Thursday, April 18, 2024 / The great American squatter panic

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Ahead on *Today, Explained*…

SCORING IN <Haunted Lodge - APM>

SEAN: Squatters.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nx522GxXzhg)*> ABC7: A woman rented out a guest home in one of LA’s poshest neighborhoods but refuses to leave.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBQRLQk86JI)*> ABC7 NY: The house came with something the new owners did not bargain for – a squatter.*

SEAN: Squatters.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iez-1ULECu8)*> NewsNation: A couple in New York City bought their dream home for 2 million dollars … But nope. A freeloader, a squatter is inside right now and will not leave.*

SEAN: Squatters.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mCpWbm-V08)*> CBS8: A San Diego woman says squatters are living in her rental home and she can't get rid of them.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP-lxRO6cyQ)*> NEWS4JAX: Lawmakers in Tallahassee are taking action to address squatting.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkUL96iJr38)*> Fox 35 Orlando: “Hot dog. Finally, finally. Something's getting done.”*

SEAN: Squatters.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpWzCn0SbPY)*> NY Post: I walked in on weapons, a prostitute, a bunch of dogs in the back.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwgL4YGQ9gI)*> WCNC: It's pretty crazy to think that I could just walk on to any porch that I want to, show up and claim that I have the right to be here. Well, we're hearing now that if it happened to the mayor's house, it can happen to any of us.*

SEAN: Squatters. Coming up on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<BUMPER> Noam Sings Tex 3 with Kid Singing - It’s Today, Today Explained. <laughs>*

SEAN: What's the big story over at Curbed these days?

BRIDGET: The story is squatting. How to do it…

SEAN: <snickers>

BRIDGET: where the best places to squat are, what's the best weather and season for squatting... Just kidding. No, it is squatting.

SEAN: <guffaws>

BRIDGET: But we don't, we don't tell you how, but we have been covering a topic that seems to be interesting for everyone these days.

SEAN: This is Bridget Read. She covers housing for *Curbed*. We asked her what’s up with the sudden interest in squatting.

BRIDGET: You know, we're not exactly sure. There definitely were a few squatting situations in New York City that happened around the same time, so it almost created like a squatter cluster, let's call it. And that was kind of swarmed by the New York Post, which really likes to cover these stories. And that's when it kind of spun out, and now it seems to have kind of reached a fever pitch of squatting.

SCORING IN <Uneasy Street (relaxed, sad, beat) - BMC>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeTvsc1vWY8)*> GMA: “You shouldn't be trying to steal my house. Yes you are.” Adele Andaloro says she inherited this New York City house but a group of people moved in and changed the locks.*

BRIDGET: One that made a lot of headlines involved a homeowner in Queens who was actually herself arrested when she attempted to intervene on men she found living at her property. And that one really went viral:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeTvsc1vWY8)*> GMA: So when Adele had the locks changed again…   
REPORTER: “You're getting arrested right now?”   
ADELE: “I’m being arrested.”   
REPORTER: “For what?”   
ADELE: “For being in my own home.”   
REPORTER: Police then took her away in handcuffs for unlawful eviction.*

BRIDGET: Another one involves a man living in a home that was recently bought by a family, and they're sort of in a dispute. The man living there claims to have been a caretaker of the old owner.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBQRLQk86JI)*> ABC7NY: A signed statement says he was hired by the former homeowner as his caretaker, was paid $3,000 a week, and his employment ended in January of last year when the man died.*

BRIDGET: And then a really grisly example was a woman who actually was murdered when she came upon accused squatters living in her apartment in Manhattan.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pOVaPNV8wU)*> CBS NY: Police say two alleged squatters killed a mother and hid her body in a duffel bag in an apartment.*

BRIDGET: There have definitely been more stories across the country. I did cover one, in LA involving people that moved into a mansion in Beverly Hills.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN_XogCn5hU)*> KTLA5: Some Beverly Crest residents tell us that they are being kept up at all hours of the night and fearing for their safety…*

