

Report: As Berkeley densifies, tenant protections needed to avoid displacement

The report argues sweeping zoning changes could worsen gentrification, but others say existing conditions are no better at protecting minorities.

By Supriya Yelimeli, April 8, 2022, 4:58 p.m.



Houses in the Elmwood neighborhood of Southeast Berkeley, famously considered the “birthplace of exclusionary housing.”
Credit: Pete Rosos

A March report from the [Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#) says Berkeley’s ambitious plans to [end single-family zoning](#) must avoid past mistakes in South and West Berkeley if they want to prevent future displacement and housing inequity.

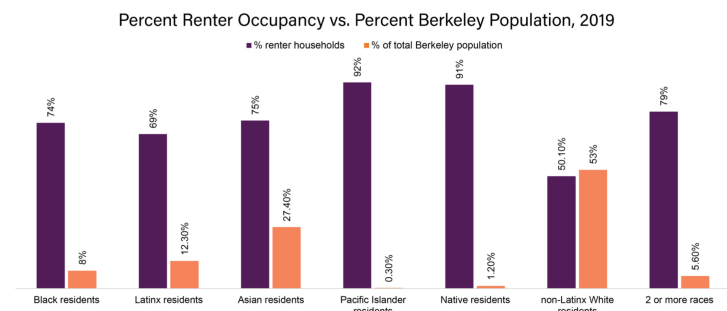
The group used data from the Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board, which commissioned the report, and found that efforts to increase homes by making the city denser could actually exacerbate the housing crisis without the correct anti-displacement measures in certain neighborhoods.

It argues that “upzoning,” or increasing housing density has historically favored developers and caused more gentrification in Berkeley neighborhoods like Fourth Street, Downtown Berkeley and South Berkeley and displaced minority residents in favor of whiter, wealthier occupants.

Strengthening tenant protections, disincentivizing speculation and other anti-displacement measures are crucial if the city is going to add denser housing over the next decade, the report says.

“This is not about trying to stop upzoning; it’s about trying to center the tenants in the policy to make sure that we don’t make

the same mistakes that we have during Urban Renewal,” said Leah Simon-Weisberg, chair of the rent board.

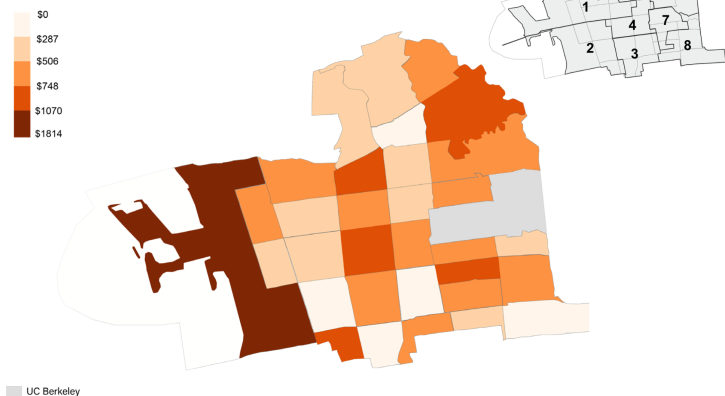


A chart from the report shows that while Black people make up only 8% of the city’s population, they make up 74% of renter households. Credit: Anti-Eviction Mapping Project

The report notes that the majority of people of color who live in Berkeley are renters, and zoning changes that increase housing options without measures to prevent the displacement of existing tenants would have an outsized effect on these groups.

It attributes these demographics to the city’s history of racist housing laws and redlining, which was also the motivation for the City Council to ban single-family zoning. It also includes a study on West Berkeley — with a focus on Fourth Street — to show that upzoning in that corridor increased gentrification and led to a whiter, wealthier neighborhood.

Monthly Median Rent (utilities included)
Change in median gross rent between 2005-2019 (in US dollars)



A chart in the report shows that West Berkeley had the highest increase in rents between 2005 and 2019 and later attributes this to upzoning on Fourth Street. Credit: Anti-Eviction Mapping Project

Advocates of increasing density say the report ignores existing tenant protections, lacks basis

Change in Black Population, 2005-2019



Rent board data in the report shows that South Berkeley suffered the largest decrease in its Black population between 2005 and 2019. Credit: Anti-Eviction Mapping Project

The report outlines a path to creating a denser Berkeley with the City Council's upzoning changes, but largely suggests these changes could be harmful if applied to South and Southwest Berkeley in the same way as wealthier, whiter neighborhoods like the Elmwood and North Berkeley.

West Berkeley Councilmember Terry Taplin said the report was incomplete in its data — for example, it didn't include data that showed upzoning in downtown coincided with more Black residents in that neighborhood. This growth has historically involved student populations.

"I had hoped that the report would cover the impact of 70s era downzoning on Berkeley's Black population over time. I was also surprised that the report neglected the growth of the Black population in the downtown, where we see the highest density," Taplin said. "I was left wondering how exactly low density and downzoning prevents displacement."

He said he wants to see more of a focus on supporting homeownership opportunities for "missing middle" households as the city continues its talks to update the [Housing Element](#) — a plan to add nearly 9,000 new units of housing in the city over the next decade.

Local density advocate Darrell Owens who has written about the city's [housing history](#) similarly questioned its "selective" case studies. Owens has done independent research on neighborhoods like South and West Berkeley and said downzoning already caused many of the harms to Black populations that the report predicts for upzoning.

"[South Berkeley] already lost 75% of its Black population under downzoned conditions," Owens said. "Under the status quo of single-family and quasi single-family zoning in South Berkeley, there's been mass displacement."

Owens said Berkeley already has some of the strongest anti-demolition and renter protections in the country, and continuing to push those forward would support the city's upzoning plans, rather than leaving neighborhoods as they are.

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