

Understanding Tenant Experiences Living in Corporate Landlord Housing in Charlotte, North Carolina

REPORT
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CHARLOTTE
CHARLOTTE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT (CHARP)

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA | GEOGRAPHY & EARTH SCIENCES
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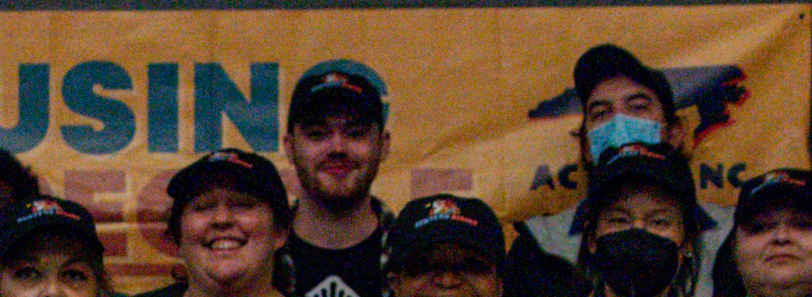
ABOUT ACTION NC

Action NC's mission is to win greater racial, gender and economic justice through popular education, grassroots organizing and mobilization, leadership development, and increased voter participation. They have locations in Charlotte, Durham and Fayetteville with a focus on various causes such as criminal justice reform, voting rights, and housing rights. Within their housing initiative, they work with Renters Rising to help inform tenants of their rights, organize tenant unions, lead "Know Your Rights" Workshops, advocate for affordable housing and more. Partnership with Action NC was pivotal in understanding research needs and future goals for influencing housing policy in Charlotte and across the country in communities undergoing similar circumstances.

ABOUT UNC CHARLOTTE'S QUALITATIVE METHODS IN GEOGRAPHY COURSE

Qualitative Methods in Geography for graduate students (masters and doctoral students) offers an overview of qualitative research methods commonly used in the geography and social sciences. It is intended to give students the basic tools needed to design qualitative research. This includes identifying a problem, formulating questions, identify the best methods to answer your research questions, drawing conclusions based on analysis of empirical evidence, and communicating results. While researchers in the class bring a plethora of knowledge and experience, it is important to acknowledge that this class project was the first community-engaged, qualitative study conducted by the majority of them. Given the limited time frame for conducting this study, students present in this report a preliminary analysis of findings and recommend a more in-depth study and analysis of the data collected.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents an analysis of the experiences of 30 renters living in corporate housing (multi-family and single-family units) across Charlotte. The UNC Charlotte research team, consisting of 12 researchers, carried out 30 virtual interviews with renters between March and April 2023. The interviews consisted of 11 questions regarding the tenants' rental experience, the benefits and challenges of living in corporate landlord housing in Charlotte, and their housing goals.

Preliminary findings suggest that tenants living in corporate landlord housing in Charlotte have mixed experiences. Several tenants express benefits leading them to live in corporate landlord housing such as proximity to schools and amenities such as the light rail. They also find it a benefit to not have to worry about lawn maintenance and to have more space in single-family home rentals. However, other tenants report dissatisfaction with the quality of the housing and management given the amount of rent paid. Others express concerns related to rent increases and a lack of responsiveness to maintenance issues. Also, we found that almost all respondents have a goal of owning a home of their own in the next ten years. However, many face financial barriers to reaching this goal.

In this report, we present 10 themes that have emerged in interviews with tenants recounting their experiences with corporate landlord housing:

- 1. Information imbalance.** In our study, 25 out of 30 participants reported that they had little or no prior knowledge of available housing options in Charlotte, or had difficulty finding reliable information about their landlord.
- 2. Lack of other options.** Respondents, 22 out of 30 (73%), described having been constrained to a particular unit or area due to numerous factors such as limited housing supply, limited resources (i.e., price, time), inadequate information, and proximity to amenities (i.e., light rail & good schools).
- 3. Difficult application and search process.** Over half of respondents reported facing multiple obstacles in the application process.

4. Questioning whether the place was worth the cost? In 22 out of 30 interviews, residents in both multi-family and single-family homes expressed having issues with maintenance. Given the increasing cost of rent and growing maintenance issues, residents questioned whether the place they rented was worth the cost.

5. Rent is Unaffordable and Unsustainable. Participants, 27 of the 30, reported rent was unaffordable and/or unsustainable.

6. Perceived Benefits of living in corporate landlord housing. Of those who experienced the benefits of living in corporate landlord housing, respondents mentioned location (60% or 18 respondents), professional upkeep of properties (33% or 10 participants), and access to amenities (six participants or 20%) as benefits.

7. Disempowered by corporate landlord housing. Participants, 29 out of 30 (97%), described having experienced a sense of disempowerment living in corporate landlord housing.

8. Poor corporate communication practice. Respondents, 26 out of 30 (86%), highlighted the difficulties faced with existing corporate communication practices.

9. A sense of pressure and feeling tricked into signing the lease. A few respondents, six out of 30 (20%), expressed that they felt pressure from staff to sign the lease.

10. Future Housing Goals. Tenants expressed a variety of future housing goals including homeownership (24 respondents or 80%), renting a home (two respondents or <7%), owning a rental property (1 respondent or <4%), moving out of Charlotte (two respondents or <7%), and building a home of their own (three respondents or 10%). Lack of personal income and access to loans were raised as concerns by 15 participants.

KEY DEFINITIONS

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Refers to residential units, such as houses or apartments, that are priced reasonably and within the financial means of low- to moderate-income households.

CORPORATE LANDLORDS

Corporate landlords are large investment firms (hedge funds, private equity firms, or real estate investment trusts) that acquire single-family homes, extracting rent from tenants while holding properties for the long-term.

CORPORATE LANDLORD HOUSING

Refers to residential units, such as houses or apartments, that are occupied by tenants but owned by a large institutional investor rather than an individual.

LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLD

Low-income household means a household earning 80 percent or less of the county-wide median income.

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Refers to the mean of median household income (in 2021 dollars) for Charlotte in years 2017-2021 (\$68,367) as identified by AMI by the United States Census Bureau. Median household income categories most often used are 1) at or below 30% of AMI; 2) at or below 50% AMI; 3) at or below 60% AMI; and 4) at or below 80% AMI.

MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING

Multi-family housing is defined as properties with five or more dwelling units.

PROPERTY MANAGER

Refers to a professional responsible for overseeing, managing, and maintaining residential properties owned by a corporate landlord.

RIGHT TO COUNSEL

This refers to a defendant's right to be provided with a lawyer regardless of their ability to pay.

RENT-BURDENED

Refers to households that spend more than 30% of their income on rent.

RENTAL LEASE

A written contract between a landlord and tenant that grants the tenant the right to reside at a premises for a specified period of time and under specific conditions, typically in exchange for an agreed upon periodic payment.

RENTER-OCCUPIED

Refers to housing that is occupied by renters rather than property owners.

SINGLE-FAMILY HOME

Single-family homes are designed to be used as a single-dwelling unit, with one owner, no shared walls, and its own land.

SOCIAL HOUSING

Social housing is a form of government regulated housing provided and managed by the public agencies or non-profit organizations using public and/or private funds for the benefit of many households, based on degree of need, made available at below-market price.



INTRODUCTION

Pawning a wedding ring to make rent. Watching bulldozers flatten places where your childhood memories were made. Struggling to host your child's birthday without a working refrigerator. Describing your housing situation in three words and picking the following: "trying to live"

These snapshots make a fitting introduction for this study, which will collect, share, and elevate the lived experiences of Charlotteans attempting to secure and remain in shelter – a basic human need – in a city rife with housing uncertainty and scarcity. In a parallel, ordinary citizens must compete with Wall Street investment firms to put a roof over their heads. Specifically, this study will seek to understand how tenants experience living in multi-family and single-family homes owned and rented out by corporate landlords in Charlotte, North Carolina. It will also attempt to reveal the reasons why people in Charlotte choose to rent – and oftentimes continue renting – from these corporations.

This report will be organized as follows: first, the background of this issue will be explored and academic literature reviewed so as to ground the present study within a historical and research context. Next, our research questions, the methods used to answer our questions, and an introduction of those who participated in the study will be shared. The report will close with preliminary results, a summary of those findings, and a conclusion highlighting implications for policy and action.

By portraying tenants' stories in this manner, those with a stake in the future of Charlotte who read this report will be able to judge whether the current trajectory – a status quo in which large companies increasingly cash in on citizens' pursuit of the American homeownership dream – is acceptable, or whether a call to action, such as one made by this study's partner organization, Action NC, must be supported and reinforced.

Background

By all accounts, the United States is in the midst of a severe housing shortage that worsened between 2008 and 2021, when post-Great Recession building activity fell far below historical levels. Studies have estimated that the country now has a deficit of between 1.5 to 20 million missing homes. In some places, as in New York (NY) and Los Angeles (CA), homes are truly “missing,” and the deficit represents the unbuilt structures needed to keep pace with demographic trends, such as in-migration to Sunbelt metros, and millennials, currently the largest generational group, reaching median first-time homebuyer age. In other cities, like Las Vegas (NV) and McAllen (TX), homes exist, but are simply not for sale at prices affordable to the low- and middle-income segments of the populations.

Priced-out buyers often remain renters, and rents in many areas have increased in step with surging prices. According to the Center for Housing Policy, nearly half of all tenants across the US spent more than 30% of their income on housing in 2018. The Department of Housing and Urban Development considers these households “cost-burdened,” a designation that hints at the painful tradeoffs that these families’ must make between paying rent and purchasing other essential resources, such as food or basic cleaning supplies. Both the lack of access to housing and the high housing costs in the US have made this one of the most pressing issues in the country’s public policy.

Context

Charlotte, North Carolina, an urban area with a population of 2.7 million people in the southeastern U.S., has not been immune to either of those effects stemming from the nationwide trend. Yet the region has been somewhat unique in drawing the special attention of relatively recent players in the multi-family and single-family residential market: for-profit, corporate landlords. These large, often private equity-backed institutional investors arose in the aftermath of the Great Recession. From 2007 to 2011, when 4.7 million households were losing their homes due to foreclosure or on short sale, these firms, forecasting long-term value in purchasing properties in desirable locations at the nadir of the housing crash, went on a buying spree, purchasing tranches of homes, often containing thousands of properties and often in communities of color. The Federal Housing Finance Agency, fearing that large swathes of American neighborhoods would become littered with abandoned homes, facilitated and encouraged these sales at the time, and corporate landlords continue to enjoy preferential advantages under the tax code.

