

---

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

# JOURNAL SENTINEL

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

# Wires and Fires

## A Journal Sentinel investigation

**Raquel Rutledge,  
John Diedrich  
and Daphne Chen**

---

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

# JOURNAL SENTINEL

## Wires and Fires

Raquel Rutledge, John Diedrich, Daphne Chen

### Item 1:

**Aug. 29, print:** ‘I still feel rage’

**Aug. 25, online:** Electrical fires hit Milwaukee's Black renters hardest. Nobody is held accountable.

<https://www.jsonline.com/in-depth/news/investigations/reports/2021/08/25/electrical-fires-milwaukee-pose-higher-risk-poor-black-renters/8061243002/>

### Item 2:

**Video: Aug. 25, online:** Electrical fires pose a higher risk to poor Black renters in Milwaukee  
<https://www.jsonline.com/videos/news/2021/08/25/electrical-fires-pose-higher-risk-poor-black-renters-milwaukee/5574776001/>

### Item 3:

**Nov. 7, print:** Frayed wires. Defective lights. Fire traps.

**Nov. 3, online:** Frayed wires. Defective lights. Fire traps. What we found doing electrical inspections in one Milwaukee neighborhood.

<https://www.jsonline.com/in-depth/news/investigations/reports/2021/11/03/electrical-inspections-milwaukee-rental-homes-reveal-dangerous-risks/8272467002/>

### Item 4:

**Video, Nov. 3:** Electrical inspections of Milwaukee rental homes reveal dangerous risks

<https://www.jsonline.com/videos/news/2021/11/03/investigation-finds-electrical-hazards-older-milwaukee-homes/8568818002/>

### Item 5:

**Dec. 19, print:** How your tax dollars help keep city renters in danger from faulty wiring.

**Dec. 16, online:** How your tax dollars keep Milwaukee renters in danger from faulty wiring

<https://www.jsonline.com/in-depth/news/investigations/reports/2021/12/16/how-tax-dollars-keep-milwaukee-renters-danger-faulty-wiring/6420441001/>

*Please note, all can be accessed from this primary link:  
[www.jsonline.com/wiresandfires](https://www.jsonline.com/wiresandfires)*

# Wires and Fires

## JOURNAL SENTINEL

Published August 29, 2021 | Online August 25, 2021

PULITZER PRIZE WINNER: 2008, 2010, 2011

SUNDAY • MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

## JOURNAL SENTINEL

SUNDAY, AUGUST 29, 2021

JSOnline.com

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

### Biden promises strikes on extremists

Another terrorist attack 'highly likely'

Robert Burns  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON – President Joe Biden vowed Saturday to keep up airstrikes against the Islamic extremist group whose suicide bombing at the Kabul airport killed scores of Afghans and 13

American service members. Another terror attack, he said, is "highly likely" this weekend as the U.S. winds down its evacuation.

The Pentagon said the remaining contingent of U.S. forces at the airport, now numbering fewer than 4,000, had begun their final withdrawal ahead of

#### Inside

Taliban block airport to most as airlifts wane. **4A**

Wisconsin Marine injured in Kabul airport bombing, reports say. **15A**

Biden's deadline for ending the evacuation on Tuesday.

After getting briefed on a U.S. drone mission in eastern Afghanistan that the

Pentagon said killed two members of the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate early Saturday, Biden said the extremists can expect more.

"This strike was not the last," Biden said in a statement. "We will continue to hunt down any person involved in that heinous attack and make them pay."

See BIDEN, Page 14A

WIRES AND FIRES A JOURNAL SENTINEL INVESTIGATION

### 'I still feel rage'



Tiffany McCarver stands outside the home on North 14th Street where her mother, Patricia Colston, died in a fire.

EBONY COX/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Electrical fires are hitting Black renters hardest in Milwaukee. No one is being held accountable.

Raquel Rutledge, John Diedrich and Daphne Chen  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

Behind the walls of most every home, a powerful energy force snakes through ceilings and down floorsboards, traveling close to the speed of light.

It zips through wires to outlets and into cords that power cellphones and televisions, air conditioners and furnaces.

**Inside**  
Tips for renters to avoid electrical problems. **18A**

Out of sight, electricity is hardly noticed — unless it jumps off course, escaping through a frayed wire, loose connection or overhead outlet. When that happens, it can spit sparks and heat to temperatures hotter than the surface of the sun, vaporizing most anything in its path.

In theory, its destruction does not discriminate. In Milwaukee, it does.

See FIRES, Page 16A



Patricia Colston, a mother and grandmother, died in a suspected electrical fire in an apartment in 2019 on North 14th Street near West Capitol Drive. Colston's friend, Clarence Murrell, who was helping her move in, also died.

COURTESY COLSTON FAMILY

### BILLS 19, PACKERS 0



Green Bay Packers quarterback Jordan Love, left, loses the snap in a preseason game against the Buffalo Bills on Saturday in Orchard Park, N.Y. See more coverage in Sports and at jsontime.com. ASSOCIATED PRESS

Craig Gilbert  
D.C. Bureau Chief  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
USA TODAY NETWORK – WIS.

### Population growth now benefits Democrats

Decade after decade in Wisconsin, Republicans saw themselves as the political beneficiary of robust population growth.

And with good reason.

Throughout the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s and early 2000s, Republicans did better in places with higher growth than they did in places with lower growth.

But the 2020 census illustrates how that pattern has flipped.

An analysis of census and presidential election data shows that faster population growth is now more strongly correlated with voting Democratic than voting Republican in Wisconsin.

And high-growth counties have seen the biggest Democratic gains in recent years.

The most important example of these patterns by far is Dane County. It has grown at a faster rate and added many more people than any other county in Wisconsin. And it gets bluer with almost every election.

But other places are contributing to the shifting relationship between population growth and voting.

See SHIFTS, Page 22A

**EARLY FALL SALE!**  
**SAVE up to 90%!** **CLEARANCE ON 100'S OF CHANDELIER'S! FANS!**  
**BBC LIGHTING** **20% OFF ALL ONLINE LIGHTS & FANS!** **BATH & OUTDOOR LIGHTS!** **TABLE & FLOOR LAMPS!**  
414-933-0808 • 2015 W. St. Paul Ave. • Milwaukee • www.bbclighting.com  
Latest Styles • All Best Brands Available • Open Mon-Fri 9-5

AWARD WINNING SHOWROOM!  
FANS STARTING AT \$49.95  
EXTRA 20% OFF CLEARANCE LIGHTS!

MICG20200809-09

#### Going solar

More Wisconsin homeowners are installing solar energy systems as federal incentives are set to decrease. **1B**

#### 27 must-see Summerfest acts

After Summerfest was canceled for the first time in 2020, this Big Gig lineup is nothing short of astounding. **1E**

#### Weather

High 89° | Low 77°  
Thunderstorms.  
Forecast, **12C**

Volume 139 | Issue 287

Home delivery pricing inside  
Subscribe 844-900-7103  
©2021 City & suburbs \$3.00  
\$4.00 & higher elsewhere



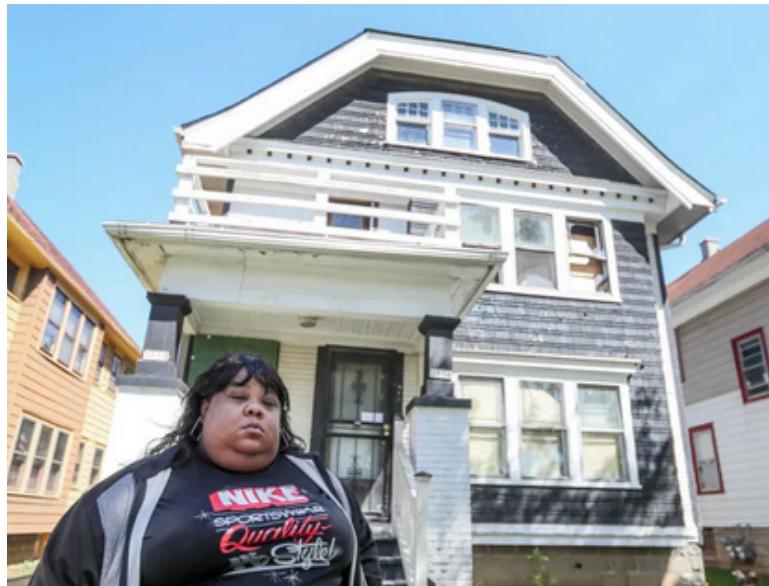
Read the pdf or click here to read online

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

# JOURNAL SENTINEL

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

## Wires and Fires



Tiffany McCarver stands outside the home on North 14th Street where her mother, Patricia Colston, died in a fire.

## 'I still feel rage'

Electrical fires are hitting Black renters hardest in Milwaukee. No one is being held accountable.

By Raquel Rutledge, John Diedrich  
and Daphne Chen, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Behind the walls of most every home, a powerful energy force snakes through ceilings and down floorboards, traveling close to the speed of light.

It zips through wires to outlets and into cords that power cellphones and televisions, air conditioners and furnaces.

Out of sight, electricity is hardly noticed — unless it jumps

off course, escaping through a frayed wire, loose connection or overheated outlet. When that happens, it can spit sparks and heat to temperatures hotter than the surface of the sun, vaporizing most anything in its path.

In theory, its destruction does not discriminate.

In Milwaukee, it does.  
Patricia Colston didn't have

much choice of neighborhoods in Milwaukee. Blind in one eye with severe arthritis making it difficult to work, the 53-year-old had trouble paying rent in the past. With multiple evictions on her record, relatives said, she was desperate.

She rented the upper floor of a 1920s bungalow on the city's north side in October 2019. Records show the property on North 14th Street had a history of electrical code violations.

A couple of days after she moved, Colston's friend, 60-year-old Clarence Murrell, was helping her settle in. The pair were likely sleeping as calamity unfolded behind the walls. It was before dawn on a cold Saturday.

By the time the downstairs neighbor smelled it and called 911, it was too late. Thick, sooty smoke had filled the apartment. Firefighters found Colston and Murrell unconscious and were unable to resuscitate them.

Police and fire reports were clear: Fire was smoldering among the electrical wires in the space behind the walls. They suspected that's where it started. Electrical testing was needed to confirm, they wrote.

But that didn't happen. Instead, the fire was treated as a tragic accident.

