

# The Rent Revolution Is Coming

For the 44 million households who rent a home or apartment in the U.S., inflation keeps pushing costs higher and higher. Anger is rising too. It could be a breaking point.



**By Conor Dougherty**  
Reporting from Kansas City, Mo.

Oct. 15, 2022

Here's a list of places you might imagine seeing an argument over housing policy. A city council meeting. A late-night zoning hearing. Maybe a ribbon-cutting to christen a new affordable housing complex.

Instead, there was Quinton Lucas, the mayor of Kansas City, Mo., on a stage dressed as the pope with a half-dozen hecklers in yellow T-shirts berating his new housing plan from the audience in front of him. Mr. Lucas had arrived at the outdoor Starlight Theater on a warm August evening for a cameo appearance in a local production of "Sister Act." Just before he walked onto the stage, the demonstrators, who belonged to a group called KC Tenants, unfurled a banner that read "Mayor Lucas: Developing Displacement."

A pack of uniformed security guards promptly smothered the scene. During the slow procession to the exit gates that followed, members of KC Tenants chanted, "The rent is too damn high!" while the audience tried to focus on the mayor/pope and the dancing nuns.

Such is the state of housing in America, where rising costs are flaring into pockets of resistance and rage. Take two-plus years of pandemic-fueled eviction anxiety and spiking home prices, add a growing inflation problem that is being increasingly driven by rising rents, and throw in a long-run affordable housing shortage that cities seem powerless to solve. Add it up and the 44 million U.S. households who rent a home or apartment have many reasons to be unhappy.

That unhappiness extends across the economic spectrum. At one end are renters who aspire to buy a home but have had their dreams dashed by high home prices and, now, rising mortgage rates. At the other are low-income tenants who make up the bulk of the 11 million households who spend more than half of their income on rent. In between is a hollowed-out middle class that is steadily losing ground, although not enough to qualify for much sympathy or help.

The confluence of all these forces has fueled a swell of tenants' rights activism that has brought organizing muscle and policies like rent control to cities far beyond the high-cost coasts. Kansas City, Mo., is a leading example. With a population of 500,000, where the avenues are lined with brick buildings and side streets have modest homes with raised porches, the city offers little to suggest a renters' revolution. Zillow's home value index puts the typical Kansas City home at \$230,000, or more than \$100,000 below the national level.

But with a steadily expanding economy driven by the logistics and medical industries, Kansas City has seen its rents increase 8.5 percent from a year ago, outpacing the rest of the nation, according to rental search site Apartment List. Over the past decade, Kansas City, like many places, has added a collection of high-end towers and apartments even as its stock of low-income housing has withered. The strain from rising rents, which landlords say they need to cover their costs, is creeping from people working in low-income service professions to middle-income teachers and city workers, part of a festering affordable housing crunch that spreads more widely across the nation each month.

KC Tenants is one result. Pairing aggressive protests with traditional lobbying, the group exploded onto the political scene during the pandemic and has since become instrumental in passing tenant-friendly laws like an ordinance that gives renters a lawyer during eviction proceedings. It has also left a trail of embittered opponents who find the group's tactics, such as protesting outside judges' homes, ill-suited to what many residents describe as a cordial Midwestern town.



Organizers with KC Tenants protesting a new set of housing ordinances during a council meeting at City Hall. Barrett Emke for The New York Times

“It’s a transition in politics for us,” said Mayor Lucas, a Democrat, who says he meets with the leaders of KC Tenants regularly, despite being a frequent subject of the group’s protests. “There is a new, almost tougher political edge, in the sense that there are people who are organizing and intrigued by politics and are very angry and are not coming out of the same institutions that built a lot of us.”

America’s housing problem was simmering long before the pandemic, and tenant organizing is a well-established trade. What’s changed is the depth of the housing shortage and the suddenness with which Covid-19 and inflation have tipped smaller cities into an affordability crisis. This has opened the aperture for policies once deemed politically impossible, in a wider range of markets.

Unlike homeowners, whose budget problems are blunted by a litany of tax breaks and fixed-rate mortgages, renters are mostly unprotected from rapidly rising prices. Once cities around the country passed widespread eviction moratoriums and emergency rent caps that were followed by tens of billions of dollars in pandemic rental assistance, it was only natural for housing activists to push for some of those temporary policies to be made permanent.

Politically speaking, inflation has only helped. Nationally, rents are now 20 percent higher than they were in early 2020, creating an opportunity for renter-friendly laws to get baked into long-term policy.

“People take for granted that rent is always going to go up,” said Tara Raghuveer, a co-founder of KC Tenants. “There’s so little political imagination about what could be different, and now I think that’s changing.”

