

# Failure to repair, fund public housing can risk lives

## Residents in dilapidated complexes are on brink

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KFF HEALTH NEWS

SAVANNAH, Ga. – Blocks from where tourists stroll along the historic, cobblestoned riverfront of Savannah, Georgia, Detraya Gilliard made her way down the dark, ruptured sidewalks of Yamacraw Village, looking for her missing 15-year-old daughter.

Like most other people living in one of the nation's oldest public housing projects, Gilliard endured the boarded-up buildings and mold-filled apart-

ments because it was the only place she could afford.

Without working streetlights in parts of Yamacraw, Gilliard relied on the crescent moon's glow to search for her daughter Desaray in May 2022. She passed yards dotted with clotheslines and power lines, and a broken-down playground littered with juice boxes and red Solo cups.

"I happened to look down, and I knew it was her by her feet, by the shoes she had on," Gilliard said. She was "barely hanging on and she was covered in blood."

The teen's shooting death remains unsolved.

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Yamacraw Village in Savannah, Ga., is one of the nation's oldest public housing projects. In 2022, Savannah's city leaders unveiled Yamacraw Square within the public housing complex, designed to pay tribute to the area's African American and Native American histories. RENUKA RAYASAM/KFF HEALTH NEWS

# Public housing

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The year before Desaray died, President Joe Biden called for the federal government to spend tens of billions of dollars to fix dilapidated public housing that he said posed "critical life-safety concerns." The repairs, Biden said, would mostly help people of color, single mothers like Gilliard who work in low-income jobs, and people with disabilities.

The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that \$15 billion is needed to fund a backlog of public housing repairs. But, two years ago, money to fund those repairs became a casualty of negotiations between the Biden administration and congressional lawmakers over the Inflation Reduction Act. Republicans also have blocked efforts to lift 25-year-old legislation that effectively prohibits the construction of additional public housing, despite the catastrophic public health consequences.

Tenants living in derelict housing face conditions that contribute to higher rates of heart disease, diabetes, asthma, violence and other life-threatening risks.

The federal government has a long history of discriminatory practices in public housing. In cities across the country after World War II, Black families were barred from many public housing complexes even as the government induced white people to leave them by offering single-family homes in the suburbs subsidized by the Federal Housing Administration. Starting with the Nixon administration, lawmakers slowed investing in new public housing as more Black families and other people of color became tenants.

Today, "residents are facing really terrible choices, or terrible options about their future," said Sarah Saadian, senior vice president of policy for the National Low Income Housing Coalition. "We got here from Congress really failing to live up to its responsibilities of ensuring that people have access to an affordable, stable home."

In 2022, an art deco luxury apartment building opened down the street. But little has changed in Yamacraw, which is filled with Black families.

Current and former tenants say the Housing Authority of Savannah, the agency that oversees Yamacraw, has ignored the mold, rats and roaches that infest the units and sicken residents, and the bullet holes in windows and gunshots that ring through the night. Now they fear the city is using the poor state of Yamacraw as justification to push residents out.

In April, an inspection of Yamacraw apartments conducted by HUD, which oversees taxpayer-supported public housing nationwide, found 29 "life-threatening" deficiencies that pose a high risk of death to residents, according to a preliminary report.

The inspection cited 28 deficiencies it called "severe," meaning they present a high risk of permanent disability, serious injury or illness. An additional 195 deficiencies were cited as "moderate" because they could cause temporary harm or prompt a doctor.

Research links structural racism and disinvestment to chronic gun violence, which has taken a heavy toll on Black neighborhoods and kids such as Desaray. A study of gun injuries in four large cities at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic found that Black children were 100 times as likely as white youths to suffer a firearm assault.

Study coauthor Jonathan Jay, an assistant professor of community health sciences at Boston University, said most of the country's gun violence stems from disputes in neighborhoods that lack investment in housing and other public services.

"This is about white privilege," Jay said. "The result is driven by racist policymaking."

## A broken promise?

Federally funded public housing must be kept in "decent, safe and sanitary" condition, according to HUD. In 2013, the agency's then secretary, Shaun Donovan, vowed his program to announce a program that could give the local housing authority millions of dollars to rehab four public housing complexes, including Yamacraw, which has been among the lowest-rated public housing complexes in Georgia.

The Rental Assistance Demonstration program touted by Donovan did not provide new public money. Instead, it loosened rules to allow local officials to work with private lenders and developers to pay for repairs, transforming public housing complexes into mixed-income developments with Section 8 project-based rental assistance.

