

Healthy Rental Housing

Healthy Rental Housing policies ensure that homes in our communities meet the safety standards we all want – from good plumbing to lead-free paint. Proactive rental inspections (PRIs) can help detect life-threatening toxins, like mold and asbestos. When communities have Healthy Rental Housing policies, hardworking families are protected from harm and can feel safer and healthier at home.

The Poor Housing Quality Challenge

- Housing that does not comply with local habitability requirements can pose myriad health risks for residents, including exposure to harmful substances, such as lead, asbestos, and mold, as well as pests, all of which are associated with illness in humans.^{1,2}
- A study in Ohio found that children hospitalized for asthma had greater odds of returning to the emergency department or hospital if they lived in census tracts with high numbers of housing code violations.³
- A study in Chelsea MA found that housing code violations were present in over half of inspected properties, with a large majority of the violations classified as high-risk health violations, including insect or rodent infestations and garbage accumulation in living areas.⁴

A Healthy Solution: Healthy Rental Housing

- **Improves Housing Quality** – Within the first decade of implementation, Los Angeles’s Systematic Code Enforcement Program corrected more than 1.5 million habitability violations.⁵ A 2018 audit demonstrated that most code violations were issued within the last ten months, signifying that property owners had largely achieved compliance with older violations.⁶
- **Ensures Homes are Safe**—PRIs allow for code violations, such as faulty smoke or carbon monoxide detectors, to be identified and resolved, particularly where vulnerable populations may be unlikely to make a complaint for fear of eviction or retaliation from the landlord.^{7,8}

- **Addresses Problems Quickly**—Code enforcement officers can respond to cases as soon as within 24 hours, and cities have their own time frames within which to respond to cases, as poor health outcomes often have the potential to worsen with increased exposure.⁹

What is the Evidence that Healthy Rental Housing Policies Can Improve Health?

Comprehensive and proactive rental inspections can not only help resolve health hazards in rental housing, but can prevent them at the outset and keep them from becoming severe.¹⁰ Healthy Rental Housing policies identify code violations and provide a timeframe within which violations should be corrected to keep rental homes safer for tenants.⁹

- Healthy Rental Housing policies can target specific health outcomes such as lead exposure, which contributes to poor health outcomes, particularly in children.^{11,12} Rochester NY passed a PRI policy in 2005 targeting lead in rental homes. An evaluation study conducted in 2011 found that the prevalence of children with Elevated Blood Lead (EBL) decreased by nearly 4% from two years pre-intervention to two years post-intervention.¹³ Between 2007-2015, Erie County NY proactively inspected 7,500 units and found 4,846 units with exterior lead hazards.¹⁴
- Healthy Rental Housing policies that include PRIs can provide crucial information on health hazards currently in rental units. A 2018 study on the Rochester ordinance demonstrated that data from PRIs adds a significant amount of information about health hazards in the housing stock, which can be used to inform public health interventions.¹⁵
- PRIs are effective in rectifying or preventing housing violations that could be harmful to occupant health. In Greensboro NC, the number of housing units with code violation orders dropped 77% over eight years after passage of a PRI ordinance allowing units to be inspected before conditions degraded enough to prompt a tenant complaint.¹⁶ A six-week PRI pilot in Syracuse NY proactively identified 115 code violations, which was a 229% increase from the standard inspection policy.¹⁷
- Evidence from Asheville NC showed the number of residential fires decreased by 50% two years after implementing a rental inspections program. Residential fires began to increase after prospective inspections ended, suggesting a negative association, though more research is needed on the subject.¹⁸
- A New York State program that provided funding to 13 counties to conduct inspections and interventions in homes in high-risk neighborhoods found significant improvements in fire safety, lead poisoning prevention, indoor air quality and other hazards between the initial inspection and follow up. This program included funding to help with remediation, which could have contributed to compliance.¹⁹

How Can Healthy Rental Housing Policies Help Address Health Disparities?

Historical discriminatory practices such as redlining and exclusionary land use zoning have contributed to racial disparities in housing today. Disparities in housing quality can lead to poor health outcomes, such as increased risk of incident asthma.²⁰ Additionally, a study utilizing data from the 2013 American Housing survey found that both structural racism in housing and individual discrimination contributed to disparities in timely maintenance repairs for rentals.²¹ Healthy Rental Housing policies can provide relief for populations that disproportionately experience hazards in the home that can poorly impact health.¹⁰

- A study of tenant reports from 2011-2021 in Boston MA found that racial disparities in asthma triggers, such as mold, were growing in the city, and that compared to neighborhoods with the most White residents, cases in neighborhoods with the fewest White residents took 3.5 days more to be resolved and had a 54.4% lower probability of receiving a repair.²²
- Vulnerable residents with less access to affordable housing may not have knowledge of their rights as tenants and be more likely to be ignored by landlords when complaints arise. Healthy Rental Housing policies provide another avenue for tenants to raise health-impacting issues in their homes and, when PRIs are utilized, could eliminate the need for tenant complaints.⁹

What are Some Future Issues to Consider?

Healthy Rental Housing policies can be designed in a number of different ways to tailor them to the needs of a city. For the most effective policies providing sufficient staff to inspect and respond to complaints in a timely manner, cities should identify a sustainable method of funding. Data sharing about the positive effects of healthy housing initiatives can reinforce the idea that such initiatives must continue to be funded.¹⁰ Additionally, policy makers should account for multiple layers of overlapping governmental jurisdiction and be aware of any preemption issues that might arise at the state level.¹⁰

Resources for Cities

[National Center for Healthy Housing: Proactive Rental Inspections](#)

[ChangeLab Solutions Guide to Proactive Rental Inspections](#)

[National League of Cities: Advancing City-Level Healthy Housing](#)

[National Low Income Housing Coalition: A Primer on Renters' Rights](#)

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