BRIDGET: There was another LA story involving someone who moved into a home in Hollywood and was renting out the rooms for OnlyFans stars. That one made some headlines.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_gnTtTvIA8)*> KCAL 9: This really is so bizarre, it almost sounds like a Hollywood movie. You’ve got a stunning Hollywood mansion up for sale, OnlyFans models and parties, but this really did happen and apparently it's going on more often than we know about.*

BRIDGET: There have been a lot of stories in Atlanta where there is a quite strong rental home and sort of second home Airbnb home market, so they do have a lot of empty vacant property.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNOu5O6w_3w)*> WSB-TV: A local army officer is back in her DeKalb County home tonight, a week after we told you about how a squatter had moved in and was living in her place.*

BRIDGET: So those are some big ones.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Is there an actual uptick in squatting right now or is this just a story that's getting more attention right now? Do we know?

BRIDGET: The answer, somewhat unsatisfying, is that it's hard to say because squatting, the term is being used as kind of a catchall for something that actually does have a legal definition. So, true squatting involving someone illegally occupying your property has never been given permission, that's the true definition of squatting. Some of these situations involve people who have been given permission to live on a property, whether they're tenants with a lease or whether they're something called a licensee, which is like, you're a guest, you're staying over, you're an Airbnb, you know, you're supposed to be there for two days, whatever. Those are licensees. So some situations involve those people. So those are not technically squatters. So it's really hard to say. There's no squatting database. Squatting itself is really rare. But what we're seeing is sort of landlord-tenant disputes. And some of them are turning violent or sort of salacious, and they're all being grouped together. That's why it's been difficult to parse what exactly we're talking about.

SEAN: In these cases in New York that have been reported on, who exactly is doing the squatting, and why? Are these people without homes? Are these people who are looking for a great deal? What's the story?

BRIDGET: It's a mix. Some of them are certainly people who seem to need a place to say for sure. The woman in Queens who was arrested, she found people living on the property, and one of them was a guy who said, hey, I'm a tenant. I signed a lease with this other guy. So…

SEAN: Hm!

BRIDGET: …there are sort of arrangements within arrangements. The people in the apartment in Manhattan where the horrible murder happened, they fled in a stolen car. They seem to certainly be criminals. The guy in Queens living in the house is a caretaker. He had an agreement, like I said, with the other owner, so he just doesn't want to move, it seems. And then there's some of them, there was another incident that involved people who've been said to be undocumented.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWCL7QXAm_I)*> ABC7 NY: Just last week, police arrested eight migrants believed to be squatting inside of the basement of this home that you see right here. But it's what investigators would find inside – drugs and multiple weapons – along with a seven year old who was playing inside of that same room.*

BRIDGET: It's a mixed bag, you know. Squatters have different reasons for doing it. It's hard to sort of paint them all with one brush.

SEAN: Can we just define what exactly a squatter is in the classical sense and, and what rights a squatter may have?

BRIDGET: Sure. And this is something not well understood, even by a lot of reporters, it seems. But a squatter in New York and pretty much everywhere is someone who unlawfully occupies or enters your property, right? So they are trespassers. They never had permission…

SEAN: Mm.

BRIDGET: …whether your home was vacant, whether you weren't there, they never have been given permission to move into your property. Squatters never really have rights, in a true sense. In New York and lots of states, there's something called adverse possession, which means someone is occupying a property for long enough where they eventually can be deemed the legal owner, the lawful owner. In New York, that takes ten years, and it has to be…

SEAN: Ten years!

BRIDGET: Yes, continuous and unbroken for ten years. So you can imagine how rare that is in New York City, to have a property where the landlord is going to notice you're living there for ten years, you know, it almost never happens.

SEAN: Right.

BRIDGET: What does happen in New York is after 30 days, you have to be taken to court to be kicked out.

