

# HAZARDOUS HOUSING

## Children's health, well-being at risk amid rental housing code violations

Christina Chkarbouli Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

Seven-year-old Jeremiah Pugh-Robinson sees the peeling, crumbling paint and the fungi spreading in his bathroom. He hears his mom plead on the phone with any city official she can reach for help. Despite desperately wanting out, Elizabeth Robinson has struggled to find a way to leave and keep a roof over her kids' heads. But the main thing Jeremiah thinks about is getting his first wheel-free training bike. He's a "big boy" now. Smoke from burning incense sticks squeezed into door cracks blends with the smell of bleach in the Wellington Avenue duplex where Elizabeth Robinson lives with her four kids. She goes through stick after stick, bottle after bottle, trying to mask the meaty odor of the mold growing in the first-floor bathroom.

Robinson makes it work for her children. When smelly water starts to resurface from their bathtub drain, she calls on acquaintances to pick the little ones up for showers.

Despite her efforts, in a household of toddlers and a seven-year-old, the dangers Robinson is most afraid of creep up anyway: Two-year-old Jasmine chews on the paint and the cry of one-year-old Ja'Liyah alerts the family to an overheating outlet in the baby's sleeping corner.

"If something happened to my kids, I wouldn't be able to live with myself," Robinson said.

The Monroe County Department of Homeless Services, which covered roughly \$950 of her \$1,200 rent through temporary assistance, had continued to pay Robinson's landlord despite the home's apparent health and safety issues. Since she moved in last fall, Robinson said she'd been asking for relocation to no avail.

Although she learned to bear the discomfort of the home's unsanitary conditions, what kept Robinson up at night was a gnawing fear for her family's safety. As her rental's possible electrical problems escalated, Robinson said she's reached her breaking point worrying about a fire.

Her landlord did not respond to requests for comment.

"I'd rather be homeless, and my kids be safe and not have to worry about no house catching on fire, or my kids having to worry about anything like that," Robinson said.

Robinson's family has since moved out of the duplex after deciding that living between hotels, her ex's place and the street would be safer. The family experienced being unsheltered for about a year and a half before moving into the rental in the 19th Ward.

The single mother is waiting for her lease to end in October, when she hopes DSS can place her in a more livable home.

The kind of housing instability Robinson's family has faced, uprooting her kids'

routines and schooling, is familiar in Rochester. A 2023 report by The Children's Agenda found that roughly one in 10 students in the Rochester City School District experienced homelessness in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 academic years. And nearly 40% had moved or switched schools in the same period.

### Impact on kids' health

Stable, safe housing is critical for kids' mental, physical and social well-being. National studies have found that frequent moves and the inherited stress of not knowing how long you'll stay in your home or school hit children hard. Instability and poor housing conditions can increase kids' likelihood of developing anything from attention and behavior difficulties to respiratory issues.

Samantha Boch, an assistant professor

of population health at the University of Cincinnati, said persistent worries about housing can manifest in kids' and parents' physical health. This is part of the "toxic stress framework," which describes how childhood experiences with high stress can influence health outcomes.

"Anytime we're talking about environment or housing, if it's lower quality and it is stressful to the parents and stressful to the children to live in those environments, that will exacerbate absolutely any condition," said Boch, who worked on a national household survey that found specific poor housing characteristics — including cracking ceilings and pest infestations — correlate with poor health.

Robinson said her children showed symptoms of allergic reactions and breathing problems after moving in their 19th Ward rental. A recent medical check-up found that her two-year-old has above-average lead levels in her blood, she said.

### Broader codes enforcement issues, kids suffer

Critics say Rochester has a housing quality problem, and low-income families are bearing its brunt. Some blame out-of-state, profiteering or irresponsible

landlords who extract what they can from the city's degrading housing stock without making repairs or ensuring livable conditions.