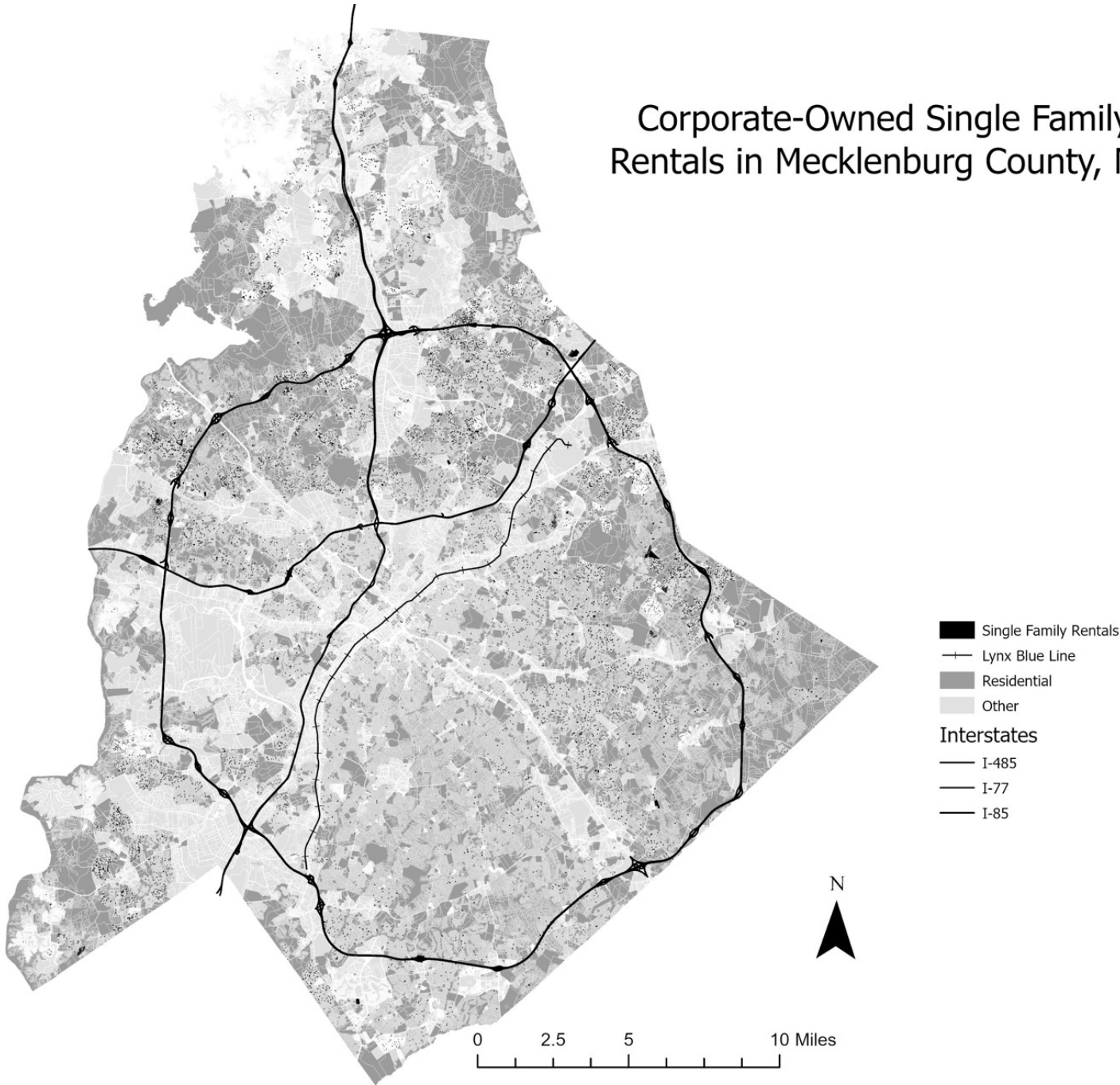


In the intervening years, as housing values have recovered, corporate landlords have purchased and now subsequently rent out 11.3% of Charlotte's single-family-rental-housing stock, and the COVID-19 pandemic supercharged their activities in the city. In the fourth quarter of 2021 alone, for example, corporate landlords purchased 32% of all homes sold in Charlotte. Institutional investors like Tricon Residential, Invitation Homes, and Progress Residential, have zeroed in on Charlotte (with one executive referring to it as a "strike zone"). Their commitment to a profitable long-term investment is exemplified in their choice of the metro as the site of the first local chapter of the National Rental Home Council (NRHC), an industry trade group for corporate landlord businesses.

The presence of corporate landlord housing in the rental housing market also impacts housing options and rental prices, with the appeal of reduced tenant responsibility of services and maintenance of homes and more attention given towards the needs of tenants. However, in Charlotte, the cost of housing is a major concern as it is significantly higher than in other cities in the state. The high costs make it challenging for many residents to find affordable housing, and a significant gap exists between the demand for affordable housing and the available supply. This gap leads to unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions and in worse cases, the inability to pay rent, eviction, and homelessness. Therefore, it is very important to study housing policy issues.

Access to safe and affordable housing is a fundamental human right that the state must protect. Access to housing is considered a human right because individuals need to live with dignity, security, and privacy. According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care." This right to housing means all individuals should have access to affordable, safe, and secure housing without discrimination.

Corporate-Owned Single Family Rentals in Mecklenburg County, NC



Data Source: The Charlotte Observer
Map Maker: Melissa Harmon, UNC Charlotte

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tenant Experiences

Pfeiffer et al. (2021) point out that the growth of corporate landlord housing has afforded tenants the opportunity to rent homes in areas with more spacious homes where privacy is possible and in moderately advantaged neighborhoods. In addition, the growth of corporate landlord housing has enabled tenants to enjoy benefits such as work and school proximity, a reduction in noise, and access to amenities like pools and gyms and services that could also bolster economic mobility (Pfeiffer et al. 2021; Reid et al., 2018; Wegmann, 2019).

On the other hand, several scholars have also documented the risks and challenges associated with living in corporate landlord housing. For example, previous studies have documented eviction rates among corporate landlord housing. Raymond et al. (2018) and Seymour and Akers (2020) claim that institutional investors like corporate landlord housing are more likely to evict people than other types of landlords such as independent landlords. Additionally, Raymond et al. (2016) in an empirical study of evictions in Fulton County, Georgia found that high eviction rates in southwest Atlanta correspond with a predominantly Black population and that single-family rentals owned by corporate landlord housing are more prone to experience housing instability.

Our study builds upon this vein of literature, which generally supports the finding that tenants' lived experiences delimit which policy or other responses are possible, and by extending similar methods (qualitative) within the Charlotte context, which, to-date, has not been studied.

Corporate Landlords

Prior research on corporate landlords, as various authors define these firms, remains relatively sparse, perhaps due to their recent arrival on the U.S. housing market scene. For example, Mills, Molloy, and Zarutskie, writing for the Federal Reserve Board, note that in 1996, most single-family residential rentals were owned and operated by individuals or partnerships with fewer than ten units, in part due to the formidable capital and logistical challenges posed by owning more.

Schnure (2014) argues that corporate landlords began to overcome these challenges as early as 2008, by raising external capital, often using real estate investment trusts (REITs) to do so, and streamlining management teams and processes. In contrast to how tenants are portrayed in the media, Kerrigan finds that landlords – corporate or not – are often represented as rational and aggressive, which contributes to the unequal balance of power between the two. Diamond, McQuade, and Qian, in their 2019 study of how different types of landlords react to rent control laws in San Francisco, find that corporate landlords were uniquely able to utilize loopholes to get around the measures.

A study by Brian An finds that Atlanta neighborhoods targeted by corporate landlords experienced a 10.1-11.3 percentage point drop in Black homeownership, even though the opposite effect -- increases in homeownership – are strongly associated with increased individual and community benefits. Finally, several studies (Tapp & Peiser, 2022; Charles, 2020) find that in some areas, corporate landlords have oligopolistic control over rent pricing and enjoy tax advantages over “mom and pop” landlords; in other words, because these landlords own so much of the rental stock in a given area and can bypass higher tax rates, they can avoid the normal competitive market pressures that might result in lower rents. The literature, broadly taken, finds that corporate landlords, who operate on a national scale and source funding globally, are uniquely powerful players in localized housing markets, and their rise represents another step in the increased financialization and commodification of many aspects of people’s everyday lives.



The present study combines and builds upon these two academic threads of inquiry by examining how tenants in Charlotte corporate landlord housing experience this financialization of their basic need for shelter.

The sections that follow will illustrate the human voices of this trend.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given this context, research questions guiding this study are:

How are residents led to live in corporate landlord housing?

How do residents experience living in corporate landlord housing?

Why do residents stay in corporate landlord housing?

METHODS

For this study, researchers partnered with Action NC, a grassroots organization focused on organizing tenants to take action for fairer housing. Together, we designed the research questions and objectives, refined the interview guide, and recruited participants for the study.

The shared goal of this study was to use the preliminary results to drive future research directions that would aid in the mission for a more equitable housing policy. To this end, it was important that we a) engaged tenants and community members advocating for housing justice in dialogue and b) centered tenant narratives to better understand a particular truth related to housing injustice among those living in corporate landlord housing.

The study was conducted by students in the Qualitative Methods in Geography class at UNC Charlotte. For many students, it was their first-time undertaking community-engaged research and qualitative methods. Given the introductory nature of this course and the limited time span, the class offers a preliminary analysis of our results. We suggest additional in-depth studies on the topic and a thorough discussion of findings to direct future research objectives.

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at UNC Charlotte (IRB#: 23-0492). Data collection for this study occurred from March to April 2023.



Participant Recruitment

Potential research participants were identified by Action NC using community canvassing, outreach to group members, and organizational relationships with tenants. Action NC provided UNC Charlotte researchers with a spreadsheet including 161 names, phone numbers, and emails. These names were collected by Action NC organizers who canvassed homes owned by corporations. The list consisted of individuals who voluntarily provided their contact information to learn more about Action NC efforts and to stay informed. Initial emails regarding this study were sent in early March 2023 by Action NC to participants with a digital flier outlining the study information.

Drawing from the spreadsheet, UNC Charlotte researchers then recruited participants through email and/or phone outreach (47%). Additionally, due to a low response rate to interview requests, this sampling approach was supplemented by UNC Charlotte researchers recruiting participants, beyond the spreadsheet, known to live in corporate landlord housing in Charlotte (53%). The final sample consisted of 30 participants made up of both Action NC and



Sample Demographics

Of the 30 participants, three interviewees did not answer the demographic survey resulting in 27 survey responses (see Appendix). Of these, a majority of respondents were women (n = 17). Interviewees identified as Black or African American residents (n = 8), White (n = 6), African (n = 5), Multiracial (n = 5), and Hispanic/Latinx (n = 1) with two respondents providing no response. Ages ranged from 25-34 (n = 8), 35-44 (n = 6), 45-54 (n = 5), 18-24 (n = 5), 65-74 (n = 2), and 55-64 (n = 1).