*<CLIP> ABC7: Property owners must go through the court system to get rid of them, a system that could take close to two years for a resolution.*

BRIDGET: If the laws around squatting don't provide this huge window to be exploited, then what does is the speed of the court system. So already, housing court was underfunded. Housing court lawyers are overwhelmed with cases. And this got even worse during the pandemic.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzlN_E3vcho)*> NY State Assemblyman Jake Blumencranz: People could stay in a home for years, years without having justice brought to them for staying essentially for free and making a homeowner have to pay their bills.*

BRIDGET: So you have a system that's gummed up by a huge backlog, and that means that even a case that looks like it should be open and shut, right? So those cops said in Queens, ‘Okay, you say you have a lease, let's let a judge decide.’ And it's obviously fake. You know, I've seen leases that are very clearly downloaded from the first page on Google. I'm not a judge, but if I could figure it out, you’d think they could. Those should be very quick. And they're not anymore because the court system is so mired in all of these cases. So that's something that absolutely improving that would make sure that even people who are sort of given the benefit of the doubt under the law as tenants, if they're lying, they would be kicked out quite quickly.

SEAN: So it feels like the laws here are pretty clear, and they certainly don't accommodate murder or theft.  
  
BRIDGET: <chortles>  
  
SEAN: And yet there's a lot of hysterics around squatting right now. Does it add up to you somehow?

BRIDGET: Yes and no. I do think it's possible that people are learning how to exploit some of these rights that tenants and licensees are afforded, right? But it does seem like another motivation is a larger dispute between the landlord and the tenant lobbies in New York City. And a really strong reason why it's powerful to have a narrative where homeowners and landlords are vulnerable and the victims in these situations, when a lot of the times, especially in New York, renters are talking about getting back their power, right? That renters don't have power. So in that sense, squatting becomes this really impactful story where a homeowner is being menaced by tenants who can run amuck.

SCORING IN <Studious red - BMC>

BRIDGET: I think it taps into a really deep fear, whether you're a homeowner or not, of someone coming into your space and doing something violent to you, doing something violent to the property. But I think on the other side, it also taps into the housing crisis that we do have where some people don't have housing at all and are, you know, living in an empty space. Right? So it gets kind of both sides of an issue that's incredibly fraught in both directions. And for homeowners who have to live with someone that they tried to kick out, I mean, it's a horrible situation. And, you know, the cases I've covered can be incredibly damaging.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Bridget Read. She’s with Curbed. Curbed is with New York Magazine. Read her work at curbed dot com.

The politics of squatting, featuring Ron DeSantis, ahead, on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<BUMPER> Wonderwall*

DAVID: I'm David Weigel and I'm a political reporter at Semafor.

SEAN: And tell us, David, how did you come across a story or several stories about squatting?

DAVID: Well, I read a lot of conservative media, which is the driver on a lot of public policy, frankly. I noticed in a number of states, New York first, but then Florida, Georgia, there were stories of squatters, people living in houses that they didn't own or didn't have the right to rent. And then responses by Republican politicians.

SEAN: Hm!

DAVID: But it started with me just noticing that there was a lot of coverage of this in places like the *New York Post* and *Fox News*, and it was not trickling over to, let's say, *The New York Times*, the other big paper in New York, or *CNN*, the other competitor on cable.

SEAN: And as far as the *New York Post* is concerned, I also saw this article about this viral TikTok…

DAVID: Mm hm.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqqdiuXqVdQ)*> Leonel Moreno: Mi gente! E pensado invadir una casa en United States… [fade the rest under]*

SEAN: … where this guy is basically promising, presumably immigrants, that they can come to the United States and just inhabit someone's house.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqqdiuXqVdQ)*> Leonel Moreno: … podemos es proprio la.*

SCORING IN <8bit Adventure Time - BMC>

DAVID: Squatting has gone on for a very long time. These recent stories of people staying on properties, refusing to leave, really pop up around the country. But what turned it into an immigration story was indeed this Venezuelan asylum seeker TikToker, Leonel Moreno. Who I was not aware of until I started looking at squatting but apparently had a big following. Like many TikTokers, leans obnoxiously into the camera, shouts in a high pitched voice, talks about ways to take advantage of the system.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.facebook.com/reel/774422527986595)*> Leonel Moreno: [voiceover translation] My people! I have thought about invading a house in the United States because I learned there’s a law that says if a house is not inhabited, we can expropriate it.*

DAVID: And in this case, he was talking about how migrants could move into homes that no one was paying attention to, get squatters rights and then stay there.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.facebook.com/reel/774422527986595)*> Leonel Moreno: I think that will be my next business: invade abandoned houses.*

DAVID: There weren’t reports of people doing this after the TikTok. There only were – and this is very common with TikTok-based stories – there were only a lot of stories of people reacting to him.

