLI): Call 311 to file a complaint about needed repairs. PLI will send an inspector to assess code violations and issue deadlines to the landlord for timely repair. <http://pittsburghpa.gov/pli/>

Other Slumlords // Contact Us

Some indicators of property run by a slumlord include number of police calls, and city and county code violations on the properties.

We've heard of a few:

AHRCO

Lobos

Atallah Khalil (affiliated with Pittsburgh Campus Housing)

Nexus

Know of more? Contact housing.pghdsa@gmail.com