

For Immediate Release: May 10, 2022

Media Contact: Gabriel Charles Tyler, Senior Communications Associate, PolicyLink,
gabriel@policylink.org

New Report Reveals that Renters across the United States Face Shrinking Access to Affordable Neighborhoods, with Black Renters Experiencing the Steepest Declines

Shrinking neighborhood affordability in many large American metros is reinforcing longstanding patterns of racial segregation and creating new ones.

OAKLAND, Calif. — The crisis of housing affordability remains an urgent challenge for communities across the country. [*The Shrinking Geography of Opportunity in Metro America*](#) — a report released today by the National Equity Atlas between PolicyLink and the USC Equity Research Institute (ERI) — presents new data and analysis that illustrate the growing gap in access to affordable housing and opportunity-rich neighborhoods for working-class, Black, and Latinx renters.

“The housing inequities that exist across American metropolitan regions aren’t coincidental. They’re rooted in systemic racism,” said Rasheedah Phillips, director of housing at PolicyLink. “Through new and refreshed approaches to housing justice, we can confront these inequities and ensure that low-income people and Black and Brown communities can access and keep affordable housing in the communities of their choice.”

The analysis leverages robust data sources disaggregated by race, income, and geography, including zip-code-level data on median market rents from Zillow, metro-level data on household income for low-income, Black, Latinx, and white households from the US Census American Community Survey, and zip-code-level Child Opportunity Index data from Brandeis University. The analysis covers the period of economic recovery between the Great Recession and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key findings include:

- **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, which measures neighborhood conditions that impact children’s health and development — while only 38 percent of zip codes affordable for the median-income white household were “low” or “very low” opportunity.

States and localities are deciding how to spend federal recovery and infrastructure funds. This research underscores that investments should expand affordable housing opportunities and improve the quality of affordable neighborhoods — creating good jobs, expanding transit access, and upgrading infrastructure — while protecting existing residents from displacement and stabilizing rents. Policymakers also need to implement equitable zoning reforms to ensure lower income residents and people of color can live in exclusive, high-opportunity neighborhoods.

“In this moment of recovery, local leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to invest in the communities most negatively impacted by the pandemic and systemic racism,” said Sarah Treuhaft, vice president of research at PolicyLink. “This study reveals the urgent need to target resources to prevent eviction, build and preserve permanently affordable homes, and invest in community infrastructure.”

Although this analysis is based on pre-pandemic data, all signs indicate that conditions have worsened, with millions of renters facing [skyrocketing rent increases](#) and [mounting rent debt](#). Shrinking neighborhood affordability in many large metros is both reinforcing longstanding patterns of racial segregation and creating new ones, according to the analysis.

“Nearly six million renter households are currently behind on rent nationally,” said Edward Muña, project manager at ERI. “Having data, like this, that provide in-depth information about the extent and nature of local affordability and opportunity inequities are crucial to guide equitable recovery efforts.”

This analysis is the first in a series exploring the changing geography of opportunity in American metropolitan regions: forthcoming analyses in this series will examine the changing geography of opportunity for Asian American and Pacific Islander communities and Native American communities across the country. Explore the full report and policy recommendations at nationalequityatlas.org/shrinking-geography-of-opportunity.

###

About the National Equity Atlas

The National Equity Atlas partnership between PolicyLink and the USC Equity Research Institute equips movement leaders and policymakers with actionable data and strategies to advance racial equity and shared prosperity. The partnership maintains the National Equity Atlas, the most detailed report card on racial and economic equity in the United States. For more information, visit nationalequityatlas.org.