Six blocks away, in the previous year, investigators found that faulty wires ignited a fire that ripped through another



**Patricia Colston, a mother and grandmother, died in a suspected electrical fire in an apartment in 2019 on North 14th Street near West Capitol Drive. Colston's friend, Clarence Murrell, who was helping her move in, also died.**

rental unit. The tenants had repeatedly complained to the landlord about sparking outlets, according to police reports.

And just this past April, fire devoured the top floor of another nearby duplex with a litany of unfixed electrical violations — so many that the city had issued a warrant for the landlord's arrest.

Those fires, too, were considered mere accidents, despite the complaints, violations and what electricians say: Most electrical fires are predictable and preventable.

These cases are not anomalies. They represent a little-known and life-threatening disparity in Milwaukee, an investigation by the Milwaukee

Journal Sentinel has found.

Fires suspected to be started by faulty electrical wiring scorch homes in Milwaukee's poorest ZIP code at five times the rate of the rest of the city.

The already distressed 53206 ZIP code — and areas surrounding it — are the epicenter for electrical fire danger in the city.

Police and fire investigators, as well as federal, state and local officials, do little to stop it, the Journal Sentinel found.

The people affected the most: low-income Black renters.

Authorities, by their own admission, routinely do not thoroughly investigate electrical fires, marking their causes as "undetermined" and, in the process, denying families closure and legal recourse and leaving policymakers in the dark about the problem and how to address it.

Will Sherard, the owner of the house where Colston and Murrell were killed, denied any knowledge of what caused the fire.

"There was no electrical fire over there," Sherard told a Journal Sentinel reporter. "I do not know what happened over there."

Sherard said he had never seen the police or fire reports that both stated faulty electrical wiring likely started the fire. The Journal Sentinel left a copy of the reports for him at

his office. He has declined to answer additional questions.

The Journal Sentinel's findings expose another systemic assault on the already beleaguered 53206 neighborhood, which has long suffered from neglect and discrimination by governments and corporations. The home where Colston and Murrell perished sits in the heart of a community that, aside from small pockets of stability, faces the city's most severe poverty, crime, unemployment and evictions rates — essentially trapping many families in substandard housing.

Nearly 95% of the population in 53206 is Black, and more than half are renters. Electrical fires disproportionately ravage rental properties: A Journal Sentinel analysis of fires from 2009-19 showed that while an average of 30% of the city's homes were renter-occupied, 62% of suspected electrical fires occurred in rental units. And nearly two-thirds of the fires took place in ZIP codes that are predominantly Black.

Electrical fires often start in concealed spaces, making them stealthy and more deadly than other kinds, such as cooking fires.

While electrical fires account for an estimated 10% of all residential fires, they cause 18% of the fatalities, according to the National Fire Protection Association, an international

nonprofit organization that conducts research on fires.

The association estimates that every year 300 to 500 people nationwide die, and more than 1,200 are injured in residential electrical fires.

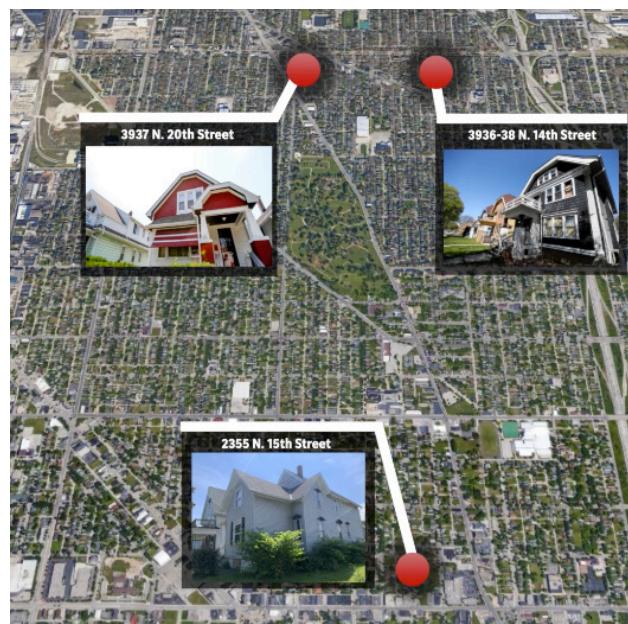
But the association's figures are significantly undercounted because they are dependent upon shoddy data and incomplete reporting from government entities, cloaking the full scope of the problem, the Journal Sentinel's investigation found.

In fact, the fire that killed Colston and Murrell wasn't included in government data used to calculate the association's figures.

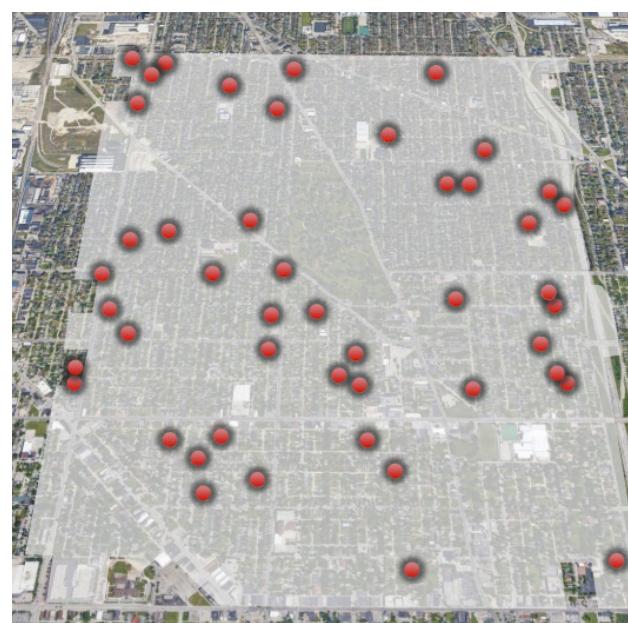
Milwaukee once had several safeguards in place that helped detect dangerous wiring and other problems. But starting in 2011, a group of state lawmakers, some moonlighting as landlords, dismantled the safeguards in a series of sweeping laws promoting the interests of landlords.

Milwaukee's Department of Neighborhood Services, whose mission includes protecting renters' safety, has failed to hold unscrupulous landlords accountable as violations mount, allowing them to continue renting unsafe units.

Mayor Tom Barrett declined interview requests, referring questions to Erica Roberts, the city's commissioner of building



**Three properties in 53206 with extensive electrical code violations or complaints prior to suspected electrical fires.**



**Such fires have occurred far more often in 53206 than the rest of the city in the past decade.**

inspections.

When told of the Journal Sentinel's findings, Roberts said: "This is interesting data, and it's sad data."

Roberts said the city does what it can to protect renters. "We do everything in our power

within the ordinances,” she said. “We’re certainly open to suggestions.”

Milwaukee police and fire departments don’t have electrical engineers on staff. If they don’t suspect arson or homicide, they don’t typically investigate electrical fires, they said. The same is true of the state fire marshal.

Heiner Giese, an attorney for the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, a landlord trade group that lobbied in favor of the landlord-friendly laws passed by state lawmakers, said he wasn’t aware that Black renters in Milwaukee were being disproportionately affected by suspected electrical fires and that little was being done to prevent the problem.

“No landlord wants to wake up and see on the news they’ve had a fire and one of their tenants has died,” Giese said. “Do we need more inspections and new laws that require better electricity in older buildings? That depends on how many people are killed or injured in a year for whom such inspections would help.”

Colston’s nephew, 29-year-old Earl McDougle of Milwaukee, said he is shocked by how little anyone has cared about the deaths of his aunt and her friend.

“I still feel rage,” he said, “and feel like she still ain’t got justice.”



**Ricky Carter reviews police records on a fire that occurred in a unit he shared with his girlfriend, Leilani Zollicoffer, and her two young daughters.**

### **Warrant doesn't stop landlord from renting**

Ricky Carter frequently had seen lights flicker in the apartment he shared with his girlfriend near North 15th Street and West North Avenue. But on the night of April 26, something was different.

Carter was getting ready for bed. His girlfriend, Leilani Zollicoffer, was asleep; so were her daughters, ages 5 and 2. The lights in the living room and kitchen flickered, rapidly. Carter said he smelled burning and heard a faint beeping from the smoke detector.

When he looked to find the



**An April fire that investigators suspected was caused by faulty electrical wiring destroyed many of Leilani Zollicoffer's belongings. She rented a duplex near West North Avenue and North 15th Street.**

source, he saw an odd sight: smoke coming up from the living room floor. He shook his girlfriend awake, and the couple rushed in to get the girls, whose bedroom was filled with smoke.

The family hustled out and called 911. They watched as firefighters hosed down the house. Their belongings were destroyed.

"That fire could have started in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep. Then what?" Zollicoffer, 24, said.

Carter, 30, said he had been worried about the electrical system. "I thought something was going to happen," he said. "I just didn't expect it to happen that soon."

In their report, firefighters wrote, "This fire appears to have been caused by an electrical issue." But as with the deadly fire that claimed the

lives of Colston and Murrell, the reports reveal that little investigation was done into the specific cause of the blaze. Officials labeled it "undetermined."

Records show the duplex on North 15th Street had a documented history of electrical violations dating to at least 2012, revealing failures by city regulators, courts and others to hold unresponsive landlords accountable.

The property changed hands several times over the last decade, with a man named Tommy Cole purchasing it in 2016. Cole failed to fix electrical problems or pay fines associated with the violations, resulting in a warrant for his arrest, records show. The warrant against Cole remains active, according to records.

Cole and his attorney did not return calls and emails from

the Journal Sentinel. Cole, who served time in federal prison on a 2006 drug conviction, pleaded guilty to new federal drug charges in 2019. He is awaiting sentencing, records show.

He sold the duplex to Dominique McKinney and Jerome Ward in April 2019. That same month the city again issued electrical violations on the North 15th Street property.

The city immediately began warning McKinney to fix the faulty electrical system, which, reports show, appeared to be the work of a “handyman,” not a licensed electrician. There were double-tapped breakers in the service box — which can overload the system and cause sparks — and other serious safety violations, according to the report.

Shortly after inspection reports were sent to McKinney, city inspector Matthew Jenrich personally delivered the order to fix the violations to her on May 9, 2019. “I also told her that as long as they are working on correcting the violations, we can work with them,” he wrote in a report.