The table below shows the percentage of each race/ethnicity of those interviewed for this study:

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
Black or African American	29.63%
African	18.52%
White	22.22%
Hispanic/Latinx	3.70%
Multiple	18.52%
Other	7.41%

Table 1 Race/Ethnicity of Study Participants

Measures

Survey

A short survey was developed in collaboration with Action NC leadership to collect additional quantitative data. The survey consisted of 11 questions total. One question prompted participants to indicate a pseudonym if they did not want to use their real name. Demographic questions (n = 6) asked about race and ethnicity, gender, age, education, household income, and number of people residing in the house. One question asked when participants moved into their current housing and another question asked about the duration of the lease. The final question asked respondents to indicate whether they had problems with mold, leaks, cooling, heat, or other specific housing problems. The complete survey can be found in the Appendix.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Following the collaborative refining of the research questions with Action NC, UNC Charlotte researchers brainstormed potential interview questions to best elucidate information able to address each research question. This process was informed by a review of relevant academic literature and communication with the community partner. An iterative refinement of these questions followed to ensure clarity and alignment with the research goals. After this, the proposed questions were shared with the community partner for input and approval.

The final semi-structured interview guide consisted of 11 questions to guide the interviewer. Interview questions inquired about tenants' search process (e.g., What did you know about corporate landlords when searching for housing), comparative rental experiences (e.g., how does your current living experience compare to your previous experience with rental properties and landlords?), benefits and challenges (e.g., What have been your biggest challenges/benefits of living in corporate landlord housing?), and future housing plans (e.g., When your lease is up, will you renew? Why or why not?).



Procedure

Participant Observation

As part of the study, researchers engaged in research by attending a housing-related event or activity (e.g., a Board of County Commissioner meeting where housing was discussed, canvassing with Action NC in January and February 2023). During observations, notes were taken, describing the social situation and interactions in detail before interpreting the data. The purpose of the participant observation was three-fold. First, by participating with Action NC's community organizing it strengthened our partnership. Second, participation gave us additional data to support our development of our study design. For example, by attending the events we interacted with tenants and developed a better sense of what research questions are most important to ask in order to drive housing change. Lastly, the participant observations gave the research team a better understanding of the broader context.

Survey and Interview

Interviews were conducted by the research team virtually over Zoom and lasted for 30 minutes on average. Each student conducted two to three interviews individually. All interviews were recorded following verbal consent and then transcribed by the interviewer. Pseudo names were also created to safeguard the identity of participants.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked to complete the demographic survey while on line with the researcher to ensure researchers were available to assist with any issues or to answer any questions. The survey was administered through Google Forms.

Participants were provided a \$45 Amazon gift card for their participation. After each interview, students transcribed each interview they conducted in order for each student to read over what was discussed in each interview and to conduct data analysis.



Data Analysis

To gain insights into the tenants' experiences, themes and codes were developed by UNC Charlotte researchers. Themes in the data were identified and discussed among researchers to understand similarities and differences in the tenants' experiences. An iterative process took place to develop these codes. Codes representing similar bandwidth were grouped under respective themes, resulting in the development of 10 themes. Each theme was then assigned to an individual researcher for detailed analysis and extraction of information. Each researcher focused on three to five codes to assess their frequency (the number of times they are mentioned by participants) and how participants discussed such topics.

Additionally, codes were developed to help the researcher assess different dimensions (of which all emerged from the data) of the issue such as: non-corporate landlord options unavailable, limited time, extenuating circumstances, and unaffordable rent costs elsewhere.

The final interpretation of the data was based on the detailed information extracted by each researcher, allowing for the summary of the final results. As mentioned previously, the data analyzed is conducted by students learning the art of qualitative methods and data analysis. Therefore, more in-depth analysis of the data should be conducted before general conclusions can be made.

Findings



Theme 1: Information Imbalance

Of the participants interviewed, 25 reported having little to no prior knowledge of or trouble finding reliable information about housing options in Charlotte, their corporate landlord, or the property they were interested in. Only one participant, who moved to Charlotte from Portland, Oregon and who described themselves as “fairly politically involved,” had extensive knowledge of the activities of corporate landlords though they also admitted, “I wasn’t aware of how severe the issue was [here].”

In ten cases, tenants’ lack of prior knowledge arose in part due to being a newcomer to Charlotte, while in at least three interviews, it was a tenant’s first time looking for housing altogether. One participant who moved from Southern California said “I feel like I had little time to find a place and I didn’t know the neighborhoods too well here in Charlotte” --a sentiment echoed by other new arrivals.

Attempts to gather accurate information before signing a lease led participants to mixed results. One student moving to Charlotte from Pennsylvania, suspicious of the authenticity of online reviews for apartments they were interested in renting, said, “I feel like those [reviews] are always a lie, because I know that companies provide incentives for current applicants to give positive reviews. So I went onto reddit”, which the tenant saw as a more authentic, reliable source. Another participant, Lillie, a dog owner who went on to rent a single-family home from one of the largest corporations in Charlotte, also read online reviews and said that though the reviews were generally negative, they “... just took the chance because there are very limited options.”

Few had any knowledge of corporate landlords prior to starting their experience. Some had a prior history of owning their own home or renting, but others were renting for the first time or were new to the city. When consumers have little opportunity to gain reliable information about a purchase so central to life, such as housing, a power imbalance results. The main effect of this power imbalance suggests that a lack of knowledge prevents Charlotteans from pursuing alternatives, like building a tiny home, buying a home with down payment assistance from the bank, community, or government programs, finding other viable neighborhoods, or even finding and renting from non-corporate landlords. This information power imbalance appears to be a major reason that tenants come to live in corporate landlord housing, and may even help explain why they continue to do so (being unaware of or having little information about possible alternatives).



Theme 2: Lack of other options

The issue of the limited supply of affordable housing coupled with the fact that a lot of houses in Charlotte are owned by large corporations limits the options available to tenants. Some of the interviewees said that most of the properties they saw posted online were owned by corporate landlords. One respondent shares, "But with what we were looking for in the Charlotte area to rent, we were only finding on these sites stuff that was owned by what appeared to be a larger corporation." In agreement, another tenant states:

Everything that I looked at was owned by a corporate landlord. I mean, that's definitely one thing I do see about corporate housing, they have all the houses in Charlotte, you know, there are not a lot of houses out on the market that's privately owned. So, it's that they've just taken over. Most of the apartments advertised for rental on these property sites are owned by large corporations.

Due to a lack of other options (non-corporate landlords), a lot of participants settled for their present place of residence (corporate landlord housing). One of the interviewees said, "We really didn't have time, nor the resources, nor the money" to continue their search." Searching for a new place may entail more time towards researching an area and more expenses incurred moving from one place to another, even if it is within the city. Such circumstances could be burdensome for individuals working long hours and who may not be able to afford the additional expenses. Thus, opting to choose for the first time or to renew their lease with corporate landlord housing may be the easiest step for some.

Take for example, Sam who just moved to Charlotte from another state. Sam had signed a lease agreement and was due to move into her apartment on October 1, 2022, but this never happened. It was not until March 1, 2023, that she moved in. It was property management who repeatedly told her that her place would be ready in two weeks. The same week she finally moved in, someone at the office turned off her water and claimed they were unaware that she had moved in.

Sam was then told she had to move to a hotel since she could not stay at the house over the weekend without running water. Less than a month after moving in, one of her door handles broke and the house was still not fenced despite being told there would be a fence. Meanwhile, she had exhausted her energy looking for other places to live instead as she kept going back and forth with the leasing office.

Another respondent, Leah, who at one time owned her own home, but had to sell it due to falling ill, currently rents a single-family home. She has been in search of a new place to rent that is quiet and offers privacy, but ultimately resorted to staying put. Leah shares, “I had trouble looking. So, it was going to be harder for me to get another place and all of that kind of stuff and I didn’t want to go through that so I just kind of hung in there.” She further shares:

Do I have any other options? No, I don’t know how to look for private owned properties, so I just did a Google search on homes that were available for rent in the area, and this is how I found it [corporate landlord housing].



Theme 3: Application Process

In 18 out of 30 interviews, tenants indicated that there are multiple obstacles in the rental application procedure which could pose difficulties for tenants when applying for housing. Some of these barriers include financial barriers, communication barriers and application fees.

Communication barriers

Several participants, eight out of 30 (26%), described the frustration of trying to contact landlords without receiving a response during the application process. For these tenants, the lack of response from landlords can be especially discouraging. Not knowing whether their application was accepted or rejected can be a source of great stress. It can be particularly stressful for tenants who are in urgent need of housing and have limited options available to them. This is why it is so important for landlords to communicate with potential tenants in a timely manner. By responding to tenants' inquiries in a timely and respectful manner, landlords can help to make the application process less stressful for tenants. By keeping tenants informed about their application status, landlords can foster a sense of trust and respect between themselves and their potential tenants.

The process of applying for housing in Charlotte can be extremely difficult, particularly for newcomers who do not have their own accommodation and have to rely on hotels. One participant who is a female student expressed her frustration with searching and application process:

So the challenges I faced were barriers in communication, really put me in a stressful situation because I wanted to settle down. And start preparing for my studies. But then, I was constantly in this state of uncertainty, because I was expecting to hear or get feedback from them. But no feedback would come. It was really slow.

There is another case of communication barriers when tenants fill out all the required forms, but as soon as they are completed, nobody is available to give them a tour or to talk to them. A woman who relocated to Charlotte for a job shared her disappointment with the search process and reported it took her two and a half months to find housing:

I found two homes that I liked and couldn't get a hold of anybody to schedule third-person showings. I figured if they were that difficult to get in touch with before they had my money. It was probably significantly worse after they had my money.

Application fees

Application fees can create a financial burden for tenants, especially those who are already struggling to afford housing. One participant, a young single woman who recently relocated from Durham, NC, (a city under three hours away from Charlotte), shared her experience when she applied for housing:

And then, you know, they add on fees and stuff like that. So, like one of the most expensive fees, is that they outsource, like in order to process credit, they like outsource that processing fee to the tenant. So that was like an extra \$100.

Another Charlotte-born, male participant shared his frustration about having to pay non-refundable high application fee:

You had to pay like \$200 or \$300 just for holding the apartment, which is insane. They charge you \$50 to just apply, which is non-refundable. So even if you don't get picked, what are they doing with that money? You know, there's so many people that apply to an apartment And they're, they're collecting the \$50 like that.

Theme 4: Is the place worth the cost?

Through these interviews, researchers learned that in many cases, tenants did not feel that their housing experience was worth the cost that they were paying. This was shown through two different mechanisms including maintenance and repairs (22 out of 30) and feelings of deception or being tricked by the landlord (22 out of 30). Within these mechanisms, the communication between the resident and the landlord is explored as well. Many residents expressed problems with consistency with their landlords. One resident shared that they wanted clearer communication regarding the leasing office. He said, "Communication is always key, and I just feel like I don't get that being here."

Maintenance Issues

In 22 of the 30 interviews, residents from both multi-family and single-family homes expressed having issues with maintenance. Maintenance issues ranged from broken blinds, gas leaks, broken doors, flooded homes, and more. In a few cases, the issues were so catastrophic that residents were forced to move from their homes into hotels for extended periods of time (three out of 30). One resident shared, "I can't pay rent when I have to live in a hotel or live in my car and buy food every day. I didn't have water, electricity in that house for weeks and weeks and weeks."

