



Messaging Matters: Countering Deficit Narratives to Invest in Housing

Affordable, accessible, safe, and stable housing supports human thriving, which in turn drives a strong economy — we cannot say our economy is working when millions of people are [unhoused](#) or one financial emergency away from [losing their homes](#). **The longstanding housing crisis, which has been only been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, is the result of deliberate government choices about who to exclude from investments. We can't afford to go back to the pre-pandemic status quo. Only massive, sustained public investment can create a housing system that meets the needs of the people, especially women of color and their families.**

Decades of misguided concerns [about the deficit](#) and narratives about [who is worthy of public investment](#) has resulted in insufficient federal housing assistance that has never come close to meeting the needs of every eligible household.

- Federal spending on all housing assistance relative to gross domestic product has [fallen by 30 percent since the mid-1990s](#), all while the [number of cost-burdened renters has ballooned](#).
- In 2019, [37.1 million households](#) spent 30 percent or more of their income on housing, and 17.6 million spent half or more of their income on housing.
- Housing cost increases have particularly impacted renters: while renter incomes grew by 0.5 percent from 2001 to 2018, [rents increased by 13 percent](#). The number of renters who spent more than one-third of their income on rent and utilities each month increased by 6 million between 2001 and 2018, to [20.8 million households](#).

Our government has made monumental investments in housing that [support largely white, largely middle- and upper-class homeowners](#). Invoking arbitrary deficit fears in response to the housing policies that benefit lower-income renters — especially women of color and their families — underscores racist and sexist ideas of deservingness. We can and must make different choices in how we invest in housing.

- Rental cost burdens fall particularly hard on women of color and their families. Among [2019](#) renters, 80 percent of single Latinas, 76 percent of single AAPI women, and 74 percent of single Black women raising children on their own spent more than 30 percent of their income on rent, compared to 40 percent of single white, non-Hispanic men raising children on their own. Of those, 53 percent, 51 percent, and 45 percent were spending more than half of their income on rent, respectively.
- The United States provides universal housing assistance to homeowners through the mortgage interest tax deduction, but it is far from effective — it benefits primarily higher-income and white families and communities and [does not incentivize homeownership](#), as many of its proponents suggest. [Most of our government's total spending](#)

on housing has been subsidizing homeowners this way — to take one example, high-income households received four times the amount of housing benefits that low-income households did in 2015. [The vast majority of benefits from this deduction have gone to the wealthiest of households](#), and most Black and brown families have been excluded entirely. In contrast, there is no universal housing assistance for renters, who are disproportionately people of color.

Housing policy that meets people’s needs is popular, grows and sustains local economies and communities, and is essential to addressing economic inequality as a whole. Any attempt to create a stronger, more equitable economy must prioritize large-scale public investments in housing. Congress must start with expanding rental assistance to every eligible household; investing at least \$70 billion to preserve public housing; and committing at least \$45 billion to building homes through the national Housing Trust Fund.

- [By a 2 to 1 margin](#), the public — including 79 percent of Democrats, 76 percent of Independents, and nearly half of Republicans — wants our government to make major investments in housing needs, **even if it means increasing the deficit**.
- In addition to this strong public support, **deficit-spending on policies that support people — including and especially stable housing, a critical human need — is the economically responsible thing to do**. Conceding to erroneous fears about the deficit and failing to invest big has [led the U.S. economy to chronic underperformance](#) in the past, and Congress can’t make those same mistakes.
- If publicly supported housing were available to all eligible households, consumer spending and personal savings would increase by [\\$48 billion](#); if all necessary capital repairs were made to existing public housing stock, local economies would gain [\\$80 billion in spending](#). Additional studies assert the positive impact that more affordable housing can have on [discretionary income](#), especially for low-income families.
- [Soaring rents over the last two decades](#) have swallowed what modest income gains people have managed to achieve in the labor market. Black and brown families are particularly susceptible to the extreme instability renters face as they are [twice as likely](#) as white families to rent (rather than own) their homes.
- **[Optional topline revenues messaging: We must ask the wealthy and corporations to pay their fair share in taxes and raise revenues for investments in our shared success. [The wealthy](#) and [big corporations](#) are flourishing more than ever, while working families are struggling with unemployment, lost wages, and the ravages of a public health crisis. We should raise revenue to invest in our shared success by making them pay their fair share in taxes.]**