A month later, Jenrich spoke to a renter living in the duplex and was told nothing had been done by McKinney about the electrical violations, according to city records.

The following month, in July 2019, the case and a \$980 fine were referred to municipal

court. McKinney failed to pay the fine, and, as with the previous owner, a warrant was issued for her arrest.

Yet the municipal court’s own practice undercuts its effectiveness when it comes to such warrants. The court generally allows for people with municipal warrants to have at least four contacts with police, for things like speeding, before police carry out the arrest order.

The approach was adopted in an effort to stop the practice of jailing low-income people who might not be able to pay fines and traffic tickets. Landlords and others who can pay fines benefit.

Records show the city continued to warn McKinney to fix the electrical problems, notifying her by letter or in person at least seven more times after the warrant was issued. Records do not show that McKinney fixed the problems.

The city has the power to declare, on an emergency basis, a house to be unfit to inhabit when the home constitutes a “substantial threat” to the health or safety of tenants. The city can “placard” the property, which means posting signs barring people from living there. In this case, the city declined to do so.

“At no time in our involvement with this property ... did we believe that the observed electrical violations constituted

a placard," Steph O'Connor, a city spokeswoman, wrote in an email. "We do not take the placarding of a property lightly and we are constantly weighing the risks of violations against the risk of displacement and potential homelessness when placarding occupied properties."

Roberts, the city's building inspection commissioner, said she reviewed the case carefully and, despite the eventual fire, believes the city handled it properly.

"I felt comfortable that we did the best we could," she said.

The warrant for McKinney was issued in 2020 and was active at the time Zollicoffer rented the upper flat from her in November.

Zollicoffer said she was concerned about the electrical system in the house soon after she moved in: Some outlets didn't work. An overhead light was inoperable. When they plugged a lamp into one outlet, the light-bulb popped and then stopped working, she said.

Zollicoffer complained to McKinney about the electrical problems as well as the heat not working. She said she called McKinney repeatedly and sent several text messages, which she provided to the Journal Sentinel. Nothing was fixed, Zollicoffer said.

McKinney did not respond to messages left at her home by a Journal Sentinel reporter.

Reached by phone later, McKinney was asked about the electrical violations at the rental unit and the fire. McKinney said she couldn't talk but would be available to comment later. She has since failed to return repeated phone messages.

The other owner, Ward, is facing drug charges in Milwaukee and Waukesha counties. He and his attorney did not return repeated phone calls from the Journal Sentinel.

Zollicoffer said she couldn't believe that McKinney was allowed to rent out the unit given her flouting of the city's authority, to the point that a warrant was issued for her arrest.

"I feel like she should be in jail," Zollicoffer said. "We were homeless and house-hopping, and now we are back to square one."

The day after the April blaze, Zollicoffer recalled she was texting with McKinney about the fire and the many problems with the rental unit that were not fixed, including the lack of heat.

McKinney's response: "You warm?"

### 'It's beyond our scope'

When fire investigators don't believe a fire was started intentionally or a crime was involved, they often don't dig deeper.

"That isn't really what we do," said Andrew Timm,

## Online Interactive Graphic

Online interactive version of the graphic can be viewed at [www.jsonline.com/wiresandfires](http://www.jsonline.com/wiresandfires)



Electrical fires typically start in a handful of ways and most are preventable, experts say.



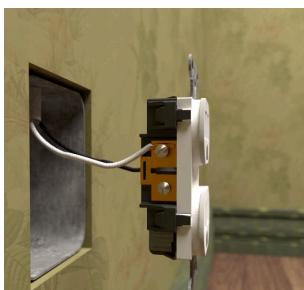
Sparks coming from a light switch are a sign of an incorrectly installed switch or damaged wiring.



A flickering light is a sign of trouble and should be examined by a qualified electrician.



An outlet plate that is discolored brown or black indicates problems and should be addressed immediately.



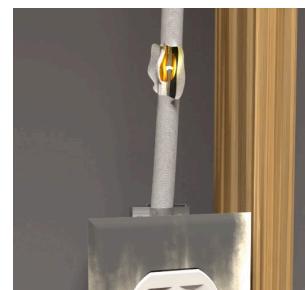
When wires are not properly and tightly installed, current can jump across those gaps, causing sparks and potentially a fire.



Loose outlets are also a regular contributor to electrical fires. The blades from a plug should slide into the outlet easily and fit snugly.



Overloading an outlet with power strips can cause the outlet to overheat. A lack of outlets or non-functioning outlets often lead to dangerous overuse of extension cords.



Worn or damaged insulation is a problem. Wire insulation can get chewed by rodents or frayed over the years by heat or moisture.

assistant chief with the Milwaukee Fire Department. “It’s beyond our scope.”

In fact, fire investigators with the state Department of Justice and the Milwaukee police and fire departments acknowledge that unless a crime is likely involved, they do not investigate most suspected electrical fires, labeling them “accidents” and listing their causes as “undetermined.”

More than 75% of suspected electrical fires in Milwaukee’s single- and two-family homes had the cause listed as undetermined or accidental, according

to a Journal Sentinel analysis of fires from 2014-19.

“If we find an electrical issue — if it’s degraded wiring or loose connections or conductors — we may stop short,” said Brian Liethen, a special agent with the state Arson Bureau. “Because if it’s not a crime, we can allow others to come up with the exact cause.”

Nationwide, regulators have long known that failure to nail down the precise cause of a fire allows those responsible to escape accountability and perpetuates the problem. A 2014 report by the National

Association of State Fire Marshals found that the lack of thorough investigations and determination of the causes of fires were nationwide concerns. The report noted: "What gets measured, gets fixed."

Electrical fires usually start in a handful of ways. Damaged wiring insulation, resulting in exposed and touching wires, can cause electricity to jump or "arc," generating heat or sparks. Broken light switches, loose outlets and service panels installed by unqualified contractors are also common causes of electrical fires.

Landlords often blame tenants for dangerous extension cord use, but city regulators say the responsibility falls on landlords to make sure there are enough outlets and that they are working, reducing the need for extension cords.

While police and fire officials don't usually drill down into the causes of electrical fires, insurance companies, which have a vested interest, often do.

But when landlords pay cash for buildings rather than take out loans — as is common in distressed areas of Milwaukee — they're not required to have insurance.

Insurance companies are not subject to public open records laws, and so it's difficult to know how many rental properties are not insured.

In a random sample of 25

rental properties in the 53206 ZIP code, however, the Journal Sentinel found 75% had no mortgage loans on file with the Milwaukee County Register of Deeds — meaning they likely didn't have a mortgage and thus were not required to have insurance.

In the case where Colston and Murrell died, landlord Sheppard told police he had no insurance, according to the police report.

No insurance, no further investigation. And no accountability.

"Wow," said city Ald. Khalif Rainey, whose district includes a portion of 53206 and surrounding ZIP codes, when the Journal Sentinel told him the findings of its investigation. "You mean to tell me they're renting uninsured homes to renters?"

Rainey said he wasn't aware electrical fires were such a problem. That's not surprising considering data collection about electrical fires at the local, regional and national level is scant and based on voluntary participation. The U.S. Fire Administration does not require the nation's 30,000 fire departments to report fires, even when they result in death.

And often when the fires are reported — about three-quarters of the fire departments do submit at least partial data

— key details are frequently missing, including information about the cause and whether there were any fatalities.

Of the Wisconsin residential structure fires reported into the National Fire Incident Reporting System from 2014-19, 60% listed nothing in the box for “factors contributing to ignition,” the Journal Sentinel analysis showed.

Based on the limited entries that did include factors that started the fires, the national database indicates there are an average of 30 suspected electrical fires across the city of Milwaukee every year, five of which occur in the 53206 ZIP code.

The database also showed that between 2009 and 2019 there were at least 3,077 suspected electrical fires in Wisconsin homes — an average of about 280 every year and a 40% increase during the 11-year period.

To find what government data failed to record, the Journal Sentinel pieced together information on residential electrical fires in Wisconsin through open records requests with local fire departments, medical examiners offices, city departments of neighborhood services and state fire marshals as well as the national database maintained by the U.S. Fire Administration.

The national database lists 229 fire-related deaths

statewide from 2009-19, with eight deaths in Milwaukee.

In reality, Milwaukee had at least 68 fire-related deaths, the Journal Sentinel found.

### Safeguards stripped away

As other cities and states enact protections for tenants, Milwaukee and Wisconsin are headed in the other direction. What few safeguards the city and state did have were rolled back in a series of landlord-friendly bills passed by the state Legislature and Milwaukee Common Council in the past decade.

The front line in protection for renters is the Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services. Yet the department doesn't routinely inspect single- and two-family rental units, leaving tenants on their own to determine if they are safe.

The city also softened its permitting requirements for some electrical work, such as replacing outlets and switches. In a council meeting in 2013, Tom Mishefske, operations director for the neighborhood services department, said some electrical work didn't need the city's oversight and that the change was a “minor lightening of the requirements.” He equated changing an electrical switch or outlet to replacing a faucet on a kitchen sink.

In a recent interview with the Journal Sentinel, Mishefske

said the change in the permitting requirement was the result of pressure from some members of the Common Council and property owners.

"We got a lot of heat from rehabbers and others, including aldermen," he said.

Pulling a permit triggers an inspection by the city's electrical experts who can verify whether the work was done properly.

In the house where Colston and Murrell died, inspectors ordered a permit be pulled for electrical repairs in 2017, two years before the fire. The Journal Sentinel could find no permit on file.

Danell Cross, a longtime resident of neighborhoods next to the 53206 ZIP code who herself escaped a blaze in a unit she was renting, said the problem begins with a lack of accountability.

"People are dying, and they are not telling us who is responsible for that loss of life," said Cross, now director of Metcalfe Park Community Bridges, a nonprofit neighborhood improvement group. "And that is something that needs to change."

Regarding the duplex where Carter, Zollicoffer and her two young daughters narrowly escaped, Cross said: "If this was a young white family in a white neighborhood, they would not have even been allowed in that house with



**'People are dying, and they are not telling us who is responsible for that loss of life,' says Danell Cross, Metcalfe Park Community Bridges director, shown at a community event in 2014.**

those code violations."

State lawmakers outlawed the city's residential rental inspection program five years ago at the prompting of the Wisconsin Realtors Association and the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin. Both groups had lobbied the Legislature to pass a law banning such programs.