The city's public code compliance site, BuildingBlocks, listed five open violations at Robinson's rental dating back to May 30 — including leaking pipes, electrical problems and an unspecified "hazardous condition" that had to be fixed "immediately," according to the citation.

Codes enforcement usually gives landlords 30 days to repair after being cited. In the most dire cases, like when the property is dangerous or uninhabitable because of a violation, the city requires repairs in one day. According to the city, inspectors come back in 24 hours to check if the fix was made — but tenants say that often isn't the case.

Code violations at poorly maintained rentals often stay open for months as landlords either don't get fined or decide paying off fines is cheaper than making repairs. More than 10,000 rentals across the city have open violations, and roughly 20% operate without a required occupancy permit, which the city renews every three to six years following an inspection showing no outstanding violations at the property.

Lizzie Flood, a social worker at Renaissance Academy Charter School of the Arts, works with children and their families to improve their living situations. One of the most common issues she sees on her visits to children's homes is rentals with severe plumbing issues and no running water.

"That greatly impacts students' not just overall well-being but also their social quality of life when they're coming to school dirty," said Flood, who has been the school's sole social worker for seven years. "I've had students that are on a schedule to be able to shower at school because they can't at home."

On one recent visit, Flood said, a rental's plumbing was so bad that she could see the upstairs bathroom through an eight-year-old girl's bedroom ceiling. Such housing issues can impact kids' sleep and mental health, Flood said, making them anxious or irritable at school because of the danger or instability they come home to.

See RENTALS, Page 18A



▲ Robinson gives Ja'Liyah Pugh-Robinson, 1, a kiss before putting her in a high chair. In the background is her 7-year-old son, Jeremiah Robinson. She has her kids sleeping in the pullout couch in the living room with her because she's afraid if there is an electrical fire she wouldn't be able to get to them in time. PHOTOS BY TINA HACKETT/VEE/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Robinson said on Aug. 6 that on hot days you can smell the mold in the bathroom. She also has problems with the toilet and base of the toilet. A wall between the toilet and bathtub has peeling paint.



One of the outlets in the living room has part of the bare wall exposed next to it. Robinson said sometimes if the outlet is touched it sparks.



Elizabeth Robinson moved her four kids into a duplex on Wellington Avenue, subsidized by the Department of Social Services, after experiencing homelessness for a year and a half. CHRISTINA CHAKARBOULI/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

ILLUSTRATION BY MICK HANGLAND-SKILL/USA TODAY NETWORK AND GETTY IMAGES

# Rentals

Continued from Page 17A

Flood said code enforcement can be a tricky system for families to navigate, and a chief concern for many is long wait times for repairs after reporting violations. She said that families often feel trapped by a lack of affordable alternatives. They stay in rentals with broken windows, doors that don't work, caved-in ceilings, and poor plumbing because they struggle to find safe housing within their budget.

Rochester's housing affordability issues mirror a statewide crisis.

In 2022, nearly three million households across New York were housing insecure, living without a stable and affordable home or spending more than a third of their monthly income on rent. Housing advocates call for rent stabilization, stronger tenant protections, more affordable units and options for temporary housing.

## Extended-stay hotels, shelters, and housing vouchers fill the gap

Last summer, while Oscar Brewer was running for City Council on a housing advocacy platform, his landlord filed a no-cause eviction against him. Brewer moved with his six-year-old daughter to a room at the Motel 6 off Chili Avenue, which became the pair's unlikely home for over a year.

Brewer said the Homestead Heights rental they left was in dire need of repairs and suffered an ongoing cockroach infestation. He reported the issues to his landlord and the city. His rental was owned by Tardis Properties LLC, which has 40 code violations across its 11 properties in Rochester. Last year, the company reportedly faced potential fines of millions of dollars for code violations.

Tardis' attorney, John Nacca, told the D&C the company is actively working to abate outstanding violations, 34 of which come from one property that's getting its certificate of occupancy renewed. Nacca wrote that Brewer's attorney had a "very good reason" for evicting him but did not say what it was.