In addition to the frustrations of having little help regarding repairs with corporate landlords, most experienced little or slow communication with the landlord (24 out of 30). Often, residents would struggle to reach an actual person to speak with. Initially, the majority of corporate landlords require a ticket request to be uploaded to their website for maintenance needs. Through these online portals, residents struggled to get in contact with a person to talk with. One resident shared that it took three weeks before anyone would come to fix their broken door. Once they would finally speak to an individual, they would have to speak to multiple individuals regarding the same issues before anything would get fixed. In one case, an individual spoke to seven different people regarding the sewage problems that had been recurring over five months.

Deception

In 22 out of 30 of the interviews, residents expressed that they felt tricked, deceived, manipulated or lied to both directly and indirectly.

In one instance, the tenant was led to believe that the corporate landlord was actually privately owned. In this instance, the private owner would have been more attentive to the resident and been more intentional with the communication aspect. This interviewee said he got quick responses when signing the lease. This individual did not discover that it was corporately owned until after they had signed and moved into the housing. After signing, the individual got slower responses and felt less acknowledged by the staff.

One interviewee felt that the leasing agent communicated effectively until the individual moved into the housing. Once they had any type of problem after signing, there's always someone different to talk to. They explained:

But you know, when we first did the application, it was very much one on one. Yeah, it was one leasing agent that I dealt with. But once I signed those papers and sent that money in, it was like, I talked to everybody different.

This was a problem in the fact that no one kept track of what was happening to the situation, making it difficult to receive any resolution. Others share that they felt pressured into moving by the leasing agent that they interacted with while searching for housing.

Participants also found that many fees would appear with little to no context or communication. Some felt deceived that they were not communicated from the beginning. One person described corporate landlords as "hungry" for money, always adding hidden fees to the rent. Another individual shared that they felt like they had no choice but to pay for the expensive renters insurance. Later they found out they could have been paying for a much cheaper option. They stated, "And they don't tell you in the beginning that you can get your own [insurance], and they push theirs, which can be higher, and you, you know you may be struggling to pay for something that you cannot afford."

Theme 5: Rent is Unaffordable and Unsustainable

High Rent/Rent Increases

23 of the 30 participants reported having high base rents or rent increases. For the most part, rent increases tend to be on a yearly basis and varies based on the landlord. One participant, an international graduate student, shared that his rent was raised just six months after he moved in. He stated that the rent increase was within a reasonable range, "I've been here for six months. It was increased by \$30."

Some participants had their rents raised significantly. One participant, a woman who is currently on a fixed budget (receiving Social Security) and living in a single-family home with her husband, stated that her rent was increased by ten percent. She stated that if the rent increase continues at this pace they would be edged out of the home.

Another participant, a young man in his early 30s renting a single-family home with two other roommates shared how their rent was initially increased slightly one year and then exponentially increased the following year: "You know we renewed in 2021, I think rent might have gone up \$60, \$70 a month which you know, between three people that's not really much. But then when we renewed last year. It jumped up. I think \$350 per month.

Some of the participants stated that one of the issues that they faced with respect to rent increases was the inability and unwillingness of their landlords to negotiate. One participant stated that there was no one to negotiate with while another stated that when she tried to negotiate, the property manager told her that it would not be possible to do so:

So, I actually went to negotiate. And at that point, the property manager told me that she could not. They cannot negotiate in the State of North Carolina unless it was a broker, and I'm like, well, what do you mean? I've negotiated before.

Additional/Hidden Fees

In 14 of our interviews, participants reported their frustration with additional fees and sometimes hidden fees. One participant talked about how these additional fees add up to an already high rent stating that, "And I pay \$1,800 a month in rent before any other fees. So it's like \$1950, all in."

Another participant shared about the required pet fees for her home:

On top of that, you have to pay like a \$400 pet deposit. You're just putting down \$400 for no reason. So even though these dogs haven't done anything, I won't get the \$400 back. And that's on top of the security deposit. So there's a security deposit and a pet deposit. And the pet deposit is non-refundable and it's \$40, \$40 or \$45 per pet per month.

Another participant reported how frustrating it is to deal with additional fees: But I think sometimes frustrating could be like, we really weren't expecting our rent to go up. Which \$50 isn't a lot, but when you add on a whole bunch of different other fees, I didn't expect it to go up that much.

Another participant, a young man living in a single-family home with his parents shared how they get charged a late fee if they do not pay their rent on time. He stated, "Currently we're sitting at \$1,750. If we make the rent on time, if we don't make the rent on time like we don't like we don't normally do; we get \$100 fee which bumps it up to \$1,850 a month." Another participant reported that her landlord outsources fees to the tenant in addition to other fees:

The base rent was like \$1,500. And then, you know, they add on fees. One of the most expensive fees, is that they outsource, like in order to process credit, like online rent payments, they like to outsource that processing fee to the tenant. So that was like an extra \$100. So I'm paying like \$1,600 right now. Plus, they have this valet trash fee. They have administrative fee service fees.

Income not Keeping up with Rising Costs of Rent

Participants, seven out of 30, reported how financially straining it is for them to keep up with rent increases. Their income does not rise as rent rises and some of them are on a fixed income, so it puts them in a bind. One interviewee, an African American single mother in a multigenerational one-income household expressed her frustration with increasing rent while her income remains the same:

Yet right now, it's really like financially is a financial struggle for me, my income hasn't increased at work, I moved here in assumption that it would increase because I had got a new position at work. Unfortunately, it didn't.

Another participant, a young African American man between the ages of 20 and 30 renting an apartment for the first time shared that his rent was raised by \$300 in his first year. At the time, he did not think too much of it. However, the yearly rent increase is putting a strain on his finances. He expressed the following:

*Now it's starting to get a little harder. So it was like, eh, what's going on here? Like, why can't I afford something that I should be able to afford? I thought I was making enough money per your rent calculator.
So I don't understand what's going on.*

Another participant, a retired woman on a fixed budget stated, "We just can't afford this forever because we are on a fixed budget and social security doesn't go up ten percent you know."



Theme 6: Perceived Benefits of living in corporate landlord housing

Our study aimed to provide a balanced view of the renting experience, presenting both positive and negative associations with this choice. The drawbacks associated with living in corporate landlord housing have been well documented in previous result sections. However, some respondents acknowledged the potential benefits that made their current living arrangements an attractive option.

Our respondents mentioned access to valuable amenities, professional upkeep of property, access to attractive neighborhood features, price affordability (size vs price), and perception of privacy and security as the perceived benefits of living in corporate landlord housing more often. In addition, some respondents found that renting from corporate landlords and not having to maintain their own homes offered an appealing alternative to homeownership where they are called to invest in their own maintenance, suggesting that they receive a good value for their money.

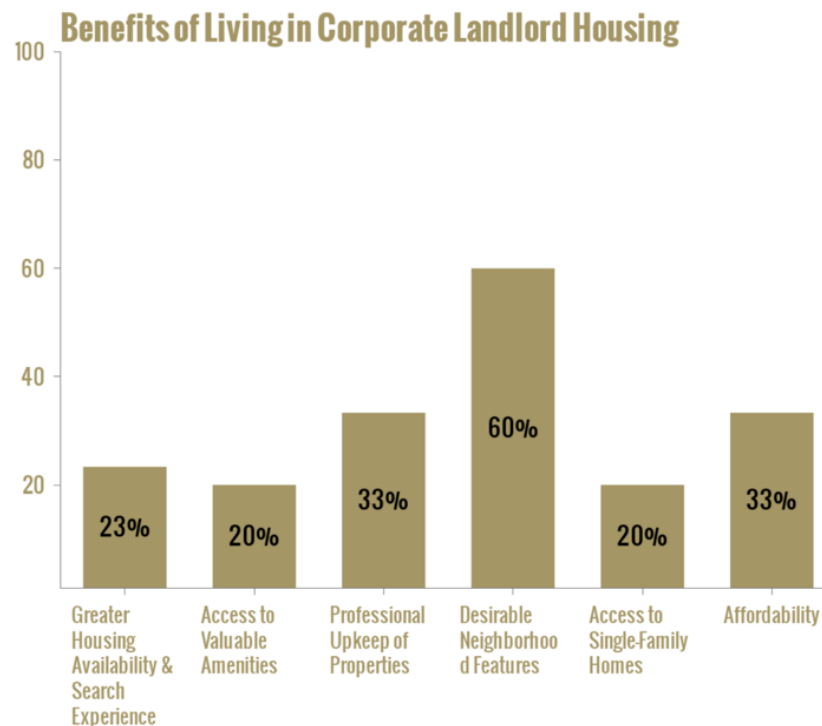


Table 2. Frequency of Self-reported Benefits of Living in Corporate Landlord Housing n=30

Desirable Neighborhood Features

Participants mentioning location as a perceived benefit of renting from corporate landlords, talked about the specific features of these neighborhoods, such as highly-rated schools, enhanced access to public transportation, and proximity to local amenities such as shopping centers, parks, playgrounds. Out of all the benefits mentioned by participants, the possibility to rent in the desirable location was important among participants of all ages, gender, race/ethnic and income groups (60%; 18 out of 30), indicating that those renters found the neighborhood's features highly compelling and contributing to a better quality of life and a sense of community.

Among 45-54-year-olds, four out of six participants in this age group mentioned location as the most important benefit; eight out of 12 African American and three out of six White participants highlighted location as an important benefit. Possibility to rent in the certain location was particularly salient for some respondents who were single parents or for families; school district, safe and kid-friendly environment, and friendly neighbors were on the top of their list of desirable neighborhood features. For example, an African-American single mother caring for a school-age child with asthma and struggling with arthritis, the possibility to rent in a neighborhood with good air quality and in close proximity to her work and child's school were recognized as essentials. She shared, "The neighborhood definitely. It was the neighborhood that drove me to sign a lease. It was absolutely the school district that played a part and it was the convenience of the proximity to the support system that I have."

Another African-American female mentioned that the possibility of renting in a safe neighborhood where her children could play outside was a benefit for her.

In signing the lease with this landlord we were looking for housing in a decent neighborhood; what we were finding is that the lower costing housing was not in a safe neighborhood, and we have kids, so we needed to make sure that when they went outside, they were safe.

Affordability & Hassle-Free Maintenance

Affordability. While several respondents have experienced dramatic rent increases, others describe their experience as affordable. One third of participants (ten out of 30) mentioned affordability of renting from corporate landlords as a key benefit. One participant stated:

Even though my rent has been increased slightly, I still think it is within a reasonable range. Given the circumstances of things in the economy, and then, compared to other places, that I engage with. So it is still affordable.

This perceived affordability can make renting from a corporate landlord a financially appealing option, particularly for individuals or families with a modest budget. One respondent shares:

It's within my budget, so I've been looking for other apartments that's within my budget but nothing meets that requirement.