A hyper-focused worker who blends the rhetoric of a revolutionary with the efficiency of a chief executive, Ms. Raghuveer also directs the Homes Guarantee campaign, which works to create tenant unions around the country. She described KC Tenants as both a local movement and national experiment through which organizing ideas can be test-driven.

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“I think every national organizer should be accountable to a local base,” she said.

During a three-day visit in which I hung around the office and shadowed meetings and protests, Ms. Raghuveer returned repeatedly to an idea that has become a refrain among tenant groups: the hope that growing resentment over housing costs is fostering a broad tenant identity that will inspire a wide range of renters to organize and vote with a shared interest. In the activist nomenclature, this is known as “tenants as a class.”

That’s an audacious goal in a country where homeownership is all but defined as success. An irony of the nation’s housing problem is that it’s become so pervasive that it has created as many opportunities for cleavage as it has for coalition. Need has grown faster than resources, making housing policy a prism through which a stealth conflict between the middle class and the truly poor is filtered.

Even so, what’s clear is that in Kansas City and elsewhere tenants are becoming a real constituency. That’s not something you could say as recently as a few years ago. But a few years ago the rent wasn’t quite so high.

## Getting the Data



Tara Raghuveer, KC Tenants’ founding director, working outside the East Patrol Division Station where the group camped out waiting for Board President Tiana Caldwell to be released on bond. Barrett Emke for The New York Times

KC Tenants began, more or less, as homework.

Ms. Raghuveer, now 30, was in her final year at Harvard when she settled on a topic for her senior thesis: evictions, inspired by the work of Matthew Desmond, the Princeton sociologist and author of “Evicted,” the 2016 book that explored the housing struggles of low-income families in Milwaukee. She’d grown up in Mission Woods, a suburb on the Kansas side of the Kansas-Missouri border, and conducted her thesis research in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

After college, Ms. Raghuveer was invited to talk about her thesis in policy forums, and that's how she met the women who would help her start KC Tenants.

One was Tiana Caldwell, whose husband contacted Ms. Raghuveer as the family bounced between hotels after being evicted from their apartment amid Ms. Caldwell's treatment for ovarian cancer. Another was Diane Charity, a 72-year-old retiree who rents a two-bedroom townhouse and who met Ms. Raghuveer during a presentation at the local health department.

"She gave all these stats and I said, 'I need to talk to you,'" Ms. Charity said. "We've been telling these stories forever, and no one's listening. But she had what it took — I'm sorry to say this, but to talk to white people and people in power, you got to have data."

KC Tenants was founded in 2019 by a group that included Ms. Charity and Ms. Caldwell. A local union allowed the group to work out of its offices, and a folding table there formed KC Tenants' first headquarters. That's where Ms. Raghuveer was working when the Covid-19 pandemic erupted.

## 'Shut it down'

For all the uncertainty that the pandemic wreaked on markets and the economy, there seemed to be at least one prediction that housing experts and policymakers agreed on in its early days: a "tsunami of evictions" was imminent.

Nearly three years later, that prediction has yet to materialize. The economic recovery from the immediate shock of Covid was faster than many expected, and in the meantime trillions of dollars in federal stimulus spending and eviction moratoriums helped plug the gaps. Still, the attention that Covid brought to housing insecurity is poised to be a lasting remnant of the pandemic economy, even after rental assistance wanes and the patchwork of moratoriums expire.

It shows up in cities like Los Angeles, where the City Council this month voted to expand tenant protections for renters in the same meeting that it voted to end its Covid-related eviction moratorium. Last year, voters in St. Paul, Minn., passed a new rent control ordinance. The uneven rollout of federal rental aid, in which bureaucratic hurdles frequently prevented cities and states from getting money to tenants, inspired a number of cities to experiment with cash assistance programs that are now becoming a permanent feature of the policy landscape.

For organizers, the pandemic provided an almost perfect opportunity to build their ranks. Here was a crisis that affected large swaths of renters pretty much all at once, in contrast to the normal state of affairs in which tenants who are falling behind or evicted are dealing with problems that seem unique to their lives and mostly handled in private.

"Embedded in tenant organizing are deeper questions about the structure of our political economy," said Jamila Michener, a professor of government and public policy at Cornell who has studied tenant organizations. "It's getting people to think about not just how you can leverage power against your landlord or get the city council to help you, but also questions like: Why does the economy seem to be rigged against people like you so systematically?"

In 2019, Jenay Manley was making \$11.50 an hour at a QuikTrip gas station when a paperwork error cost her a voucher that covered a portion of her rent through the federal Section 8 housing program. To help make up for the loss, she allowed a former boyfriend who she said was abusive to move back in. One night, she texted a friend who had been displaced by a rent hike to ask what she could do. The friend, Maya Neal, suggested that she go to a KC Tenants meeting. There, she heard Ms. Caldwell tell her story of being evicted during cancer treatment.