Last year, a consultants' report found a host of problems in Yamacraw, including water leaks and faulty wiring. "The



Records show most of the 315 apartments at Yamacraw Village in Savannah, Ga., sit empty, many with boarded-up doors and windows. PHOTOS BY RENUKA RAYASAM/KFF HEALTH NEWS

Remaining Useful Life of the Property is estimated to be 0 years," the consultants wrote. The housing authority wants to demolish Yamacraw and replace it with homes that are "healthier, more energy efficient and accessible," the report said.

Yamacraw never saw the windfall Donovan promised, current and former tenants said. Even with a housing assistance waitlist of more than 3,000 families in Savannah, records show most of the 315 apartments in Yamacraw sit empty, many with boarded-up doors and windows. Some other public housing developments in the area have been repaired or rebuilt, but except for new roofing added in 2019, Yamacraw has not had a significant renovation in years, according to the consultants' report.

Rather than repair the units, local officials started a process to tear down the complex, threatening to displace residents who have nowhere else to go in a city where the average two-bedroom apartment rents for more than \$1,600 monthly.

Congress has provided less money than was needed over the past 20 years to fix Yamacraw and other public housing complexes nationwide, leaving local agencies in a tough spot, said Earline Davis, executive director of the Housing Authority of Savannah.

The housing authority still plans to demolish Yamacraw and redevelop the property with new affordable housing, she said. Residents fear that they will be pushed out, and that because of its prime location, the redevelopment plans would prioritize apartments that attract people who can afford higher rents.

"Anytime you want to do something to make money - go destroy the historic Black community," said Georgia Benton, who grew up in Yamacraw. "But ain't nobody hollerin' 'Stop.'"

She and her son, LaRay Benton, have been fighting the housing authority's redevelopment plans, which they say could also disrupt the two-century-old First Bryan Baptist Church. The Rev. Andrew Bryan, a former enslaved person and ordained minister, founded the church in 1788. He later bought his freedom.

The Bentons and three city council members went door to door observing the condition of residents' units. They said plumbing issues caused sewage overflows and leaky faucets, mold tracked across the ceilings, and there were insect and rodent infestations.

Many families said they developed respiratory problems, such as bronchitis and asthma, after they moved in.

"It is an unhealthy situation," LaRay Benton said.

About seven years ago, after his previous Savannah landlord raised the rent, Paris Snead, his wife and two children found themselves homeless. A nonprofit helped them get into Yamacraw, where rent was \$750 a month.

It's been years since they left. Snead said he still takes a daily allergy pill because he believes he was exposed to mold in his unit, which caused allergy-like symptoms.

"The walls sweat like working men," Snead said of his former apartment. "The walls will, literally, from the top to the bottom, leak water."

"When you're homeless, and you want to be able to have a place for your kids, I mean, you'll make a home wherever you can," he said.

Snead said he showed Yamacraw's management the leaking walls, but they didn't act.

"The management team there did more to evict people and cause problems than they did to help families and ensure they had a place to stay," Snead said.

HUD, which conducts periodic inspections at public housing complexes, declined an interview request. The agency referred questions to the Housing Authority of Savannah.



Georgia Benton grew up in Yamacraw Village in Savannah, Ga. She and her son, LaRay Benton, have been fighting the housing authority's current redevelopment plans. They say the plans would displace residents and disrupt the two-century-old First Bryan Baptist Church.

ing Authority of Savannah.

The housing authority's redevelopment plans have been delayed by HUD's lengthy approval process, said Savannah Mayor Van R. Johnson II, who appoints people to a five-member board of commissioners that helps oversee the city's public housing.

He said he met with HUD's acting secretary, Adrienne Todman, and other HUD officials about housing issues in Savannah.

"People don't deserve to live like that," Johnson said.

If Yamacraw is demolished and rebuilt, he said, current tenants will have a chance to return because the homes will be affordable to people with low incomes.

## 'Worst experience of my life'

Yamacraw's struggles are rooted in century-old policies that have made it difficult for many Black neighborhoods to thrive.

In the 1930s, the federal government's Home Owners' Loan Corp. made color-coded maps for Savannah and 238 other cities and labeled redlined areas - usually places where Black people, Jews, immigrants and Catholics lived - as undesirable for investment.

"The houses are occupied by the lowest class negro tenants," a government surveyor wrote.

Yamacraw was opened in 1941 as segregated public housing for Black residents. Today, a health clinic occupies the original administrative building, designed to look like a plantation house.