Additionally, the cost savings associated with professional upkeep and valuable amenities such as on-site gyms, pools, communal areas, in-unit laundry offered by corporate landlords instead of additional expenses and responsibilities usually incurred by homeowners, can further contribute to the overall perceived affordability of such housing options for future tenants. In reflecting on the cost-benefits, a few participants share:

*I do think the amenities are really nice, compared to the fact that it is overpriced, but it makes for [higher price]. It was like, do I want this private house where it's only one bedroom, like, you know, one bathroom and like absolutely no space for my dogs or do I want to go with this corporate landlord who has like three bedrooms, a little bit of a yard, that kind of thing.
So I had to basically weigh the benefits and the cons.*

Professional Upkeep of Properties

One of the key benefits, as described by respondents, of renting from corporate landlords is the professional upkeep of property. This responsibility falls on the landlord, ensuring that renters do not have to worry about issues such as landscaping, property repair, or general maintenance. The convenience of having these tasks taken care of was a significant draw for some tenants (ten out of 30). Below are some of the statements heard from several residents regarding convenience:

Submitting things for repairs has been easy.

There's a main office located at the apartment complex that you can go to, and you're actually having a bit of a face to face with a person.

The benefit would be if something breaks down here. I'm not responsible for repairing this, so that's not an additional cost to me.

When we need replacement of stuff, it doesn't have to come out of our pockets, because we rent and so they're able to help replace it without a big cost. So I do enjoy that.

Access to Amenities

Tenants (six out of 30) perceived access to amenities more valuable as it enhanced their living experience by offsetting the costs of maintaining a property. A few statements by our respondents highlighting the benefits include:

It looks nicer, you know. There's a fitness center I can go to. There's like a business center that I can go to, and there's a pool.

The amenities are great; the spa room, steam room, sauna, volleyball court, hot tub, grills, smokers for really nice clubhouse, bunch of stuff drew me in.



Theme 7: Disempowered by Corporate Landlord Housing

Disempowerment due to corporate landlord housing was described by 97% percent of interviewees (29 out of 30). Rappaport (p. 122) defines empowerment as “a process, a mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs.” Therefore, disempowerment is tied to an ultimate lack of self-determination and volition. Disempowering situations within corporate landlord housing deprive tenants of power and influence over their living conditions. Lack of power and influence may manifest as feeling “trapped” in one’s current housing, as was the case for 63% of interviewees (19 out of 30), many of whom referenced their lack of financial resources amidst rising rent prices as a source of entrapment. One young woman described paying \$2,000 a month to live in an apartment infested with roaches that she deemed “unlivable.” As a Charlotte native, she expressed her frustration with the changing economy:

*Most people that are here grew up here. We--we're just trying to f*cking survive at this point. We're trying to handle this inflation. I'm only 22. I, I don't make a lot of f*cking money and now I'm finding myself at this point surviving because I can't get out of this f*cking lease.*

Participants described that despite being good tenants such as paying on time, there was no reciprocation from the corporate landlord:

I feel like they do whatever you know they want to do and they don't never fix anything, and it's always a money, money, money, money thing with them.

Yeah, the thing is, they act as if they are doing you a favor like you are staying for free. So they make whatever decision they want to make, and they do whatever they want to do. They don't give a damn about you.

I feel that the people that I give my money to, I want them to appreciate it. I am not asking for anything. I am paying for what I deserve. I am a tenant that helps fuel your business.

Even in instances where tenants have higher education and salaries, there is still a feeling of powerlessness when up against the resources of a corporation. One mother, despite having a bachelor's degree and being upper middle class, summed up how the power imbalance contributed to her sense of disempowerment:

I felt like I was at their mercy. It's kind of like the big corporation against little me. And I was just like, I felt defeated. Because where am I going to turn, you know, who can I turn to? And mostly, I was scared because if nothing else happens, I have to keep my family housed. So I just felt like I was under this thumb.

Another man in his forties, a father of four, similarly expressed feeling powerless in comparison to the nameless but seemingly omnipotent corporate landlord:

Once you have a contract with them actually you are the slave of them. With corporate landlords, you don't see anybody, and the only thing is on the contract and you already signed it.

While some interviewees were able to divorce their overall negative experiences with corporate landlord housing from their positive experiences with particular personnel, 63% of tenants reported demeaning interactions that made them feel disrespected, "patronized," and like "a nobody."

One single mother described her interactions with corporate landlord housing personnel as "baffling." After months without air conditioning and multiple ignored work orders, in desperation, she tried to withhold her rent. Instead of fixing the air conditioning, she was taken to court. She reflected, "it makes you feel like you let your family down."

Another single mother caring for her aging mother and toddler suffered in an “uninhabitable” house with multiple gas leaks. When she tried to resolve the issues with corporate landlord housing staff, she was told the issue was resolved when it was not, and then she was stepped over for weeks at the expense of her mother’s and baby’s health:

I could not believe that there are human beings that work in these offices. And that [they were] okay with treating people the way they’ve treated me and my family they have displayed no empathy, no compassion, and very, very little respect.

Of tenants interviewed, 73% of tenants (22 out of 30) reported that it was not only the sense of feeling trapped or the negative interactions that contributed to their disempowerment, but also the “unacceptable” living conditions: roaches, unresolved gas leaks, broken A/C during the hottest months of the summer, and broken heat during the coldest months.

Interviewees also described subpar living conditions that may seem minor but ultimately contribute to disempowerment. Examples include an unfinished fence in the backyard that prevents usage, overly sheer curtains that obscure privacy, and a perennially deteriorating home with shoddy repairs that hinders desired ambiance.

Although there are some residents who have experienced benefits living in corporate landlord housing, these complaints are representative of a larger disillusionment—“The American Dream for Rent” —whereby some tenants burden the baggage of home ownership (i.e., yard work, Home Owner Association fees, routine maintenance) without the benefits (i.e., equity and accumulation of wealth) and the autonomy to cultivate conditions whereby a house feels like their home (re: a fenced in backyard, thick curtains, renovations).

Theme 8: Corporate Communication Practices

When discussing their experiences with corporate-owned rental properties, 87% (26 out of 30) of tenants highlighted substantial difficulties faced with existing communication practices of corporate landlord housing. Corporations reportedly fail to engage in efficient, timely, or consistent communication resulting in tenants being forced to exert immense energy and time to resolve issues with their housing. The primary form of communication used by corporate landlord housing is asynchronous using an online portal or email.

Tenants highlighted corporate communication to be informed by a myriad of corporate employees responding to housing needs and this lack of one point person fostering opportunities for somebody to “drop the ball”. This is accompanied by an absence of follow-ups or updates provided to tenants by corporate landlord housing and responsible parties being unreachable and unresponsive when needed for emergency maintenance and needs.

Of note, direct contact and communication with landlords was elevated by tenants as a mechanism of improving experiences and should be promoted in corporate landlord practices.

Large corporations are businesses that are often remote from the various locations they provide services and goods. When housing is the good being provided, the associated lack of concern exhibited by corporate employees can have dire consequences for tenants caught in this system. Tenants recognize this lack of concern as a common characteristic of corporations and express dismay at this response to issues that affect their quality of life and housing. One tenant shared the lackluster response to their filed report regarding their newly moved into apartment infested with roaches:

[The employees say] ok, well, we'll put in a request and [maintenance will] come and do it whenever and we'll let you know. I just think they don't care.

Corporate landlord housing is noted to respond with low levels of urgency with no standard process in place to prioritize critical issues. When experiencing issues such as gas leaks, lack of working A/C or heat, and sewage backups, tenants report having to speak to upwards of seven corporate employees and go for weeks with the issue remaining unresolved. One tenant shares, “there’s not one person you can hold accountable for anything because it’s a corporation.”

This contributes to negative maintenance experiences and unlivable housing conditions with one tenant describing when her A/C unit stopped working during the summer months with another tenant explicitly noting the lack of accountability present in corporate landlord housing:

I [had] to call multiple, multiple times, speak to multiple people, ask for a supervisor. It’s kind of like a whole process there...I had sent an email to the office here in Charlotte and I didn’t get a response... they came in to fix the AC finally after like a week or two of calling and calling and calling and when they fixed it, whoever came to fix it hooked the system up wrong.

Other tenants find their landlords to be unreachable or unresponsive during emergencies. This is paired with lease clauses with penalties if tenants independently address problems. This leaves tenants no way to redress the issue aside from forcing them to await the time the landlord becomes available. This can result in hotel expenditures, homelessness, and extensive damage to property. Tenants detail these experiences with corporate landlord housing:

I get an email and the corporation didn’t know there was a tenant in the house. They turned off my water – on a weekend, on a Friday! So [for] 3 days I had [no] water, so I go to [stay] in a hotel. So there’s no water in the house until the following Monday. And then when I tried to reach out to the property manager [remembers and shakes head], she wouldn’t pick up her phone call.

We had a shower leak that was leaking into the ceiling of the garage, and there was a large water spot. This was in the dead of summer, so it was very hot and humid in the garage already, so it was just a perfect opportunity for mold and bacteria to start growing in our home. [The landlord] took their sweet time responding to us and getting anyone out there. Even then the person they did send out there didn't actually fix it.

Often, tenants cite that the above concerns are exacerbated by communication being limited to asynchronous methods. Corporations utilize online portals and emails that limit efficiency and lead to tenants having to engage in elongated exchanges to address problems. One tenant reports the resulting frustration arising from an inability to speak to someone directly about the shower leak noted above. They stated, "You have to go online, fill out a complaint and wait for somebody to respond and then sometimes they call you, but you can't call them back."

Another point of frustration for tenants is the lack of updates or follow-ups after maintenance requests are submitted using these asynchronous means of communication. Many indicate the stress and uncertainty resulting from this practice as can be seen in the tenant experiences below:

And he tells me, "Okay, we're gonna have someone out there, not a problem", as if it was supposed to happen kind of almost immediately. But then I noticed, no one was contacting me.

So our heating system was not working, so I put in a maintenance request. The person came and looked at it, and went back. Before they even came and repaired it, the cold had gone and we didn't even need it that much again. And we had to sleep in the cold. It was not easy, like you even have to wear a jacket to go to bed. Your feet, all will be very cold like, I don't even know how to describe it. Yeah, so like, I can say he's very slow to respond to a maintenance request.

In sum, 87% (26 out of 30) of tenants cited corporate communication practices as negatively affecting their housing experience. Tenants consistently expressed a desire to have direct contact and communication with those responsible for the property:

At least you know with an apartment [that] if you put in a maintenance request [there's] generally there's a main office located at the apartment complex that you can go to, and you're actually having a bit of a face to face with a person. You can go down and you can talk to someone to get it fixed. And there's a lot more interpersonal connection going on.