The move and subsequent instability have had a lasting effect on Brewer's daughter, who recently graduated from kindergarten.



**Jeremiah Pugh-Robinson, Elizabeth Robinson's eldest child, bikes around the front yard of their rental duplex on Wellington Avenue.**

CHRISTINA CHKARBOUL/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

"How do they expect our children to flourish and learn in school if they're getting evicted because of bad landlords?" Brewer said. "Do you know what it's like to have your daughter look at you and cry because you have to tell her we just lost the house because of a bad landlord not taking care of their property?"

Several families Lizzie Flood has worked with choose to live in extended-stay hotels while looking for their next rental after falling out with their landlord or facing a rent hike. The school offers limited housing vouchers to families needing emergency housing, paid for using federal COVID-19 relief funding.

Flood said vouchers have helped families that need support with housing costs like hotels, deposits, and furniture, but they're not a long-term solution with the current funding model. The relief funding will eventually run out, hampering the school's ability to provide direct help to families experiencing housing instability.

Identifying housing insecure students through schools can be an effective avenue for supporting struggling families in their search for a stable and affordable place to live, said Peter Hepburn, a sociologist who researches the impact of public policy on families at Princeton University's Eviction Lab.

"There are targeted programs for

families with kids that seem promising," said Hepburn, who also serves as an assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at Rutgers University. "The best example of this is in Tacoma, Washington, where there are projects between the public school system and the local public housing authority to provide housing to families who are unstably housed to get on their feet."

Housing vouchers and direct funds to help tenants pay rent haven't seen policy success from the city of Rochester or Monroe County. Last year, county legislator Rachel Barnhart sought to address tenants' struggle to afford rent, proposing a \$1 million pilot program to provide vouchers to 100 families.

Barnhart's idea didn't gain traction in County Executive Adam Bello's administration, she said. Critics worry that tenants will grow dependent on vouchers, but Barnhart argues that tenants can't become self-sufficient if they don't have a place to live.

"We should have a 'housing first' mentality," Barnhart said. "We should be thinking about making sure a family is in a safe apartment now, and then, you can work with them about future plans."

## Landlord renting to families with kids

From his experience with renting

families, Peter Hepburn of Princeton's Eviction Lab said families struggle to find suitable rentals for them and their children as some landlords view kids as a liability, he said.

"Landlords are, in many cases, more reluctant to rent to families with kids," Hepburn said. That could stem from worries about noise, mess, or property damage.

Jay Molis, a Rochester landlord, said he rents most of his 34 units to parents and their kids. Apart from occasional complaints about rambunctious small children making noise or drawing on walls, he hasn't faced many issues with his family tenants.

What Molis has noticed, though, is that families often apply for rentals that aren't big enough to accommodate the number of kids they're moving in. In the search for an affordable place to live, he said one parent of six children requested a one-bedroom apartment.

"Sometimes families have trouble finding apartments, but I'm not so sure that that problem has to do with the fact that they're a family versus the fact that they are maybe trying to stuff too many people into too small of an apartment," he said.

As renting families butt up against affordability barriers, often putting up with lower quality housing to make it work, social workers and other community advocates do what they can to help. But what they're able to provide often feels like short-term solutions patching up more significant shortfalls in housing support, Flood said about her work at Renaissance Academy.

"It's very exhausting and can sometimes feel like a losing battle because of these systemic issues and because so much of the work sometimes feels like Band-Aids on larger problems."

*Christina Chkarboul was a summer 2024 intern at the Democrat and Chronicle and a student journalist at USC, where she focused on Earth science, global studies and journalism.*

*Editor note: The byline information on this story was adjusted Oct. 24 to reflect that Chkarboul was the sole reporter on this article. A second reporter consulted for the story but did not do byline-credit reporting.*

*Story update: Single mother Elizabeth Robinson reports that she is now unhoused.*