Maya Neal Barrett Emke for The New York Times

“It was just this clarifying moment of, We’re not OK. People are not OK,” she said. “We are struggling, and no one knows. And the more of us who tell our story, the more of us realize our story is worth being told.”

A few months later, after leaving the night shift at QuikTrip, Ms. Manley, along with her sister and three children, stationed herself along Interstate 70, next to a minivan with “#CancelRent” scrawled across a window in purple marker. She was there to protest the burden of Covid on tenants in a socially distant manner.

In July 2020, KC Tenants protested the end of a local eviction moratorium and tried to halt eviction proceedings by logging onto virtual court hearings and continuously reading a script — “Every eviction is an act of violence” — so that judges and lawyers couldn’t hear one another. By October, the group’s members were chaining themselves to the courthouse doors.

They also started targeting lawyers and public officials, including through a rally in the front yard of Judge J. Dale Youngs, who oversees the circuit court in Jackson County. Mr. Youngs said in an interview that at one point the group spray-painted “FU” onto a flagstone path in his yard. He added that he did not know if “FU” was the completed thought or if the vandal was interrupted before the message could be finished.



"I'm a pretty big supporter of the First Amendment, and I'm the first to admit democracy is messy," Judge Youngs said. "But when you go protest in front of someone's private home, I think the only reason you're doing that is to let them know that you know where they live. And there's something kind of inherently not cool about that."

Locals argue over how effective these protests were, but there's little doubt that housing pressures brought on by Covid helped open the door to policies that otherwise would never have happened. The biggest, by far, is a new right-to-counsel ordinance in which the city will pay for a lawyer to represent any tenant facing eviction. The measure was drafted by KC Tenants, according to Andrea Bough, the City Council member who introduced it.

In an interview in her office, Ms. Bough expressed the same anxiety I had heard all around town, including from the mayor and from low-income tenants: even though Kansas City remains inexpensive compared with larger cities, it is spiraling into the same affordability problems as those places and is no more equipped to solve them.

"We aren't to the point of a widespread housing crisis, but if we don't do something we're going to get there," she said.

The right-to-counsel law, which went into effect this year, has already changed the landscape. Julie Anderson, a Kansas City attorney who represents a number of local landlords, said that the cost of an eviction had risen by a factor of five and that the process now took from three months to a year, up from a month or so. Her clients are unhappy, but it's also been good for business: Ms. Anderson said she had hired two lawyers and three paralegals to handle the extra work.

"That part of my practice was very uneventful," she said. "Now, post-Covid, almost everything is contested."

## The Tenant Class



Barrett Emke for The New York Times



KC Tenants now has 4,300 members, seven full-time employees and piles of yellow T-shirts ready for distribution. The nonprofit organization operates out of a second-floor office inside a Methodist church, and is funded through a mix of individual donors and foundations. It has a \$450,000 annual budget.

This month, members launched a separate entity, KC Tenants Power, that is registered as a 501(c)(4) and has more leeway to engage directly in politics. Like everyone else these days, Ms. Raghuveer seems to spend most of her time on video calls, talking in front of a banner that reads, “Eviction Kills.”

Tenant-organizing has been central to any number of social justice and civil rights movements stretching from the turn of the twentieth century, but, in recent decades, it has rarely been successful outside localized pockets. An enduring issue in organizing tenants as a class is that homeownership is still most families’ goal.

Covid has illustrated this. Once remote workers could live anywhere they wanted, many renters left big, expensive markets for smaller cities where they could afford a home.

Ms. Raghuveer believes in a growing tenant identity, but she has no delusions. She doesn’t imagine that one day she’ll lead a protest march in which public-housing tenants lock arms with residents of luxe buildings, where one-bedrooms start at \$3,000 a month and include access to rooftop pools and private dog parks. What she does believe is that housing instability, however it is experienced, can be a catalyst for a broader coalition that operates across traditional political lines.

She pointed to a recent effort to help a local trailer park where the county was evicting residents in order to build a jail on the property. This would normally have been an organizing no-brainer. However, during a meeting, several members of KC Tenants said they were reluctant to get involved because a number of the cars and trailers in the park had Trump stickers and flags on them. Other members responded by recalling that the group’s community agreements, which they read before every meeting, declare that KC Tenants does not make assumptions about *anyone*.

So a group went to knock on doors.