Despite its problems, Johnson said, some of the city's most prominent doctors, lawyers and ministers grew up in Yamacraw.

Former and current tenants said the apartments slowly descended into disrepair.

Each year, more than 10,000 public housing apartments across the U.S. become uninhabitable.

Some lawmakers have used the poor state of public housing as justification to refuse lifting a moratorium passed during the Clinton administration that prohibits the construction of additional units, even as the nation's rental prices - and evictions - soar.

The argument that public housing "doesn't work" is disingenuous, said Saadian, with the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

"The federal government really failed to invest in public housing, to keep it in good condition and to keep those communities thriving," Saadian said, "and in many cases, actively contributed to those communities declining."

Instead of repairing public housing and building more high-quality units, federal lawmakers promised to provide housing vouchers, commonly known as Section 8, which helps people with low incomes rent privately owned homes. But most people who qualify for vouchers never receive them. Those who do often struggle to find landlords who will accept them, rendering them sometimes worthless.

Three years ago, LaTonya Atterbury was living in hotels north of Atlanta when she was offered a unit in Yamacraw for \$511 a month. In August 2021, she moved in with her niece, now 29, and her niece's son, now 8, relieved to have more stable housing.

But within the first week, she said, a neighbor's son broke her window and the housing authority charged her \$60 to fix it. She said her bathroom is covered in mold and mildew. One day, months after she moved in, Atterbury noticed a hole in her second-story window and saw a bullet on the floor, and realized there had been a shooting overnight. No one was injured, she said, but the bullet hole was only recently fixed - about 2½ years after the incident.

"It's been the worst experience of my life," Atterbury said. "Sitting here will make you very depressed."

Atterbury said she and other residents remain in Yamacraw at least in part because the housing authority has promised vouchers to move elsewhere. Three years later, she is still waiting.

Demolishing and rebuilding Yamacraw could take years.

Davis, the housing authority's executive director, said her agency has repeatedly told tenants they would be relocated to other public housing complexes or given a Section 8 voucher during construction if they have no lease violations. But residents say they routinely receive lease violations for harmless acts such as broken blinds. LaRay Benton said one resident was cited and fined \$75 for leaving a stroller on her front porch while she took her baby inside.

## 'Nothing has changed'

Researchers said that the presence of abandoned buildings can contribute to violent crime by making people feel unsafe and creating a sense of disorder. Studies suggest that razing abandoned buildings and improving green space can reduce it.

"No gun policy is going to work if we don't fix social infrastructure," said Jonathan Metz, director of the Department of Medicine, Health, and Society at Vanderbilt University. "We need investments to make sure communities feel safe. This is not just a public health problem. This is a race problem. This is a democracy problem."

In recent years, shooting victims or their relatives, including Desaray's mother, have filed at least three lawsuits against the Housing Authority of Savannah. Those ongoing lawsuits allege the agency failed to take added security measures in its public housing complexes - some of which had fallen into disrepair - despite gun violence and other crimes.

"I don't know how we can prevent shootings," Davis said.

Davis declined to comment on the lawsuits. She would say only that her agency has installed cameras in Yamacraw, worked with police and asked residents to report crime.

Johnson, Savannah's mayor, said police have investigated the Desaray Gilliard case, but there are people "who know what happened" and will not talk to officers.

Around 9 p.m. on a Friday night two years ago, Gilliard went looking for her daughter for the second time that night. Desaray missed an 8 p.m. curfew and wasn't answering her phone.

Gilliard waited for about 30 minutes at a bench near a park in the middle of the complex, hoping Desaray would find her. Then she started to retrace her steps.

Gilliard called 911 after she saw her daughter's body.

When the police arrived, they made their way through the darkened complex with flashlights, Gilliard said. An officer pulled up Desaray's shirt and saw a bullet hole in her chest. Gilliard said she later learned from a funeral director that her daughter had been shot three times. She has yet to receive an autopsy report from the police.

Gilliard said "nothing has changed before, since or after" her daughter's death.

"It's been very difficult," she said. "Sometimes, I wanted to give up."

About a month after Desaray died, Gilliard said someone tried to break into her apartment. A couple of weeks later, her request to move to a new complex was finally granted and Gilliard left Yamacraw.

She said she has struggled with thoughts of self-harm. She maintains a memorial with pictures, stuffed animals and flowers near the spot where she found Desaray's body.

"I have to remember this is for her," Gilliard said of her middle child's death, "because nobody else is doing these things for her to keep her memory alive."

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