In the absence of this, there is a recognized lack of concern shown by corporate employees for the hardships tenants are experiencing. This slack must be made up by tenants with many being forced to devote extensive amounts of energy to addressing their housing needs. The lack of direct contact and communication is contributed to by the primary means of communication being limited to asynchronous methods resulting in no one being responsible or accountable for ensuring tenants' needs are met. This is fostered by corporate employees' remoteness and disconnect from the community leading to a dismal lack of concern or empathy being shown that has real consequences for those living in corporate landlord housing.

Theme 9: Feeling Tricked & Feeling Stuck

While interviewing the tenants regarding their housing situation, tenants expressed their experience of feeling unhealthy pressure from the corporate landlord leasing office to sign the lease. The following situations can be noted as ways these landlords have applied a certain amount of pressure or tactics on the tenants while signing the lease.

Situation 1: By creating a delusion that if they do not sign the lease now, they will give the unit to another person. This kind of false situation pressures the renters to sign the lease in a competitive market with little time to think about their decision.

Situation 2: Corporate landlords tell the tenants that the rent will go up or that some promotional offer will expire if they do not sign the lease today based on the market demand of the apartments.

Situation 3: Pre-sale tricks

The first example provides insight into the experience of a tenant who recently moved to Charlotte from southern California about a year and a half ago. As described in Situation 1, the tenant “got nervous” when discussing a unit in a multi-family apartment building with the agent/salesperson of a corporate landlord housing. The tenant spoke with the saleswoman over Zoom and was told, “You need to hurry up and lease it because we’re filling up.”

The tenant also described Situation 2 where the expiration of a promotion of three free months was also at risk of being lost. These actions led the tenant to “feel a little rush to make the decision”. Later, when she finally moved into the multi-family housing, she observed many of the apartments were still empty. Therefore, she felt “tricked” by the leasing office.

This second example will add a layer to the deceptive nature of some corporate landlords. This tenant has daughters and needed a nice place where the daughters can be raised. Upon moving to Charlotte, she chose to rent from a corporate landlord. Along with bigger space and a backyard, the landlords also provided an impression of upgrading amenities. The tenant mentioned (indication of situation 3):

Well, when I looked at the house, they were putting in new carpet and I thought they were putting in new carpet everywhere? But once we signed the lease and got in the house, there was only new carpet in one room? Which was ugly to me, you know, so only one room in the house had new carpet the rest of it was old carpet. Some stains here and there. They never said anything.

A similar example was found in another interview when the tenant went to see the apartment before signing the lease, the agent did not show the actual apartment. They show a "model version" which is apparently the best version of the similar kind of apartment the tenant will be leasing. From the collected interviews, around 20% of tenants felt an external pressure to sign the lease to make a huge decision of where they might get stuck for a year or 15 months (depending on the time frame of the lease).



Feeling “Stuck”

One of the most prominent experiences expressed by residents interviewed, 13 out of 30, is a sense of “feeling stuck”. This sense of feeling stuck comes as residents feel stuck in a lease that they do not feel comfortable in, where they sense they are treated badly, where it costs them a lot of money to support themselves, and/or where they do not have the elements to have a good quality of life.

Particular to new Charlotte residents, among the main reasons for feeling this way is a lack of economic opportunities, and a lack of knowledge related to housing availability and the neighborhoods that make up Charlotte. When a family first moves to Charlotte, they have to get used to their surroundings and learn about the different neighborhoods in Charlotte. Finding yourself in a new place, totally unknown, and having to look for a place to live, implies a vulnerability when deciding on where to live. The person is not used to the environment, to transportation, or to the neighborhood. The person also does not know the proximity of basic services, if they have a hospital nearby, or a supermarket far away. Those elements are important when deciding to choose a place to live, and first-time movers to Charlotte have little information to help them select a place.

This may then lead newcomers to corporate landlord housing given their prominence in the city. It then may prove difficult to leave corporate landlord housing regardless of the dissatisfaction experienced. Internal factors such as lack of maintenance may drive one to move away, but external conditions such as family pressure may force one to stay. For example, many residents have children who are happy in schools close to their corporate landlord homes, and their children’s happiness forces them to stay in the housing conditions they describe.

One of the most repeated comments by participants describing their sense of “feeling stuck” is demonstrated by Lorraine. She is a single mother who lives with her three children and works as a nurse at a hospital. She moved to Charlotte because of her son’s education, and despite not being happy living in Charlotte, she has to stay because her kids enjoy being here. She shares,

I moved here because I have a son who required special attention in a school, and Charlotte was one of the few places that could offer us that opportunity. Therefore, I must stay in Charlotte, and put up with the housing conditions until my son grows up.

Like her, many people must stay in their places of residence due to conditions beyond their own interests, be it their children, parents, work or others. Additionally, strict lease agreements make it almost impossible for people to move from places in the middle of the year, making it difficult to get out of places they are uncomfortable with.



Theme 10: Future Housing Goals

Finally, central to the goals of 24 of 30 interviewees was to one day own a home of their own. While tenants did not specifically describe what 'home' means to them, one tenant, a single 26-year-old woman living in a multi-family apartment complex (owned by one of the largest corporations in Charlotte), felt that housing is a "human right" as opposed to a commodity. The 10th theme that emerged from the interviews with tenants living in corporate landlord housing spoke to their Future Housing Goals. Here tenants described where they see themselves, in terms of housing, in the next ten years.

Overall, tenants expressed a variety of future housing goals including homeownership, owning rental property, moving out of Charlotte, and building a home of their own. One woman, who is a graduate student in her 20s, desired to own rental property as a future goal, stating: "I would hope to have my own house and potentially rent one out to like some students or someone who does need it because I know how difficult it can be to buy a house." Her experience as a student has shaped her future housing goals in a direction of assistance to other students or individuals looking to be housed.

Three tenants expressed wanting to build their own home. Two of these tenants were men aged 18-24 years with some college, but no degree. They also both made \$40,000 - \$79,999 annually. One of these tenants expressed, "I'd like to build my own sort of tiny living home that's economic and also environmentally friendly and have more land than I do home space." This man is in his 20s and has been living in a single-family home with his family of five since August 2019. He has tried to find to no avail alternative housing for his family, including communities with affordable housing and assistance programs. This desire to own a tiny home could be linked to gaining more freedom in his housing situation. Therefore, autonomy appears to be an important factor in deciding where to live in the next ten years for this tenant.

Similarly, five of 30 tenants expressed a desire to not renew their lease from their current corporate landlord housing, with one tenant living in corporation landlord housing stating, "I want nothing to do with [names corporation]. I never want to rent a home." This tenant has been living at his current single-family home located close to his work since 2020. At the time he decided to live in corporate landlord housing because there were few options that were being offered to rent privately from a single individual. Therefore, corporate landlord housing was the option he opted for despite bad reviews found online on the home that he decided to rent.

Additionally, not all tenants that were interviewed wanted to stay in Charlotte, NC. Of the 30 tenants, two wanted to move out of the Charlotte area to reach their housing goals. One of these tenants is male and has been living in his current multi-family residence since August 2022 with four total roommates. He noted:

The housing market in Texas is really good right now, you can get a really nice place for really cheap with a lot of land so honestly, I will like to have a nice big house in Texas and I guess that would be in around ten years, preferably with a lot of land.

This tenant felt rather positive about his future housing situation moving out of Charlotte, NC by obtaining a nice house in Texas with land.

Another tenant, who lives in multi-family housing, felt more strongly about leaving Charlotte, stating:

*I don't want to live here anymore, which hurts because I used to love Charlotte so much. I had a big love for Charlotte because I grew up here. I was born here. I was raised here and to have all these f*cking bulldozers come in and f*ck up your city.*

Barriers to Meeting Housing Goals

Tenants were also asked what barriers they may face when trying to obtain their housing goals. When asked what barriers tenants may face in their next ten years with obtaining their housing goals, finances such as personal income, lack of savings, high interest rates, and access to loans were a main barrier faced by many tenants. Of 30 tenants interviewed, 15 discussed finances as a barrier. For instance, one tenant explained:

And so from ten years from now, renting a home would be ideal. But is it feasible for my career and what I would want to do probably not. Only because I can't guarantee that I'll be like locked down in that location. So I think the problem would be also like finances but also where I'm staying.

For this tenant, who is a college student, while corporate landlord housing has been beneficial pertaining to her career as a future professional dancer, renting a home would be ideal within the next ten years.

Another tenant, who identifies as a Black or African American woman age 45-54 years noted the ability to get loans as a barrier to her homeownership, stating:

I would definitely like to own my own home, that has a nice little backyard and fenced in. So whenever my grandbaby does come over, I can let her go outside and play. You know, just in a nice, comfortable neighborhood, I don't want it to be too fancy, they don't have to be too big, you know, just something nice and comfortable that I can call my home, that I'm not spending \$2,000 a month for rent, and I could be spending \$1,200 for mortgage, you know, which makes a lot more sense to me, but it's hard for an independent single woman to get loans.

For this woman, she moved into her housing in November 2021 and has seven people in her household. Family appears important to her in her future housing endeavors, but the cost of housing is a barrier to achieving her dreams.

Among other financially tied barriers was the debt to income ratio noted by one tenant. Of all 30 tenants, one had unknown housing goals. She is a local housing advocate in her 20s who is unsure of her next job. Being in the restaurant industry, she wants to look for another job, which places her housing situation as unknown and dependent upon her next job and the income she will receive. One other person desired to remain in their corporate landlord housing as long as the rental rates did not rise. This woman is between the age of 65-74 and has lived in her current residence since 2021.

For other barriers, two people mentioned the lack of knowledge they have about homeownership and securing a home while nine tenants did not have any barriers to obtaining their housing goals. Overall, most tenants felt strongly about leaving their corporate landlord housing situation within the next ten years in hopes of owning their own home with some wanting to leave Charlotte altogether.



SUMMARY

Results highlight how corporate landlord housing poses challenges to tenants in the form of lack of communication, maintenance, and overall living experiences that tend to burden the tenants with the cost and time to face the challenges on their own. These findings can be summarized into five main points below:

Key Findings

Several tenants do not know their corporate landlord, and instead often communicate with property managers.

Residents have a lack of alternative housing options to corporate landlord housing, keeping them in this model of housing.

Several residents feel trapped in corporate landlord housing with limited resources (time, money, alt. housing) to change their current housing situation.

The perceived benefits of corporate landlord housing do not outweigh the burden of adhering to a corporate landlord.

There is a lack of information and autonomy on the part of several residents that causes a power imbalance between corporate landlords and tenants.

This study, and the work that Action NC conducts, have implications to sway policy in the future for housing in the City. This study can be said to be in line with Kerrigan (2022) and the finding that tenants are vulnerable. The lived experiences of tenants in Charlotte have been important in capturing the lack of access that tenants have to information about their landlord, better housing options, and income to move out of depleting and draining situations that are corporate landlord housing.