SEAN: Mm.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYpOyXQCPKk)*> KTLA 5: A Venezuelan national dubbed “the migrant influencer” is at the center of controversy this morning. He's been using TikTok to coach migrants how to live in the U.S. by taking advantage of laws protecting squatters.*

DAVID: That fed into something that was already churning really fast on conservative media. It wasn't just that there were cases of people having their homes taken from, out from under them in New York and in Georgia and California, Florida. It was that this migrant TikToker who, again, most people reading this story hadn't heard of before they clicked, was saying, hey, take advantage of this.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.facebook.com/reel/774422527986595)*> Tomi Lahren: Well, as an American citizen, you may not be able to afford to buy a home, but just know the ten million-plus illegals Biden has let in will not lose a wink of sleep as they steal, plunder and pillage what you have worked for.*

DAVID: And so this is not a fake story, but that created the impression that this was taking the nation by storm, that this is something that might be coming to your town.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And then what happens?

DAVID: Well, states start passing bills. In Florida, the story of more than a year ago was Patti Peeples, a woman who owns rental property in Jacksonville, went to check it out, and squatters were living in it, claiming they had the right to be there, being very rude with her.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzJBart7bJk)*> Fox News:*

*TENANT: “Your police report states this is under investigation. So with that being said, we don’t have to leave anything until the police comes back and tell us what will be the decision.”*

*PATTI: “I have every right to be in this house.”*

*TENANT: “You don’t have any right to be in the house.”*

*PATTI: “I do, ma’am.”*

*TENANT: “You do not.”*

DAVID: She filmed herself interacting with the squatters, got local attention, and that was the story in Florida for quite a long time.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaEHmp-3GyI)*> News4JAX:*

*“I own the house.”*

*“It’s been a year since Patti Peeples found strangers had moved into her rental property.”*

*“Haha, record that <bleep>!”*

*“They refused to leave and it was Peeples who was banned from the premises as the case spent weeks moving through civil court.”*

DAVID: In Florida, this bill inspired by Patti Peeples’ work passes unanimously.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaEHmp-3GyI)*> Patti Peeples: It gives me a real feeling of positive hope that we still have the ability to discuss challenges in our society and work with our legislatures in a bipartisan way.*

DAVID: Ron DeSantis signs it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHJM_msIcGA)*> Florida Governor Ron DeSantis: We are, in the state of Florida, ending the squatter scam once and for all.*

DAVID: The signing ceremony was like a lot of DeSantis events where, uh, he comes out…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV0ICT5POuI)*> Florida Governor Ron DeSantis: Good afternoon! Good afternoon. It’s great to be back here in Central Florida… [fade under]*

DAVID: …there are legislators and Republicans in the audience invited to be there. Patti Peeples was pointed out there, she was sitting next to the Orange County Republican Party fundraiser for Florida. And he brought special guests to talk about how, unlike some weak governors, DeSantis was acting on something that could be a problem.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV0ICT5POuI)*> Florida Governor Ron DeSantis: In places like New York and California, that's exactly what's happening in this country. Homes are being invaded, uh, and those states and their laws are not siding with the homeowners, they're siding with the squatters.*

DAVID: One of the stars he brought in that surprised people is Flash Shelton, this Californian who calls himself the “squatter hunter” and helps people with problems getting unpaying tenants off their property to navigate the law, to show up, to draw attention to their case.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV0ICT5POuI)*> Flash Shelton: My fight to change squatter laws started one year ago and I will not stop fighting until squatter laws are changed from coast to coast and homeowners are free from their squatters. Thank you. [applause, fade under]*

