

# Out of Order:

## HOUSTON'S DANGEROUS APARTMENT EPIDEMIC

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University of Texas School of Law—Entrepreneurship and Community Development Clinic

Heather K. Way, Clinical Professor

Carol Fraser, Graduate Research Assistant

### Fact Sheet

#### A City of Renters

- Renters live in **55%** of Houston's occupied housing stock. Houston has the **third highest** number of occupied apartments (320,000) in the country.

#### The Scope of the Epidemic

- **40%** of Houston's apartments were built between 1960 and 1979 when building safety regulations were especially lax. As of 2014, approximately **400,000 Houstonians (more than 20% of the city's population)** lived in these older apartments.
- Before Harvey, **274 apartment complexes** were in poor or unsound condition according to appraisal district records. These units are concentrated heavily in neighborhoods with high percentages of black and Hispanic residents.
- Harvey amplified the scale and severity of the City's preexisting unsafe building conditions, with close to **43,000 apartment units** in Houston damaged by the storm, according to reports in the local news media.
- Apartments with high levels of crime are pervasive, with a disproportionate impact on persons of color. At one apartment complex in Southeast Houston, **284 major crimes** were reported in a single year.

#### Weak Safety and Enforcement Standards

- Houston's Multi-Family Habitability Code meets **only 24% of core public health protections recommended** by the National Center for Healthy Housing and American Public Health Association.
- 28% of Houston's multifamily complexes (more than 1,000 properties) **do not have an active Certificate of Occupancy**, in violation of City laws.
  - Example: At Belfort Townhomes, the City knew the property lacked a certificate of occupancy for close to **9 years** and failed to take any enforcement actions against the property.
- The Multi-Family Habitability Division has **weak and dysfunctional protocols** for enforcing code violations at apartment complexes.
  - Example: At Belfort Townhomes, the City identified multiple code violations that posed a "material risk to the physical safety or health of the building's tenants," in 2012 and again in 2017. The City failed to take any enforcement actions against the property, resulting in the dangerous conditions persisting for more than **4 years**.

## **An Operations Nightmare**

- **9 city units spread across 5 separate departments** administer apartment safety programs in Houston.
- **Houston employs only 2 inspectors** for the entire city to respond to tenant complaints about interior code violations impacting health, including mold, bug and rodent infestations, and sewage overflows.
- The Multi-Family Habitability Division's programmatic inspections **do not cover interior** health and safety issues.
  - Example: At Wesley Square Apartments, tenants made more than **73 reports to 311** for health and safety issues, including a ceiling caving in, bed bug infestations, and mold, none of which were covered by the Division's programmatic inspection of the property.
- The Multi-Family Habitability Division's policy is to wait **6 months** to follow up on safety issues identified through the Division's apartment inspection program and 311 calls.

## **311—Is Anyone There?**

An investigation of tenants' 311 reports at 10 apartment complexes in Houston shows multiple, systemic failures that allow dangerous conditions to persist:

- Tenant calls to 311 are **frequently misrouted** to the wrong department resulting in **long delays** to address major safety hazards.
  - Example: At Tierwester Village, multiple tenants called 311 to report sewage overflows inside and outside their units. The calls bounced back and forth between departments over several weeks, and the City did not inspect the property until **5 weeks** after the first 311 calls came in.
- The Multi-Family Habitability Division **automatically closes** cases from 311 calls after reaching a tenant's voicemail or busy signal.
  - Example: At Crystal Springs Apartments, the Division responded to a tenant's 311 report of a roof caving in by leaving a voicemail message and closing the case. No additional action was taken.
- Tenant reports to 311 of major health and safety issues are **rarely inspected**.
  - Example: Tenants made **58 calls to 311** reporting health and safety issues at Wesley Square Apartments that were referred to the Multi-Family Habitability Division. None of the calls resulted in an inspection.
- Tenants' 311 calls routed to the Health Department are often **closed without any record** of the health issues' resolution.
  - Example: Tenants at Tierwester Village called 311 to report water leaks from the ceiling and mold, but the City has no record of the issues being resolved. The Health Department reported that staff "may have never gotten around" to following up of the tenants' reports.
- **Spanish-speaking callers** reporting safety issues face longer response times.
- The City often **fails to act on 311 calls** when there is a pending landlord-tenant dispute or when the caller is not a lease-holding tenant, even concerned caretakers of elderly and disabled tenants.
  - Example: The City refused to take a report of bed bugs from the son of an elderly leaseholder with dementia because the son was not listed on the lease.

For the full report, visit: <https://goo.gl/6yHTg3>