The inspection program required rental units in certain neighborhoods with many negligent landlords to be certified by building inspectors.

The Realtors and apartment associations argued such programs were costly and unfair.

Representatives of at least two neighborhood associations wrote to city and state officials expressing support for Milwaukee's program and their concern that lawmakers sponsoring the changes had conflicts of interest, emails obtained by the

Journal Sentinel show.

"Inexplicably, this bill will reward the bad apples," wrote Bill Werner, president of the Mariners Neighborhood Association, in a 2015 email to city and state lawmakers. "It is troubling that of the five sponsors/co-sponsor of the bill, three are listed in the Blue Book as realtors and one is a former broker."

At least one study showed Milwaukee's residential rental inspection program worked.

A 2014 analysis by the city's Department of Neighborhood Services found the number of violations spiked in the previous five years and then declined over time, indicating problems were being addressed, according to the authors. And, the analysis found, complaints from renters to city aldermen about the condition of their apartments and the responsiveness of landlords dropped substantially.

The program allowed inspectors access to properties in vulnerable areas and routinely exposed violations for such things as defective electrical switches, improper wiring and missing fire safety alarms, the authors wrote. They also said the program encouraged landlords to take a more proactive approach to maintenance.

The program was so successful they recommended expanding it into other neighborhoods.

Since the routine inspections ended, the number of properties being cited for violations in the neighborhoods that the program targeted has dropped nearly 80%, a Journal Sentinel analysis showed. City officials say that's most likely because tenants are afraid to call and complain and, as a result, inspectors aren't getting to the properties.

In another change in 2016, then-Gov. Scott Walker signed into law a provision that said properties did not need to be inspected and brought up to code at the time of sale. In Milwaukee, that nixed an exterior inspection of all properties changing hands.

Wisconsin law changed again in 2018 and now allows rental inspection programs but caps the fees that cities can charge landlords to do inspections. City officials say the change makes it cost-prohibitive and therefore they are not doing them.

"It is the responsibility of the landlord to maintain their property and provide a safe unit for the tenant," said Mishefske, the neighborhood services official. "If we get a complaint, we'll investigate."

That kind of complaint-based system is deeply flawed, according to tenant advocacy groups.

Tenants often don't have the expertise, and they worry

they may be evicted for complaining, said Gregory Miao, an attorney with ChangeLab Solutions, a national health equity and housing improvement group based in Oakland, California. He said at least 15 of the nation's largest cities, including Baltimore, Minneapolis and Boston, have various types of residential rental inspection programs.

"It saves lives," Miao said.

### **Violations preceded fatal fire**

In October 2019, Patricia Colston was already renting from Will Sherard — known in Milwaukee for his poor upkeep of dozens of properties — before she moved to the North 14th Street duplex where she died.

Sherard, who was jailed for several days in 2011 by a federal judge for failing to follow court orders and clean up lead paint in his units, was also threatened with jail in 2018 for failing to pay more than \$60,000 in fines from code violations. Faced with being locked up again, Sherard paid a portion of the fines and set up a monthly payment schedule.

Sherard had sold the place where Colston had been living. He offered her the option to move to another of his rentals on North 14th Street, just off West Capitol Drive. Family members told the Journal Sentinel Sherard didn't mention



**Landlord Will Sherard attends a sheriff's sale of foreclosed properties in 2016.**

any problems with the electricity in the house. But records show the property had been repeatedly cited for "potentially hazardous" electrical wiring that was "improperly installed or defective."

The place was also a mess, the family members said; somebody else's belongings were still scattered throughout when Colston moved in.

Her friend, Clarence Murrell, offered to help her clean on the evening of Oct. 11.

Before sunrise, a downstairs neighbor smelled smoke and called 911.

"It smells like it's burning," the woman told the dispatcher. "It smells like something electrical is set on fire and it's burning."

Firefighters arrived at 6:17 a.m. They saw no smoke outside, the reports say. They inspected the basement and entire first floor with a thermal imaging camera. When they moved up to the second floor

they still found no heat.

But when they opened the door to Colston's apartment, heavy smoke poured out. They could see fire burning in a living room wall. It took them less than 25 seconds to put it out.

When firefighters moved to the back of the house, they found Colston and Murrell on the kitchen floor, 10 feet apart near the back door. They were covered in soot and unresponsive and were pronounced dead soon after.

The autopsies list their cause of death as "smoke and soot inhalation."

Murrell's family last year filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Sherard and his company, Morocco Investments, alleging the landlord failed to maintain the electrical system in the duplex where Murrell and Colston died. The family's attorney, Justin Padway, said he is taking depositions and that no trial date has been set.

Angel Sodamade, Murrell's daughter and a plaintiff in the case, said her father deserved to be safe.

"I lost a father, and my son lost his grandfather," she said. "We want justice and to ensure that no other family is harmed at the hands of Sherard and other reckless landlords."

Sherard's attorney in the case, Robert Meyeroff, declined to be interviewed.

Sherard bought the house

where Colston and Murrell died from a sheriff's sale for \$12,100 in 2014, records show. Following complaints three years later, the city cited the property for 28 code violations, including several pertaining to electrical problems. It's unclear whether the electrical problems were properly fixed as the Journal Sentinel could find no permit on file — despite the city's orders that a permit be pulled.

"You don't just buy some property and slap some paint on the wall and throw somebody in it," said Tiffany McCarver, Colston's daughter. "(Sherard) should have had it up to date, and it should have been checked out. ... When you pay rent somewhere, you pay to feel safe, not to worry about if your house is going to catch on fire."

Sherard sold the house several weeks after the fire for \$20,000. The new owner took out a permit in March to upgrade the electrical service to the building, according to city records.

McCarver, a 35-year-old from Milwaukee, said she could not salvage any of her mother's belongings after the fire because they were all destroyed, covered in black soot.

And, she said, the landlord refused to return the rent or her mother's security deposit.

"He said he wouldn't because her stuff was still in the house," McCarver said.

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

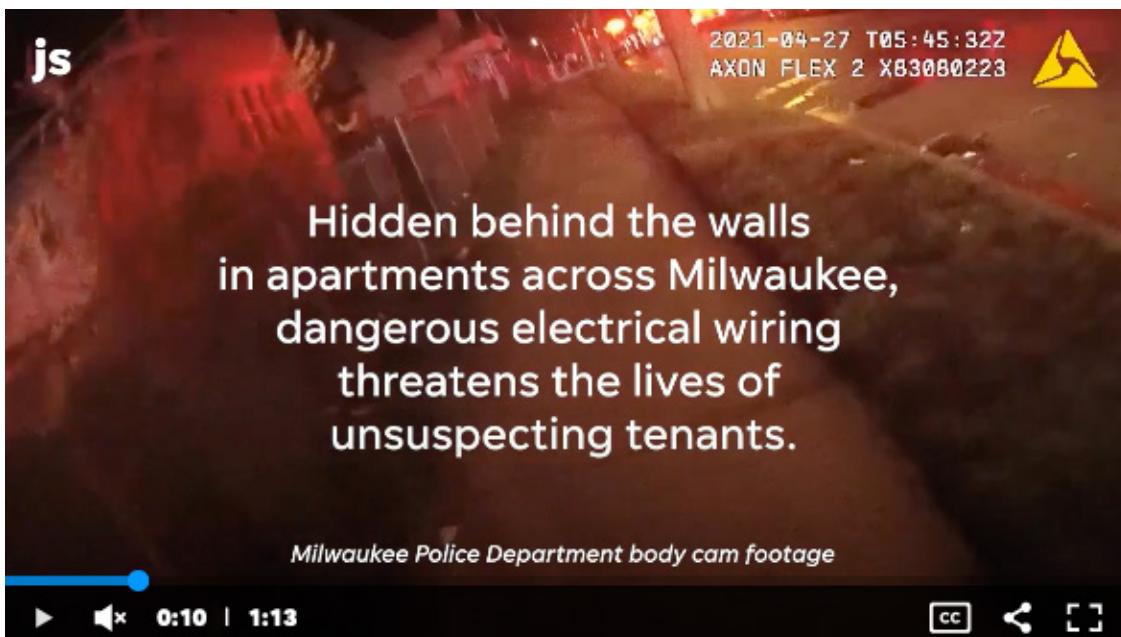
# JOURNAL SENTINEL

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

[Wires and Fires](#) | [Video](#)

Published August 25, 2021

## Electrical fires pose a higher risk to low-income Black renters in Milwaukee



The majority of Milwaukee's suspected electrical fires are in rental units, many in low-income neighborhoods.

[Click here to watch online](#)

[https://www.jsonline.com/videos/news/2021/08/25/electrical-fires-  
pose-higher-risk-poor-black-renters-milwaukee/5574776001/](https://www.jsonline.com/videos/news/2021/08/25/electrical-fires-pose-higher-risk-poor-black-renters-milwaukee/5574776001/)

# Wires and Fires

## JOURNAL SENTINEL

Published November 7, 2021 | Online November 3, 2021

PULITZER PRIZE WINNER: 2008, 2010, 2011

SUNDAY • MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

## JOURNAL SENTINEL

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2021

JSOnline.com

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

15 RENTALS INSPECTED

47 VIOLATIONS FOUND

WIRES AND FIRES A JOURNAL SENTINEL INVESTIGATION

## Frayed wires. Defective lights. Fire traps.

What we found doing electrical inspections in one Milwaukee neighborhood

John Diedrich, Raquel Rutledge and Tamia Fowlkes  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

In the dark basement of a duplex on North 19th Street in Milwaukee, Bruce Janczak shines his flashlight at an electrical service panel on the wall. • "Touch that and you'll go flying," he says. • The aged, rusted panel is missing its cover. A web of copper wiring — second only to silver in its ability to conduct electricity — sits exposed. • Four young children are upstairs, slowly waking up from a birthday party sleepover. Their mom says she will keep them out of the basement, away from the panel.

**Pulitzer Center**  
This story was supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

**MORE ONLINE**  
To see previous stories in the Wires and Fires investigation go to [jsonline.com/wiresandfires](http://jsonline.com/wiresandfires).