DAVID: He had not acted in Florida, but DeSantis brought him there, and he was pretty typical of the way squatting is often covered, not as here's a problem for the government to act on, but here's a nightmare that happened to this family. Could it happen to you? In Georgia, legislation is moving. In New York, legislation is moving. It’s different in each state. So, and one factual point that drives a lot of New York coverage is that New York City has fairly generous renters’ rights. And so if you are in a property for more than 30 days, it takes a court order to remove you. This is the thing that changed in Florida, where now, if somebody is in a property, a homeowner with a deed comes up and says, I need them out, cops can just remove them. They don’t need a court order. That’s not the law in New York. And, that is what becomes sort of the policy focus of these stories. I think the reason that these are so attractive as stories is, they have that feature of something horrible happening that it's easy to imagine happening to you. This is an old nightmare. You can find movies like *Pacific Heights*, where squatters take advantage of somebody and take their lives from out from under them.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gthKu_FqCc)*> Pacific Heights:*

*“He’s changed the locks. You changed the <bleep> locks!”*

DAVID: You add to that the social media factor and how it looks like anyone can do it. You add to that the policy that New York has and this is a great local news story, local TV news story. I'm not saying that in a patronizing way. It is a dramatic story of the kind that, people with cameras filming things live get incredible footage taping. That feeds into the conservative media framework. The New York Post is often the assignment desk of Fox News. Same corporate owner, which goes around the country. One thing I saw while tracking coverage of squatting, was that you could see people resharing these videos all across the country, could see them sharing them on social media, worrying that this would happen.

SEAN: Hm.

DAVID: One of the first clues I had that this was catching on was that I was covering the South Carolina primary in February. I was talking to Congressman Ralph Norman and a resident of a retirement community that he was campaigning in, came up to him and wanted to interrupt our conversation, which I let him do – he’s a constituent, he's allowed to – because he wanted to know what he was doing to stop the squatters. So these stories are going viral in places where people were not immediately at threat of being squatted or had not heard of anything happening like that locally.

SEAN: And we've been talking about these laws being a big deal in conservative media…

DAVID: Mm hm.

SEAN: …but are they getting bipartisan support in these states?

DAVID: Yes. There's really not any partisan opposition to it.

SEAN: Mm.

DAVID: Now, most of the advocacy you’ll hear, most of the surveys that are designed to prove that squatting is up or that there's a trend, they are from landlord organizations. One reason I think some media outlets, and I can't read their minds, didn't jump on this is because it is hard to track. Is this a trend that is rising around the country, or is this a fake trend, because there's a lot of interesting footage of this happening?

SEAN: Mm.

DAVID: You could ask the same question: are there, are there more people stealing packages, or are there more doorbell cameras so we see people stealing them…

SEAN: Mm hm.

DAVID: …and put them on the news. It's one of those questions. But there's not a partisan organization, no lobbying organization for squatters or for people just staying in homes that they don't pay for. There are some movements around letting people stay in abandoned houses. But that's not what this is.

SEAN: Does this squatting incident, this brief squatting panic we've had in the United States these past few months in an election year teach us anything about how some viral video can become an issue that actually leads to legislation being passed?

DAVID: I'd say for some people this is how legislating should work. The Fourth Estate draws attention to a problem, legislators who weren't aware of the problem act on it, and everyone walks away happy. This is the case in Florida. It was a Democrat in Florida who drew attention to this. It was a Republican state legislator who saw it on Fox and wanted to act on it. And then it was a unanimous legislature that voted for it. So this is how a lot of legislation passes. People become aware of the problem and they act. And I see more happy endings than I see partisan rancor on this. I honestly do.

SCORING IN <Watercolor Sunrise - BMC>

DAVID: Even though this didn't germinate in progressive media or NPR or something like that, no one had a problem with it when attention was drawn to it. It was just the difference really was who saw this as a nightmare that they wish didn't happen to them? Who saw it as a public policy issue to fix? That was the difference between, I think this being covered as a nightmare lifestyle magazine story, as you've seen in the past, and being covered on local TV news. So local TV news, drawing attention to something and people acting – that is how a lot of legislating happens.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: That’s David Weigel. Politics. Semafor dot com.

Our show today was produced by Avishay Artsy, it was fact-checked by Laura Bullard, mixed by David Herman, and edited by Matthew Collette with help from Amina Al-Sadi. I’m Sean Rameswaram and this is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]