“This little skinny gal comes to my door, and I’m like, ‘Who in the hell is this?’” said Urban Schaefer, a resident of the park who helped organize it after meeting Ms. Raghuveer. “A lot of people were skeptical about it.”

In the end, about a dozen members of KC Tenants worked with residents to demand a better deal. And the county sweetened its offer: six months of free rent and at least \$10,000 in relocation costs.

## Inventing Hope



An organizing meeting for tenants Gabriel Tower Apartments, in Kansas City. Barrett Emke for The New York Times

There weren't any MAGA hats at the KC Tenants meetings I went to, but it was a generally diverse group with a range of motivations for being there. There were Black women, who are among the people most affected by eviction, both locally and nationally. There were white men, who began whatever they were about to say with acknowledgments of privilege. And there was a child of the housing bust, whose faith in the American dream was shattered when his family was foreclosed on and a chain of moves followed.

During a meeting of a tenants' union in the gentrifying Midtown neighborhood, I met an economics professor who had come because she had wanted to better understand the housing problem. Later, at meeting in a Section 8 building on the other side of Troost Avenue — long the city's dividing line between its Black and white residents — several attendees sat in wheelchairs, and one said he'd recently slept under a bridge.

Small frictions abound. At one recent meeting, a young man talked about the "carceral state," only to have Ms. Charity reply: "Are you talking about jail?"

This diversity is, unintentionally, the policy conundrum that Mayor Lucas and other officials are grappling with as more people look to the government for help with housing.

Around the country, developers have spent the past decade building mostly higher-end units. Eli Ungar, the founder of Mac Properties, which is based in Englewood, N.J., and owns about 9,000 apartments, including 2,000 in Kansas City, bluntly laid out the economics. The cost of development is now so high that the most reliable way to make money is by building apartments for tenants who regard the cost of rent as "a matter of curiosity."

This leaves two groups behind.

"The folks who think of themselves as middle class and are feeling increased worry and pressure as rents go up faster than incomes, and the people who are most vulnerable in our society and desperately need housing that no developer can provide without a massive subsidy," Mr. Ungar said. "As a citizen, I would be entirely comfortable with my taxes being higher to provide well-maintained housing for



those who can't afford it. The question is how that is achieved, and market-rate developers are not unilaterally going to say, 'I will reduce my income to achieve this goal.'

Caught in the teeth of a housing problem that is growing faster than local budgets, public officials inevitably try to solve both problems at once, pitting the middle class against families who live on minimum wage or fixed incomes. This was the crux of the "Sister Act" protest.



Mayor Quinton Lucas, in Kansas City, last year. Chase Castor for The New York Times

As part of a new housing plan, Mayor Lucas had proposed a \$50 million bond issue to fund low-income housing, but at the same time he wanted to loosen the city's regulations for apartment projects that receive tax breaks through a program designed to create affordable housing in market-rate projects. The shift would allow developers to substitute middle-income units for those reserved for families in the lowest income brackets.

KC Tenants framed the change as selling out families closest to the edge. The mayor's retort was that the previous iteration of the program had resulted in no new units for anyone, and his hope was that the revisions would push developers to build middle-income housing, which the city needs as well.

In the interview, he cast himself as a leader trying to navigate a difficult problem in world of limited resources.

"We don't have a Scandinavian tax structure," he said. "Maybe we can get to it, but I don't know that it starts in Kansas City."

Two days after the "Sister Act" protest, when the City Council held its vote on the plan, the chambers were packed with yellow T-shirts. After a 9-to-4 vote in favor of the new policy, Ms. Neal, an early KC Tenants member, yelled, "How dare you!" Security hauled her out with her arms behind her back in a scene that members' cellphones captured from every conceivable angle.



Ms. Neal being escorted out of the council meeting at City Hall. Barrett Emke for The New York Times

When Ms. Neal was gone, Ms. Caldwell, the once-evicted tenant whose cancer is now in remission, continued the chant. “Not another penny for the slumlords!” she shouted. She was removed just as fast, only instead of getting booted to an outdoor bench, like the one where Ms. Neal sat after she’d left the building, Ms. Caldwell was arrested and taken to a local police station.

An hour later, the lawn outside the station was crowded with yellow shirts. Members of KC Tenants lay on the grass typing on laptops and eating pizza. A slice was waiting for Ms. Caldwell when she emerged a short time later to cheers.

“I’m feeling great,” she said to the crowd, as her 15-year-old son joined her. “I’m doing this so that my baby will never have to.”

After a chant of “Tiana, we got your back!” a small group that included Ms. Caldwell and Ms. Raghuveer went to a wine bar to relax. The bar was closing, but Ms. Raghuveer said she’d called the owner, who’d promised to keep it open for them. She added that he was a renter.

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