AT LEAST 80% OF THE 3,300 RENTALS IN 53206 ZIP CODE HAVE VIOLATIONS, STUDY SUGGESTS

### Biden hails public works bill passage

Infrastructure package promises \$1 trillion for 'rebuilding America'

Alan Fram and Zeke Miller

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Saturday hailed Congress' passage of his \$1 trillion infrastructure package as a "monumental step forward for the nation" after fractious fellow Democrats resolved a months-long standoff in their ranks to seal the deal.

"Finally, infrastructure week," a beaming Biden told reporters. "I'm so happy to say that: infrastructure week."

The House passed the measure 228-206 late Friday, prompting prolonged cheers from the relieved Democratic side of the chamber. Thirteen Republicans, mostly moderates, supported the legislation while six of Democrats' farthest left members opposed it.

See INFRASTRUCTURE, Page 10A

### Prevea cuts ties with Rodgers

Kelli Arsenneau  
Appleton Post-Crescent  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Prevea Health announced Saturday that it would no longer continue its partnership with Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers.

The announcement comes after Rodgers publicly made a series of misleading and false claims about COVID-19 Friday during an appearance on "The Pat McAfee Show."

Prevea Health remains deeply

See RODGERS, Page 8A

INSIDE TODAY'S SUNDAY PLUS



Dr. Ben Weston has helped guide the community through the COVID-19 pandemic. Page 6A

### Caring for patients and public health

Dr. Ben Weston has helped guide the community through the COVID-19 pandemic. Page 6A

**BBC**  
LIGHTING

**BIG FALL SALE!**  
SAVE UP TO 90%!  
ALL THE NEWEST STYLES!  
CHANDELIERS! FANS!  
BATH & OUTDOOR LIGHTS!  
LAMPS & MIRRORS!

414-933-0808 • 2015 W. St. Paul Ave. • Milwaukee • [www.bbclighting.com](http://www.bbclighting.com)  
Latest Styles • All Best Brands Available • Open Mon-Fri 9-5 • Closed Holidays

Did you forget?  
Daylight saving time ended at 2 a.m. today. Set your clocks back one hour.



#### 18 things to do inside

Cooler temperatures are the perfect recipe for enjoying Milwaukee's great indoors when you have visitors. **1E**

#### Weather

High 63° | Low 46°  
Partly cloudy.  
Forecast, **14C**

Volume 139 | Issue 356

Home delivery pricing inside  
Subscribe 844-933-0808  
©2021 Journal Sentinel Inc.  
\$4.00 & higher elsewhere



Read the pdf or click here to read online

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

# JOURNAL SENTINEL

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

## Wires and Fires



# Frayed wires. Defective lights. Fire traps.

By John Diedrich, Raquel Rutledge and Tamia Fowlkes,  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

In the dark basement of a duplex on North 19th Street in Milwaukee, Bruce Janczak shines his flashlight at an electrical service panel on the wall.

"Touch that and you'll go flying," he says.

The aged, rusted panel is missing its cover. A web of copper wiring — second only to silver in its ability to conduct electricity — sits exposed.

Four young children are upstairs, slowly waking up from a birthday party sleepover. Their mom says she will keep them out of the basement, away from the panel.

The panel's missing cover, while it might seem minor to a layperson, is a serious danger and violates city codes, Janczak says. Most of the components are electrically charged,

and sparks can shoot out, easily starting a fire. It's one of dozens of infractions the master electrician found while inspecting the duplex and other rental properties across this north side neighborhood as part of an ongoing investigation by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

To better understand how pervasive — and overlooked — potentially hazardous electrical wiring is in rental units, the Journal Sentinel hired Janczak to examine electrical systems at rental properties in the city's most impoverished ZIP code, 53206, which has the highest rate of suspected electrical fires in Milwaukee. Suspected electrical fires ravage homes in 53206, which is 95% Black, at five times the rate of the rest of the city.

Janczak and reporters visited a random selection of 50 single- and two-family rental properties in June and July. Renters in 15 units agreed to participate in the study, inviting Janczak and the reporters inside.

The results: The Journal Sentinel found electrical fire hazards and significant electrical code violations in all but one of the properties. In total, the inspections uncovered 47 electrical code violations, the most common being improperly installed service panels and lack of working outlets that forced tenants to rely on



**Electrician Bruce Janczak inspects a rusted electrical box that was not properly grounded in a rental home on North 16th Street in June.**

extension cords. Ten of the units Janczak inspected had one or both such violations.

Other common problems included homes with no electrical grounding; loose outlets where plugs didn't fit snugly, which can cause electricity to arc and spark; open junction boxes; and improperly hung or spliced wires.

"This was done by a wanna-be electrician or a handyman," Janczak said of wires taped to the ceiling running between an outlet and an old electrical service panel in the basement of one duplex. "No real electrician would do work like this. They found someone to do this who knew just enough to be dangerous."

The testing follows a Journal Sentinel investigation in August that revealed the brunt of suspected electrical fires falls hardest on Black renters and that governments at all

**A property in the 3500 block of North 19th Street with four violations**

An exposed electrical panel in the basement presented an electrocution and fire risk.

- Improperly installed or unsafe electrical service panel
- No grounding or bonding of the electrical service is installed
- Improper wiring in basement by use of cords and open junction boxes, improper splices
- Due to lack of receptacles properly installed and spaced, extension cords/plug strips are used throughout
- Defective or not properly wired light fixtures
- Receptacles not properly grounded / wired properly
- At multiple locations, switches are not functioning properly or not functioning at all
- Replace missing covers on electric junction boxes / outlets

**LANDLORD RESPONSE:**

**“**Lloyd Morris of AMG Properties, the owner of the rental unit, said the company sold the property a few weeks after the Journal Sentinel inspection. Morris said he was unaware of any problems.

levels fail to address the problem. Reaction to the investigation was swift and broad, with Gov. Tony Evers describing the findings as “gut-wrenching,” the Milwaukee Common Council convening a hearing, and other lawmakers and community leaders calling for better oversight.

Though the sample size of the Journal Sentinel-sponsored testing was limited, the design of the study and the participation rate make the findings statistically valid and suggest widespread dangerous electrical wiring and rampant code violations in rental properties throughout the city’s

most vulnerable community, according to John Johnson, a researcher who studies housing and demographics at Marquette University and who, at the request of the Journal Sentinel, provided randomly selected property addresses used in the investigation.

Johnson said that considering the margin of error, the study indicates at least 80% of the 3,300 single and two-family rental properties in the ZIP code studied have electrical code violations.

Vytenis Babrauskas, a leading expert on electrical fires who worked for 16 years at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, called the Journal Sentinel testing “pioneering work” and said it exposes an unacceptable risk low-income renters face.

Babrauskas said governmental bodies, not just in Wisconsin, but nationwide, should take the risk of electrical fires more seriously.

“There should be a movement toward electrical inspections and real inspections, not perfunctory ones,” he said. “Someone has to say, ‘That is important. Let’s go do that.’”

Mayor Tom Barrett, who has been nominated by President Joe Biden to become U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg, has repeatedly refused requests for interviews on the issue.

Erica Roberts, the city’s

commissioner of building inspections, also would not agree to an interview for this story.

In an email, a spokesperson for the Department of Neighborhood Services said the agency “continues to prioritize the safety of residential properties throughout the city of Milwaukee consistent with our departmental objectives and mission to ensure safe and healthy neighborhoods.”

Landlords have little to fear when it comes to enforcement of electrical code violations, the Journal Sentinel reported in August. The Department of Neighborhood Services does not inspect single and two-family rental properties unless it receives a complaint, and there are no monetary penalties for code violations, only a \$175 inspection fee following a complaint. The department typically receives 200 to 300 electrical complaints from renters each year, according to city officials.

And even when landlords rack up multiple violations over months and years, little prevents them from continuing to lease their properties, the Journal Sentinel reported.

Heiner Giese, an attorney for the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, a lobbying group for landlords, said when landlords learn of electrical problems, they should fix them promptly.



**In May 2021,**  
electrician Bruce  
Janczak talks with  
renter Tirrell  
Glosson about  
an issue with the  
overhead wiring  
outside the home  
Glosson and his  
fiancee rent  
on West Thurston  
Avenue.

"The real problem, as your study has validly pointed out, is there are tons of properties with old, insufficient wiring," he said.

### Landlords promise fixes

Janczak's inspection findings were documented in reports, which the Journal Sentinel shared with owners and tenants. Several landlords said they would fix the problems immediately.

"This is totally a surprise," said William Smith, owner of a duplex on North 16th Street, where Janczak found numerous problems. "I'll have my electrician go over there ASAP."

Lonnie Slocum, whose company owns a duplex on North 22nd Street that was included in the study, said his tenants had not complained about electrical problems but he planned to have an electrician at the property the morning after he learned of the issues.

"I do thank you for doing

what you're doing," he wrote in a text message. "I wouldn't have known otherwise."

Lloyd Morris of AMG Properties, the owner of the rental unit on North 19th Street where Janczak found an exposed panel in the basement and where children were having the birthday sleepover, said the company sold the property a few weeks after the inspection. Morris said when he bought the property several months earlier for \$39,900, he didn't have an inspection and was unaware of any problems. Records show he sold the property for \$71,000.

Another out-of-state company that owns a property inspected by Janczak said it would fix the issues but only when the unit becomes vacant.

Still another landlord reacted with anger that the Journal Sentinel inspected his property.

"I am not happy about this, you going in there," said landlord Jesse Stewart, who owns a house on North 13th Street where the electrician found

open junction boxes, hanging wires and a lack of outlets.

Asked by a reporter what he planned to do about the electrical issue, Stewart said, "It's not your business, ain't your problem."

Some landlords would not comment or did not return calls.

Only one home inspected by Janczak had no code violations. It was a property on West Nash Street, owned by a company called Strong Blocks Milwaukee.

Carl Quindel, co-founder and manager of Strong Blocks, which owns about 100 rental homes on the near north side, said his company typically spends between \$2,000 to \$15,000 per property to ensure electrical systems are safe and up to date.

"We believe there is a lot of value in the city, not just the homes, but the people who live here," Quindel said. "We try to reflect that in our work."

At one upper duplex on North 26th Street, listed in city records as owned by Isaiah Retzlaff of Madison, Janczak found an overhead light not working and outlets that often lead to tripped circuits. In the basement, he found the service panel was badly rusted, indicating an electrocution risk as moisture gets in the box. There also were few outlets in the two-bedroom unit, leading to the potentially dangerous, but unavoidable, use of extension cords.