At the onset of this study, UNC Charlotte researchers assumed that Charlotte tenants are aware of their corporate landlord and what corporate landlord housing is, but according to interview data and theme analysis, tenants are more likely to be in contact with local property managers and maintenance teams instead of the corporation that they are receiving housing from. As such, holding parties accountable for the negative experiences tenants have faced and continue to face is complex. Findings shed light on the disconnect between the corporation and its tenants to discuss and address important issues and day-to-day happenings. This could be due to the size of the corporation and the number of employees needed to manage a corporation or the power imbalance reflected in theme eight that prevents tenants' issues from being heard and addressed. As found with Kerrigan (2022), this study has shown that there is a power imbalance between tenants and responsible property parties in which there is often a lack of communication on matters surrounding properties. As a result, tenants have been faced with unfair housing situations.

LIMITATIONS + FUTURE RESEARCH

In this study, we focus on interview data to learn about tenant experiences. Since many tenants raised concerns related to maintenance, renewal, and responsibility, future studies could dive deeper into tenant leases to assess what corporate landlords should actually be doing. When conducting this study, researchers did not examine the leases that tenants had with their corporate landlords. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether the leases are poorly written and do not uphold the rights of tenants, or if the issue lies with other responsible parties for the property, such as leasing managers, leasing office staff, or maintenance teams. The responsibilities of the tenants and of the corporation should be clearly outlined in the lease agreement to avoid further issues such as those that this study has raised.

In interviewing tenants, it has become clear that issues may lie within the scope of leasing managers instead of corporate landlords. Such issues include the day-to-day operations of the housing unit. While it may be difficult to pinpoint responsibilities at times when tenants explain their lived experiences in corporate landlord housing, all in all, the corporate landlord is responsible for the people they delegate power to in the operations of the housing. This can create a notion that landlords are after profit instead of caring for the people they house. The corporate landlord structure creates unchecked responsibilities of staff delegated to run operations, such as property managers that may have a high turnover rate. Thus, corporate landlords need to be held accountable for the housing situations that tenants are placed in and endure during their lease(s).

Lastly, as previously mentioned, the results of this study are simply preliminary findings, therefore more in-depth studies are highly encouraged to better define patterns, mechanisms, and conclusions related to tenant experiences living in corporate landlord housing in Charlotte.

Additional Areas of Research:

Explore the experiences of more diverse tenant populations, including elderly individuals, people with disabilities, or low-income tenants. By examining the specific challenges and needs of these groups of tenants, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how living in corporate landlord housing affects different segments of the population. For example, evaluating the accessibility and affordability of housing for elderly and disabled tenants in corporate landlord-managed properties, research can identify gaps in service provision or physical accommodations.

Evictions are a persistent and growing issue in Charlotte that has been significantly underexplored. However, the issue requires urgent attention from policymakers, researchers, and community stakeholders. We suggest that future research focus on factors such as affordable housing availability (mapping), legal frameworks, and the role of community organizations in addressing the eviction crisis. By investigating the causes, consequences, and potential solutions for the current crisis, future studies could fill this research gap and address this important issue in greater depth.

It is recommended to be able to implement a census of tenants in North Carolina who rent a house or apartment from corporate landlords. It is important to be able to clearly know the characteristics of the tenants, and their socio demographic situation. With this information, policies can be generated with greater effectiveness and clarity about reality, and resources can be used more effectively. It is necessary to emphasize research with academia, so that researchers in fields of geography, anthropology, sociology, and economics can participate in the use of data from a census of tenants in North Carolina, in order to produce further research that can serve both the public and private sectors and make better decisions that benefit tenants and organizations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary purpose of housing is to support life, safety, and well-being of the residents and should not be overshadowed by landlords' property rights. Policymakers can take measures such as capping the number of units owned by private equity landlords. Along with growing concerns about rental affordability in Charlotte, our results highlight the need for wide-ranging tenant protections. Such measures should focus on controlling rent increases, reducing extra (hidden) charges, and minimizing penalties while improving tenant security.

Another policy should be the training of neighborhood leaders who are empowered with the rights and responsibilities of tenants. It is important that public policy can provide the right conditions to be able to organize in a sustained way the organizations that fight for the rights of the tenants, from the residents themselves. As has been seen throughout the analysis, the tenants' complaints are isolated, lack structure, and above all, they cannot solidify into group actions that could mean changes. The political struggle is and should be the greatest organizing force of the tenants, who have to know their rights and the way in which they can demand them. Public policy must provide the conditions for these organizations to exist in a structured manner, with leaders willing to be the voice of the tenants before the corporate landlords.

Rental Housing Disclosure Requirements similar to a Residential Property and Owners' Association Disclosure Requirements in North Carolina could be extended to rental properties, giving tenants more transparency about the condition and, thus, value of the property they are paying for.

Policymakers and municipal authorities can enhance regulatory oversight with the development of an oversight committee to ensure landlords comply with current tenant protection laws. It could include regular inspections, enforcing penalties for noncompliance, and better monitoring.

Social Housing

An alternative housing option for the most vulnerable of residents could be social housing. Social housing refers to a system of providing affordable housing for individuals or families who have low incomes or other specific needs. It is housing not based on profit, but on meeting resident's needs, particularly for the most vulnerable. Traditionally provided by the government or non-profit organizations, social housing aims to make safe and of quality, affordable housing available.

Social housing units can come in many forms, such as apartments, town-houses, or single-family homes. In some cases, social housing may also provide rent-to-own opportunities, where tenants have the opportunity to purchase the property, they live in one day.

The implementation of social housing in Charlotte is important to address housing inequality and to provide another option for those in great need for a more affordable option. The concept of social housing seeks to de-commodify housing as it stands with the model of corporate landlord housing and recognize housing as a human right.

“Pushing people to the brink of being homeless”

Although the issue of evictions did not arise in this research profoundly, it is important to raise as a concern given the looming threat it poses on residents who are just barely making ends meet. Evictions can negatively impact a tenant's ability to secure another lease, as it carries a stigma associated with their rental history. Compared to other proprietors, corporate landlords, particularly large institutional investors, exhibit a higher propensity to evict tenants. Another study conducted in Atlanta indicate that these landlords use eviction threats more frequently. Accordingly, “JustCause Eviction” laws or policies to protect renters from arbitrary evictions are recommended.

CONCLUSION

Our study focused on three main topics: how residents are led to live in corporate landlord housing, how residents experience living in corporate landlord housing, and why residents stay in corporate landlord housing. Data was gathered qualitatively through interviews, and during the interviews, several noteworthy findings were highlighted. The findings of our study showed that most of our participants had little to no prior knowledge of corporate landlords. Our findings also suggest that corporate landlords invest in desirable neighborhoods which make them attractive to prospective renters. Corporate landlord housing also seemed to be the most readily available option for most of our participants. Participants also faced certain barriers during the application process such as financial barriers, poor communication, and non-refundable application fees.

Renting single family homes from corporate landlords in other instances also seemed to provide a sense of security, privacy, and freedom that residents were willing to sign a lease for. Others felt “trapped” and wanted so badly to cancel their lease, but found limited alternatives. The results also revealed high rent costs are becoming unsustainable because of the mismatch between the cost of living and stagnant income and additional hidden costs. Most of the participants also hope to own a home in the next 10 years for a variety of reasons including dissatisfaction with their current housing experience and the desire for autonomy and agency.

Future research can concentrate on the experiences of vulnerable groups, particularly those on the edge of eviction in order to better understand their barriers and modes of protection for them. Additionally, qualitative interviews with corporate landlords or their representatives could also provide greater insight into slow response to maintenance issues and lack of direct communication with tenants. Given the growing power corporations have in Charlotte and in cities across the US and the increasing concern from residents and the number of studies and reports focused on this issue in Charlotte, policymakers should ensure that renters’ rights are effectively protected, and a greater effort should be made to hold corporations accountable to Charlotte’s greater goals of equity and inclusion for all Charlotteans.



APPENDIX

Demographic Survey

1. Create a fake name if you do not want to use your real name.

2. What race/ethnicity do you identify with? (Please select all that apply).
 - .. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - .. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - .. Hispanic or Latino/a
 - .. African
 - .. Asian-American
 - .. White
 - .. Prefer not to say
 - .. Other

3. Which of the below most closely describes your gender?
 - ... Man
 - ... Woman
 - ... Transgender man
 - ... Transgender woman
 - ... Nonbinary
 - ... Prefer not to say
 - ... Other

4. What is your age range?
 - ... 18 - 24 years
 - ... 25 - 34 years
 - ... 35 - 44 years
 - ... 45 - 54 years
 - ... 55 - 64 years
 - ... 65 - 74 years
 - ... 75 and over
 - ... Prefer not to say

5. What is your highest level of education?
 - ... Elementary or middle school
 - ... Some high school, no diploma
 - ... High school graduate (includes equivalency)
 - ... Some college, no degree
 - ... Associate's degree
 - ... Bachelor's degree
 - ... Graduate or professional degree

6. How many people live in your household?

7. What is your annual household income?

- ...Less than \$14,000
- ...\$14,000 - \$39,999
- ...\$40,000 - \$79,999
- ...\$80,000 - \$119,999
- ...\$120,000 or greater
- ...Prefer not to say
- ..Other

8. When did you move in (month & year)?

9. How many months is your lease for?

10. Have you ever met your landlord?

- ...Yes, via email
- ...Yes, in person
- ...Yes, via phone call
- ...Never met my landlord
- ...Other

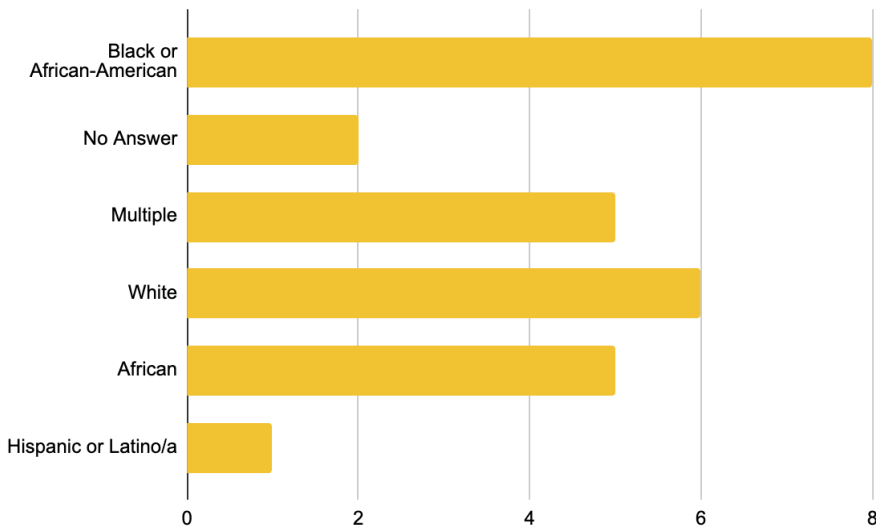
11. Have you had problems with?