The Journal Sentinel mailed the inspection report to multiple addresses for the owner. A reporter also left repeated phone and email messages, which were not returned.

For now, Alex Jones, who lives in the upper flat with his fiancee and their daughter, said all he can do is prepare for the worst.

"We have made a plan to get out in case there is a fire," he said.

---

### 'Real scary situation'

Tirrell Glosson said he hadn't slept well in months, worrying that shoddy wiring could spark a fire in the ranch-style house where he lives with his fiancee and their four children on Milwaukee's northwest side.

"I sleep light so nothing goes wrong," Glosson recalled in an interview with the Journal Sentinel. "I'm smelling for bad smells like electrical burning. I have to make sure nothing happens here. It's a real scary situation."

The Journal Sentinel learned of Glosson's case through a tip in May and hired Janczak to inspect the property. The problems Janczak found prompted the news organization to look at additional rental units using a randomized study.

As Janczak inspected Glosson's home, room by room, he noted a light switch in a

first-floor bathroom was held in place with a Band-Aid. Other switches, outlets and overhead lights did not work.

In the basement, Janczak found an extension cord plugged into an outlet in the ceiling, then strung about 15 feet across the room and spliced directly into an electrical junction box.

"This is not safe," Janczak told Glosson.

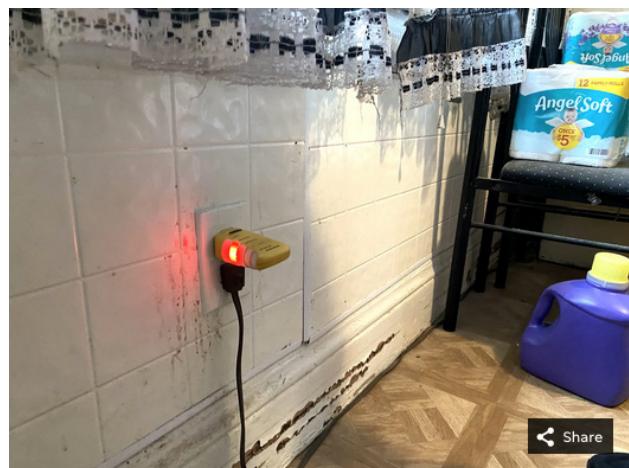
Glosson said that when it rains, the sockets get damp from a leaking roof, and an overhead light in the basement crackles and flickers and then stops working. A Journal Sentinel reporter saw the basement light flickering during an earlier visit to the home when it was raining.

The same thing happens to an overhead light in his sons' room, Glosson said. At first, he put tape on the light switch in the room so it couldn't be used, he said. Later, he taught the boys to use it sparingly.

"The kids know now just not to turn it on when it's raining," Glosson said.

The electrical problems have gotten worse in the four years the family has rented the four-bedroom home near North 67th Street and West Thurston Avenue, Glosson said. The couple pays \$1,100 a month in rent.

"It's a lot of pay, to have a cord running across the basement, water leaking on our heads and a Band-Aid holding



This kitchen outlet in a rental home on North 11th Street was ungrounded, presenting a possible fire risk from shorting out.

on the light switch," he said. "We could be killed here."

According to city records, the house is owned by Vine-Brook Homes, of Dayton, Ohio, which owns numerous rental properties in Milwaukee. After the Journal Sentinel contacted the company, a VineBrook employee visited the house and planned to address the electrical problems and other issues, according to a statement from company spokeswoman Lucy Bannon.

But Bannon said VineBrook can't fix the problems while Glosson and his family are living there.

"The number and nature of the updates needed at the property would be very difficult to address while the house is occupied," Bannon wrote in the email.

She said the company would be willing to help the family find another place to live, but

**A property in the 3200 block of North 17th Street with four violations**

In the basement, a metal conduit pipe had pulled apart, leaving a wire exposed that could start a fire.




- Improperly installed or unsafe electrical service panel
- No grounding or bonding of the electrical service is installed
- Improper wiring in basement by use of cords and open junction boxes, improper splices
- Due to lack of receptacles properly installed and spaced, extension cords/plug strips are used throughout
- Defective or not properly wired light fixtures
- Receptacles not properly grounded / wired properly
- At multiple locations, switches are not functioning properly or not functioning at all
- Replace missing covers on electric junction boxes / outlets

**A property in the 1800 block of West Clark Street with three violations**

In this home, most rooms had just one working outlet, leading to the dangerous use of extension cords.




- Improperly installed or unsafe electrical service panel
- No grounding or bonding of the electrical service is installed
- Improper wiring in basement by use of cords and open junction boxes, improper splices
- Due to lack of receptacles properly installed and spaced, extension cords/plug strips are used throughout
- Defective or not properly wired light fixtures
- Receptacles not properly grounded / wired properly
- At multiple locations, switches are not functioning properly or not functioning at all
- Replace missing covers on electric junction boxes / outlets

**LANDLORD RESPONSE:**

**“** Landlord Jackie Beamon said she didn't know about the problems and vowed to fix them. "I don't want someone to lose their life over something that can be taken care of," she said.

**LANDLORD RESPONSE:**

**“** Owner Abdullahi Mamo said he didn't know about the problems and said he would address them. "I am worried about the people here. I will do whatever I need to to fix this."

Glosson said he likes the size of the house and that it's close to a school bus stop. He doesn't want to move; he just wants the landlord to fix the fire hazards.

### Water, electricity don't mix

All 15 houses inspected in the 53206 ZIP code were built between 1891 and 1928. But age alone does not equal a fire risk, experts say. It depends on how well the electrical systems are maintained.

Old homes in affluent neighborhoods in Milwaukee County, for instance, have a far lower rate of suspected electrical fires than in poor areas, a Journal Sentinel analysis found.

For example, in the city's section of 53211 where the median home value is \$270,100 and the median construction year of single and two-family rentals is 1910, the rate of suspected electrical fires is more than 30 times lower than in 53206, where the median home value is \$28,500 and the median construction year is 1913.

And in 53204, a predominately white area on the south side of Milwaukee where the median home value is \$58,800 and the median construction year is even older — 1895 — the rate of suspected electrical fires is three times lower than in 53206, according to the news organization's analysis. This is

true even though the ZIP codes have roughly the same percentage of renters.

The electrical system in a 126-year-old duplex on North 17th Street was far from well-maintained, Janczak found. Unsecured electrical wires hung from the basement ceiling, the service panel was badly rusted, and the original panel sat open above a sink.

"Is this to code? No. Is it unsafe? Yes. Could it cause a fire? Yes," Janczak said. "Will it cause a fire? Flip a coin."

The rusted electrical service panel box was concerning to Janczak and common in the homes he inspected in the study. The rust may be because of the humidity of the basement or moisture coming through metal tubing protecting electrical wires, he said.

"I can tell you that water and electricity don't mix," he said. "That is not good."

Willie J. Lewis of Milwaukee, the property owner according to city records, did not return repeated messages from the Journal Sentinel. The electrician's report was mailed to the address listed to him in city records.

In another duplex, also on North 17th Street, the metal tubing had pulled apart with the tube lying on the exposed live wire. Because there is weight on the wire, Janczak said, it is a matter of time before

the tubing wears through the wire insulation.

"Hopefully, it will cause a short, and the circuit trips as opposed to something worse," he said.

The owner of the unit, Jackie Beamon, who lives a couple of blocks from the rental house, told a Journal Sentinel reporter she didn't know about the problem. She said it is often difficult to get contractors to come to her neighborhood.

"I tell them, 'Not everyone here is bad. I'll watch out for you,'" she said, adding she will make sure the problems get fixed. "I don't want someone to lose their life over something that can be taken care of."

At a house on West Clarke Street near North 18th Street, the problems inside concerned Janczak but not compared to what he spotted outside.

The metal piping above the outside meter, called the raceway, appeared to have been pulled off in a storm. Repair work was done — evident by different straps that were attached to the raceway — but it was also clear to Janczak it was "handyman work," not done by a licensed electrician.

Most alarming to him, though, was that a gutter had torn partially off the home, perhaps in the same storm, and was lying on a live electrical wire leading from the power line to the house.

The risk, Janczak said, was that the aluminum gutter could slice through the wire. "That can short out, cause heat and a fire," he said.

The electrical panel in the basement also looked like it had been replaced in the past decade, Janczak said, and it appeared to be amateur work because it was not correctly grounded.

A check of city records showed only one electrical permit to work on the house, and that was in 2012.

Abu Abu, 21, who lives in the rented house with his parents and seven siblings, appreciated the Journal Sentinel's review and said he would follow up with the landlord. "I don't want to take any chances," he said.

Reached by the Journal Sentinel, Abdullahi Mamo, who bought the 111-year-old house in November 2020, said he didn't know about the gutter on the wire and other issues. He said he would address them.

On Oct. 11, two weeks after the Journal Sentinel showed Mamo the inspection report, a licensed electrician whom Mamo hired came to the property. The electrician agreed with the problems identified by Janczak, including the need for more outlets in rooms where there was just one, leading to a tangle of extension cords.

A Journal Sentinel reporter was present when the

electrician came for the estimate. The cost for 10 new outlets, a new circuit for kitchen appliances and grounding for the electrical system: \$3,400. The issue with the gutter would be referred to a gutter company for repair.

Mamo said he will go ahead with the repairs.

"I am worried about the people here," he said. "I will do whatever I need to, to fix this. I don't worry about the money. I worry that the electric is unsafe."

---

### **Shoddy repair work**

In a house she has rented near North 9th Street and West Concordia Avenue for eight years, Shorelonda Avery smelled a burning odor coming from an outlet in the kitchen earlier this year. In the bathroom, the outlet didn't work at all.

She called the property management company in charge of maintenance. A worker came and changed both outlets. But he didn't do a good job, Janczak's inspection this summer revealed.

When Janczak stuck his handheld tester into the kitchen outlet — the one that was causing the burning smell — to check for proper grounding, it lit up red, meaning it was not grounded. An ungrounded outlet is prone to arcing, sparking and starting an electrical fire.

When Janczak checked the bathroom outlet, he could not plug in a three-prong tester into the three-prong outlet. That means, for example, a tenant could not plug in a hairdryer.

The city does not require a permit to replace outlets, making it legal for unskilled people to do the work. And to Janczak, these incorrectly installed outlets are the result.

City records show that Lomac Properties Corp., a Canadian company, owns the rental property. It is managed by VP Investors, a Milwaukee firm. In an email to the Journal Sentinel, VP Investors said the issues would be addressed but

failed to respond to follow-up questions.

Since the inspection, Avery has taped off the dangerous outlets so that no one uses them.

“People are doing what they have to because landlords are not doing what they should be doing,” she said. “I grew up in Milwaukee, so I know about the electric. Everyone does.”

Avery said she has picked up habits over the years to protect herself.

Now, every time she leaves her unit, she unplugs most everything in the house.

---

Daphne Chen of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

# JOURNAL SENTINEL

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Wires and Fires | **Video**

Published November 3, 2021

## Electrical inspections of Milwaukee rental homes reveal dangerous risks



Electrical inspections of randomly selected rental units in Milwaukee's 53206 ZIP code revealed widespread violations and dangerous conditions.

**Click here to view online**

<https://www.jsonline.com/videos/news/2021/11/03/investigation-finds-electrical-hazards-older-milwaukee-homes/8568818002/>

# Wires and Fires

## JOURNAL SENTINEL

Published December 19, 2021 | Online December 16, 2021

PULITZER PRIZE WINNER: 2008, 2010, 2011

SUNDAY • MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

## JOURNAL SENTINEL

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2021

JSOnline.com

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



SUBSCRIBER-EXCLUSIVE SPECIAL SECTION INSIDE

puzzles&games!

Pages full of crosswords, sudokus, word searches and so much more!

### Need for substitute teachers grows dire

Wisconsin schools raise pay, but still desperate

AnnMarie Hilton and Rory Linnane  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

On a typical day this school year, the Neenah Joint School District's elementary schools are at least one substitute short of filling all their teachers' absences.

In September and October, there were 45 unfilled absences — 45 times that a music teacher or a guidance counselor or a principal had to teach a class because a substitute wasn't available.

In the district's middle and high schools, where substitute teachers are also in short supply, students without a teacher join a study hall or go sit in the auditorium for that class period.

"It's a dire situation," said the district's communications manager, Jim Strick.

Educators have said for years that there's been a critical need for full-time and substitute teachers in Wisconsin, but COVID has exposed the need like never before — and it's not getting any better.

With new cases reaching levels not seen since last fall's peak, and with most schools now teaching in person, droves of Wisconsin's educators are missing school because they've tested positive, been exposed to somebody with COVID or felt symptoms that could be COVID.

Schools have raised substitute pay, but they're still failing to fill all the absences.

The Kimberly Area School District has seen a tenth of its staff absent on a

See SUBSTITUTE, Page 22A



### Great Lakes an 'incredible' inspiration

Geo Rutherford, a printmaker and adjunct lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, has more than 1.1 million followers on TikTok, where she posts videos sharing her passion for the Great Lakes and the art she creates from her walks on the beach.

Page 6A

WIRES AND FIRES  
A JOURNAL SENTINEL  
INVESTIGATION

How your tax dollars help keep city renters in danger from

## FAULTY WIRING

Daphne Chen, John Diedrich and Raquel Rutledge  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

In the spring of 2020, city inspectors discovered hazardous wiring in a rental duplex on West Vine Street in Milwaukee and ordered the owner, Absolute Properties, to pull an electrical permit and fix the violations promptly. • For more than a year, city records show, the company didn't do as ordered. It didn't pull the permit, and it didn't resolve the outstanding violations. • But the company did do one thing: It collected taxpayer money for rent.

Tax dollars in the form of rent assistance to low-income families regularly flow to landlords who neglect to fix electrical issues, a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel analysis found. Samples of data between 2018 and 2020 show that rental assistance went to the owners of at least 62 single- and two-family Milwaukee homes that had

See WIRES, Page 20A



Barbara Smith is the housing coordinator for Amani United, a community group working to improve housing conditions in the north side neighborhood.  
ANGELA PETERSON / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

"How do you know that something is wrong on a property — because it's in your records and it's documented somewhere — but you're still sending the check?"  
Barbara Smith

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BILL SCHULZ/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

## HOLIDAY GIFT IDEAS!

SAVE UP TO 90%!  
GIVE BBC GIFT CERTIFICATES!

GREAT GIFT IDEAS!  
CHANDELIERS! FANS!  
BATH & OUTDOOR LIGHTS!  
LAMPS & MIRRORS!

AWARD WINNING SHOWROOM!  
FANS STARTING AT \$49.95  
MAN-CAVE GIFTS & COLLECTIBLES!

414-933-0808 • 2015 W. St. Paul Ave. • Milwaukee • www.bbclighting.com  
Latest Styles • All Best Brands Available • Open Mon-Fri 9-5 • Closed Holidays

'Big, big task' against Ravens  
Columnist Tom Silverstein says the clock is ticking for coach Matt LaFleur to fix the Packers' awful special teams. 1C

'Reindeer Tracks'  
Greg Borowski, a Journal Sentinel editor, writes a Christmas story every year for his family and friends. 1E

Weather  
High 36° | Low 22°  
Partly cloudy.  
Forecast, 12C

Volume 140 | Issue 34  
Home delivery pricing inside  
Subscribe 844-900-7103  
©2021 City & suburbs \$3.00  
\$4.00 & higher elsewhere



Read the pdf or click here to read online

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

# JOURNAL SENTINEL

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Wires and Fires



## How your tax dollars help keep city renters in danger from faulty wiring

By Daphne Chen, John Diedrich and Raquel Rutledge, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

In the spring of 2020, city inspectors discovered hazardous wiring in a rental duplex on West Vine Street in Milwaukee and ordered the owner, Absolute Properties, to pull an electrical permit and fix the violations promptly.

For more than a year, city records show, the company

didn't do as ordered. It didn't pull the permit, and it didn't resolve the outstanding violations.

But the company did do one thing: It collected taxpayer money for rent.

Tax dollars in the form of rent assistance to low-income families regularly flow to landlords who neglect to fix electrical



**Barbara Smith is the housing coordinator for Amani United, a community group working to improve housing conditions in the north side neighborhood.**

issues, a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel analysis found. Samples of data between 2018 and 2020 show that rental assistance went to the owners of at least 62 single- and two-family Milwaukee homes that had unfixed electrical violations at the time of payment, totaling nearly \$200,000. The actual numbers are likely much higher.

The Journal Sentinel also found local government agencies and nonprofits that distribute federal rental assistance to landlords often do so without conducting thorough safety inspections or reviewing publicly available records online to see, for instance, if landlords have outstanding arrest warrants for failing to make repairs.

Community leaders and housing advocates said they

were troubled by the Journal Sentinel's findings.

"How does that occur?" said Barbara Smith, housing coordinator for Amani United, a resident-led community group that has worked for years to improve housing conditions in the north side neighborhood. "How do you know that something is wrong on a property — because it's in your records and it's documented somewhere — but you're still sending the check?"

The problem of electrical fires in Milwaukee's predominantly Black and low-income neighborhoods reveals how money and power tilt against tenants and in the favor of landlords, some of whom take advantage of an ineffective inspection system.

The risk is far higher in

these areas compared with the rest of the city, the Journal Sentinel reported in August. In the 53206 ZIP code, which has the highest rate of suspected electrical fires, as many as 80% of the single- and two-family rental properties may have electrical code violations, based on a series of home inspections sponsored by the Journal Sentinel in November.

Yet landlords in low-income neighborhoods can charge steep rents for often-unsafe apartments, in part, because affordable housing is scarce, and tenants, especially those with credit trouble and eviction history, feel trapped. They must accept what they can get, they say.

The Journal Sentinel's newest findings reveal that tax dollars are being used to pay for these overpriced and potentially dangerous rental units.

Each year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development sends roughly \$51 million in rent assistance funds to the Milwaukee County Housing Division and the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, which then distribute the money to landlords whose tenants qualify for the subsidy. Since the pandemic began, the federal government has also released about \$70 million in emergency rent assistance to local governments, which contract with nonprofits to disburse the funds.

Although the Journal Sentinel's analysis of the samples of data suggests that only a small fraction of that rent assistance money was sent to landlords with unresolved electrical problems, the consequences of these hidden hazards can be deadly.

When contacted about the Journal Sentinel's findings, officials at those agencies said they were unaware that landlords with outstanding electrical violations were receiving payments. But they offered no solutions for the problem.

Some of those same officials argued that adding conditions to rent subsidies, such as there being no outstanding code violations, could hurt tenants by taking aid from them. But one housing expert said providing public assistance for properties that have not been inspected for safety perpetuates a system that puts people in dangerous housing, with the government essentially bankrolling the risk.

Court records show that in March, three months after receiving a \$2,000 rent assistance payment for a woman living in the duplex on Vine Street, Absolute Properties moved to evict her. She was \$880 behind on her rent.

One day after the eviction, the apartment was listed on Twitter.

"\$775/month," the advertisement read. "Call us today!"

Curtis Hoff is listed in city inspection and court documents as being the owner of companies that collectively own hundreds of properties in the poorest parts of Milwaukee, including the one on Vine Street. Hoff's own house is a nearly 5,000-square-foot mansion in Mequon that is assessed at \$842,900, records show.

Reached by cellphone at a Milwaukee Bucks basketball game earlier this month, Hoff said he could not talk and asked a Journal Sentinel reporter to email him questions.

He has not returned phone calls and emails since.

### Hazardous electrical conditions unfixed for months

Another duplex listed to a company owned by Hoff, this one on North 22nd Street, had defective electrical wiring and was cited in September 2020 by the city Department of Neighborhood Services. The city gave the company five weeks to make the electrical repairs.

Months passed. No fixes were made, records show.

Rental assistance records show a \$4,500 payment was made to the company, Accurate Properties, in December 2020, three months after the city's order for repair had been issued and while the violations were ignored.

Serious electrical problems



**Galen Dumas said outlets and overhead lights were not working as he prepared to move into a unit in the 2900 block of North 22nd Street.**

in the upper unit of the 110-year-old duplex went unfixed for a year. That changed in late November — but not because of any action by the city.

Galen Dumas, who was preparing to rent the unit, said he noted that several outlets didn't work, resulting in a tangle of extension cords snaking through the apartment and feeding into surge protectors. Also, several overhead lights on the first floor and basement were broken, he said.

Dumas, 39, said he demanded that Accurate Properties fix the electrical problems before he, his girlfriend and their daughter moved in and started paying

the \$795 monthly rent for the three-bedroom unit.

On Nov. 29, just two days before the family was to move in, an electrician arrived at the property and replaced the defective outlets and switches, according to Dumas, who then agreed to move in.

"Now every outlet and switch is doing what it is supposed to be doing," he said.

Less than a mile and a half away, at a similar duplex off West North Avenue, Ricky Carter spotted smoke coming from the floor late one night in April.

Carter, his fiancée and her two young daughters had moved in less than six months earlier. According to Carter, the family had no idea that city inspectors had previously cited the property for multiple electrical violations. Records show the problems went unfixed for years and resulted in an arrest warrant against landlord Dominique McKinney.

As Carter and his family ran outside, they watched as fire destroyed most of their belongings. Investigators with the Fire Department suspected the cause was electrical.

One day after the fire, Community Advocates, one of the nonprofit agencies contracted with local government to distribute federal pandemic rent assistance in Milwaukee, gave McKinney \$2,700, according

to Shawanna Lindenberg, the nonprofit's housing department manager. She said the nonprofit was not aware there had been a fire or a warrant for McKinney's arrest.

According to Lindenberg, Community Advocates case workers do not check whether a landlord has a warrant for unpaid violations. Those checks are not a requirement of its contract with Milwaukee County, she said.

The group does conduct in-person "habitability checks" on units that it funds, but they were suspended during COVID, according to Community Advocates CEO Andi Elliott. They resumed in November, she said.

McKinney has not responded to repeated calls from the Journal Sentinel.

Carter and his fiancée said Community Advocates never told them about the electrical problems and neither did their landlord. And the couple said they were outraged when told by the Journal Sentinel that McKinney received rent assistance after she failed to make fixes.

"I feel like the whole system failed us," Carter said.

---

### Inspections look stringent — on paper

On paper, the rules are firm: Outlets and lights must be working. Broken and frayed wiring isn't allowed. And the

electrical system must ensure safety from fire.

Those are the basic housing standards for any property to qualify for the HUD rent assistance program known as housing choice vouchers or “Section 8,” according to federal regulations.

At the local level, the protections on HUD rent assistance funds are even stricter.

Across 26 pages of regulations, the Milwaukee County Housing Division adds that “any electrical problem” that could result in shock or fire must be corrected within 24 hours. If not, the rent assistance could be withheld and the contract could be terminated.

At the city’s Housing Authority, the safety regulations are less strict than the ones at the county, but they still mandate that exposed electrical wires or sparking outlets be fixed within a day.

City and county officials say they inspect homes before rent money is distributed, but the inspections are usually limited to problems that are easily seen.

“When visible issues are detected, the county Housing Division gives landlords a date by which the issues need to be fixed or resolved,” said Brandon Weathersby, spokesperson for Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley.

That’s a typical approach, said Robert Dicke, the former



**Landlord Mohammad Choudry had about 70 properties taken over by the city and sold after he allowed them to fall into disrepair.**

executive director of the Dane County Housing Authority. He said inspectors will look for missing or charred outlet covers but usually won’t go further, such as bringing circuit testers to check whether outlets are wired properly.

“They’re not going to move furniture and inspect every outlet. They’re not going to take covers off and check if there’s loose wires,” Dicke said. “It’s not that deep.”

In a statement, city Housing Authority spokesperson Amy Hall said renters should alert the agency about safety issues. If problems are verified, the agency will demand fixes and potentially terminate the contract with the landlord, she said.

But tenants and housing experts say it’s unrealistic to expect renters to spot wiring problems and risk retaliation for reporting their landlords to authorities.

Plus, data from the city Housing Authority shows that enforcement happens infrequently. Over the past six years, the agency terminated an average of 16 contracts per year — just 0.3% of the roughly 5,900 landlords who receive rent assistance money annually.

Rent assistance funds for tenants affected by the pandemic have fewer regulations than the regular assistance given out by HUD, the Journal Sentinel found.

Tatyana Warrick, the spokesperson for the Wisconsin Department of Administration, which passes the federal rent assistance funds to local agencies to distribute, said the pandemic funds were designed to be one-time, emergency cash infusions to prevent evictions during the pandemic.

As a result, no inspections were required, she said.

According to Warrick, the federal government prohibits local officials from using pandemic resources on repairs or putting conditions on the money.

“Requiring a landlord to come into compliance with building codes/inspections, while it may seem to make logical sense on one hand, would actually limit what assistance a renter could access by no fault of their own,” she said.

Social Development Commission, one of the nonprofits



**Landlord Elijah Mohammad Rashaed, left, pictured in 2017. Disrepair in the 150-plus properties linked to Rashaed overwhelmed court-appointed property managers.**

contracted to distribute pandemic rental assistance in Milwaukee, does not inspect properties before giving out money, said James Hall, an attorney for the organization. He said the group also does not check for unresolved building code violations or arrest warrants.

The Journal Sentinel’s findings that tax dollars are going to landlords who fail to fix potentially dangerous electrical violations are “shocking and terrible,” said Mitch, a housing law expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who legally goes by just his first name.

“It would be as if a health inspector found rats at a restaurant and said, ‘Here’s a whole bunch of government coupons that you can use to give out and make your food less expensive — never mind the rats,’” he said.

Mitch, who oversees the

UW-Madison Neighborhood Law Clinic, which primarily serves low-income renters, said it's possible to hold landlords accountable while still protecting tenants.

"We can have safe cars, and people still buy cars," he said. "We can have regulations on restaurants, and we still have restaurants. We have regulations on banking, and we still have banks. Every industry has regulations, and it still survives."

### Low-income rentals are a booming business

The vicious cycle in low-income housing churns along largely due to Milwaukee's rental ecosystem, characterized by its aging housing stock, high levels of segregation and lack of renter protections.

Landlords who are willing to exploit these factors can often recoup their cash investment in a few years, the Journal Sentinel found. There is little pressure for them to address violations. The city's Department of Neighborhood Services lacks follow-through, and the state Legislature passed pro-landlord laws in the past 10 years that limit the ability of cities to run rental inspection programs. The changes came from a group of state lawmakers, some moonlighting as landlords.

The inner financial workings

of landlords are typically tightly held secrets, but lawsuits filed by the city against several Milwaukee landlords show glimpses into the value that can be extracted from low-income renters.

Court-appointed property managers who took over the portfolio of landlord Mohammad Choudry in 2017 reported the 70-plus properties were regenerating \$531,000 to \$780,000 in rental income per year from 2017 to 2020. According to civil court records, the properties had accumulated more than 1,700 open violations. Many were dilapidated beyond repair with electrical wiring problems, caving ceilings, cockroach infestations and mold. In September, a judge ordered his properties sold or razed.

Another central city landlord, Elijah Rashaed, was bringing in even more around the same timeframe — approximately \$1.3 million per year, according to court records. The disrepair in the 150-plus properties linked to Rashaed overwhelmed court-appointed property managers, who detailed years of neglect, including faulty electrical systems, broken furnaces and rotted pipes.

Housing and economics experts say this is not an accident or a tragedy but a purposeful business model of certain property owners.



**Reginald Reed's company buys abandoned houses on the north side and uses them to teach construction trainees about home rehab.**

It's a peculiar puzzle of Milwaukee's poorest ZIP codes: The rents are shockingly high. Landlords are able to charge comparatively exorbitant rents even on houses that they may have bought for relatively small amounts.

For example, the duplex on Vine Street: The six-bedroom, three-bathroom home was purchased by a company linked to Hoff for \$37,000 at the height of the Great Recession in 2008. Advertisements online show the two units lease for about \$750 per month, generating nearly \$18,000 per year in rental income when fully occupied.

Rents in Milwaukee do not vary much between its poor and rich neighborhoods, said Yaidi Cancel Martinez, a housing researcher with the

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Decades of racially discriminatory housing and criminal justice policies mean that poor families and communities of color can find themselves trapped in a cycle: Often lacking generational wealth, such tenants are more likely to sacrifice a significant share of their income for rent, making them more vulnerable to eviction and subsequently ineligible for other apartments.

A 2019 study by Princeton University sociologist Matthew Desmond, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Evicted" about housing in Milwaukee, found that landlords in poor areas of the city profit more than those in wealthier parts because they are able to charge relatively high rents for

cheap properties while deferring maintenance.

National research from UCLA economists earlier this year similarly found that profits for single-family rentals in the poorest ZIP codes are 2.5 times higher than those in the richest, even when accounting for the costs of evictions or vacancies.

The potential for profit has drawn interest from Wall Street investors who have discovered Milwaukee as a place to make money off desperate tenants.

Mike Gosman, executive director of the Milwaukee non-profit Acts Housing, said its clients, usually low-income Black and Latino aspiring homeowners, are increasingly getting outbid by out-of-state corporate investors.

"What we see with investors is that they're almost always making cash offers and not having any inspection contingencies," Gosman said.

Reginald Reed, an entrepreneur in the construction industry who grew up on Milwaukee's north side, said officials are not doing enough to protect renters from negligent landlords. He had one word for the city's housing stock: "Trash."

Many renters could become homeowners but are unable to because banks refuse to lend to them, and landlords continue to exploit them for profit, Reed said.

"How is it that the bank

doesn't trust me with a \$600 mortgage, but they trust me to pay the landlord \$900?" Reed said. "Make it make sense."

That's why Reed launched an effort this year to increase home ownership on Milwaukee's north side. His idea: buy 100 blighted homes and allow his staffing company's trainees to use them for renovation practice. After the projects are done, the homes will be offered at below-market rate to the trainees who worked on them.

But Reed said he's found little financial support from fellow business owners or city officials.

Meanwhile, proposals to strengthen renter protections have been opposed by landlord lobbying groups, which have argued that more enforcement would drive landlords out of business.

Heiner Giese, an attorney for the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, agreed that profits can be substantial in poor neighborhoods but said that owners aren't always able to collect all the rent.

Kail Decker, a former assistant city attorney in Milwaukee who prosecuted negligent landlords and is now the West Allis city attorney, finds the plea of poverty by landlords hard to believe.

"Most landlords do have the money to fix their properties," he said. "It's just not money they want to spend."