- ..Mold
- ..Plumbing
- ..Heating
- ..Cooling
- ..Roof
- ..Walls/Ceiling/Structure
- ..Pests (rodents, roaches, etc.)
- ..Lead
- ..Leaks
- ..Slippery surfaces
- ..Unsafe electrical wiring
- ..Heating, Cooling, Spraying for bugs
- ..Other

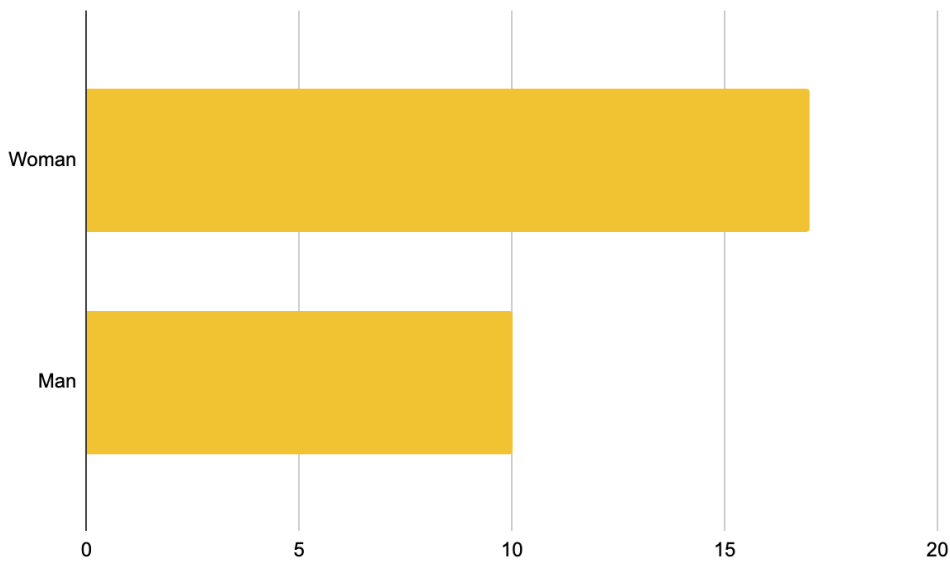
Demographic Survey Results

What race/ethnicity do you identify with?

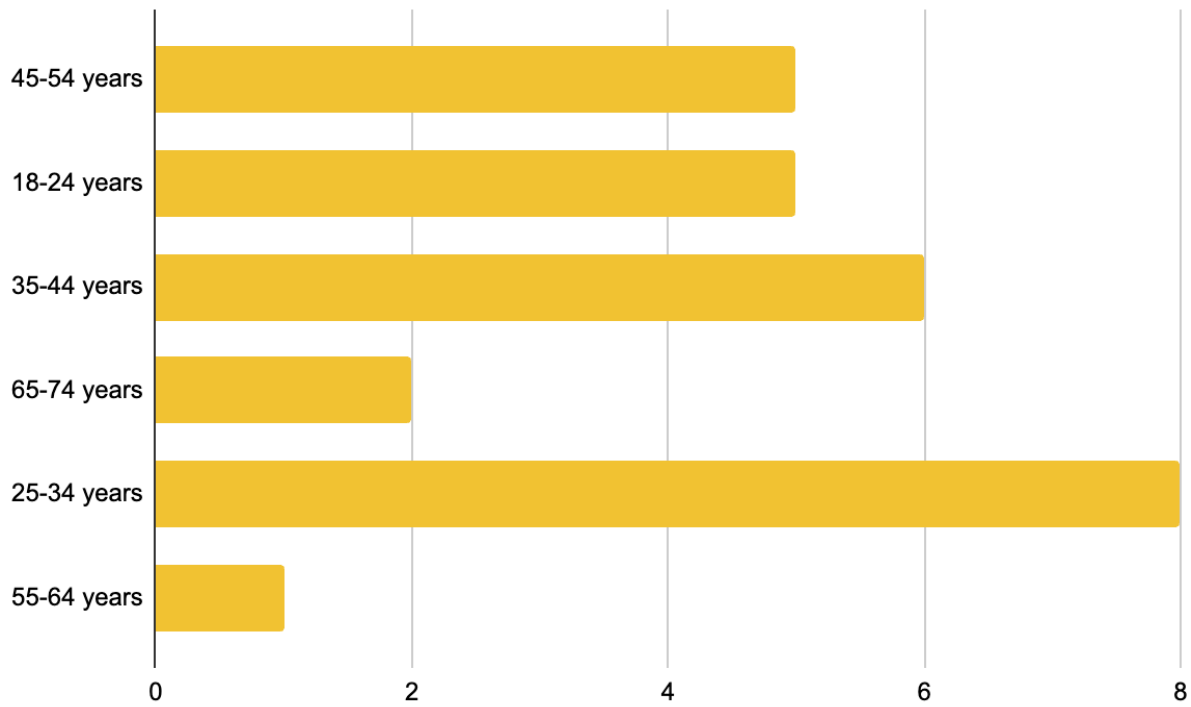
Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
Black or African American	29.63%
African	18.52%
White	22.22%
Hispanic/Latinx	3.70%
Multiple	18.52%
Other	7.41%



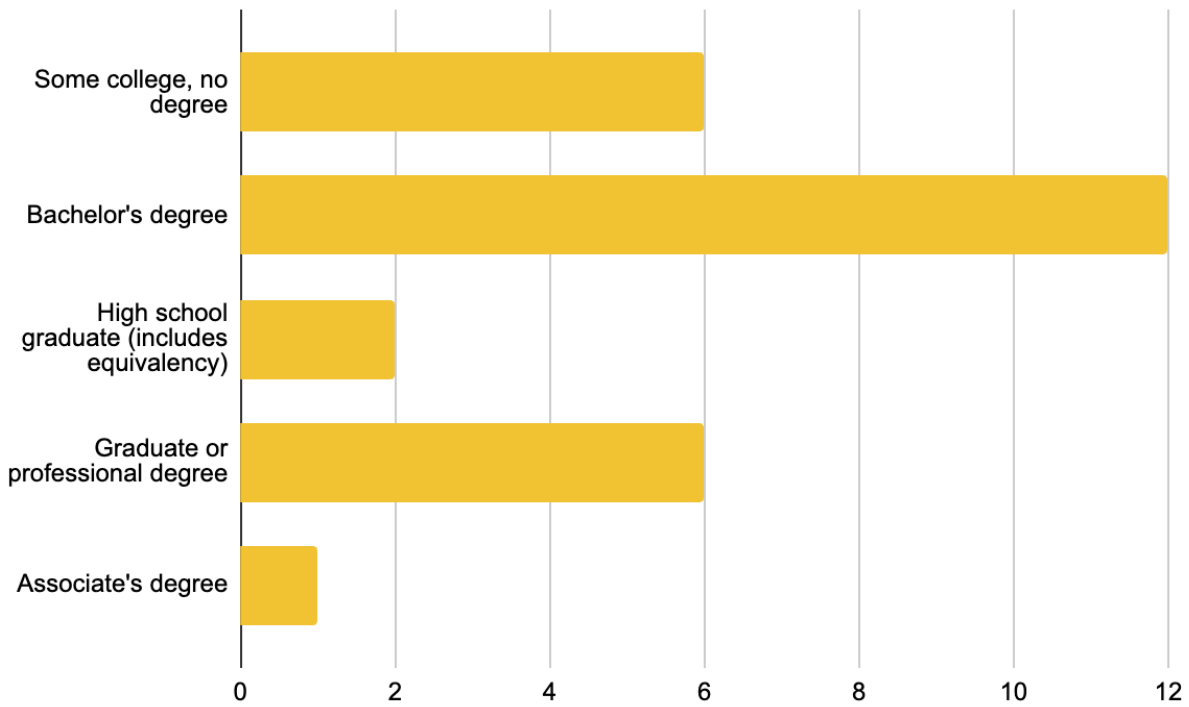
Which describes your gender?



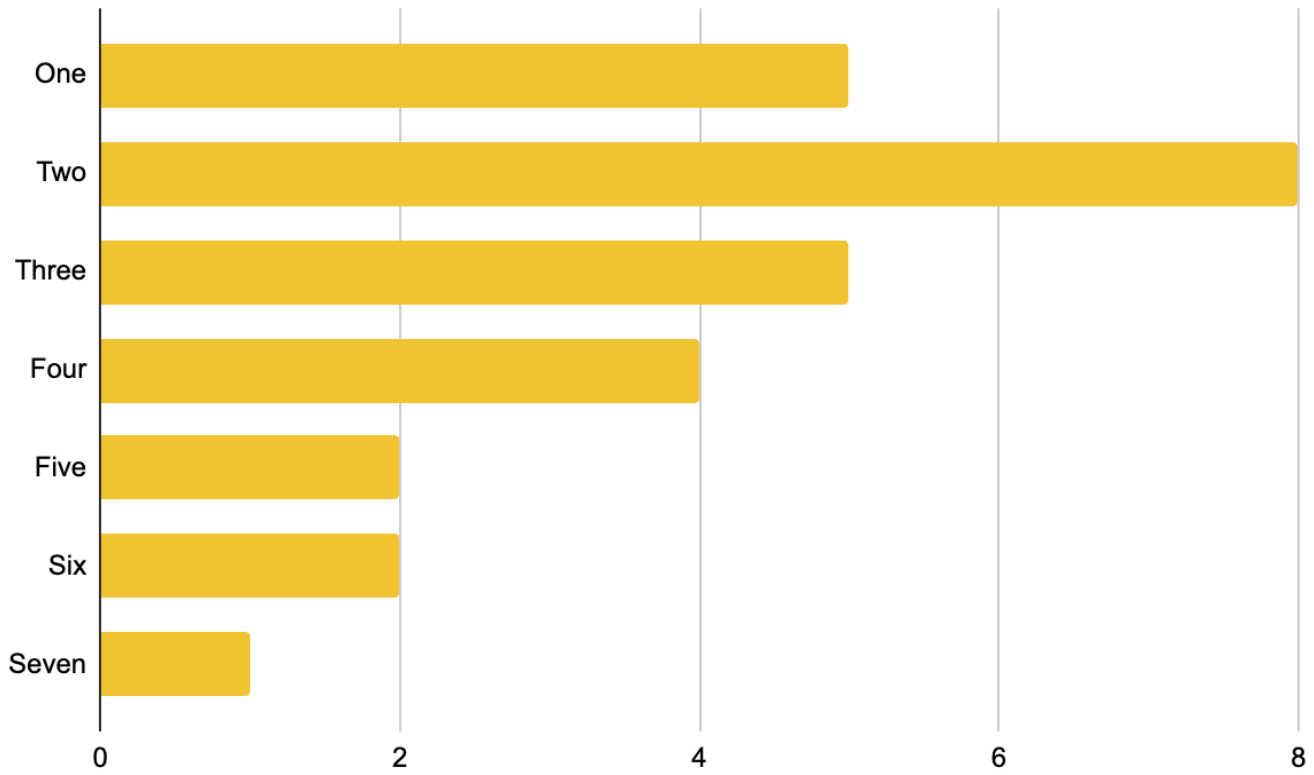
What is your age range?



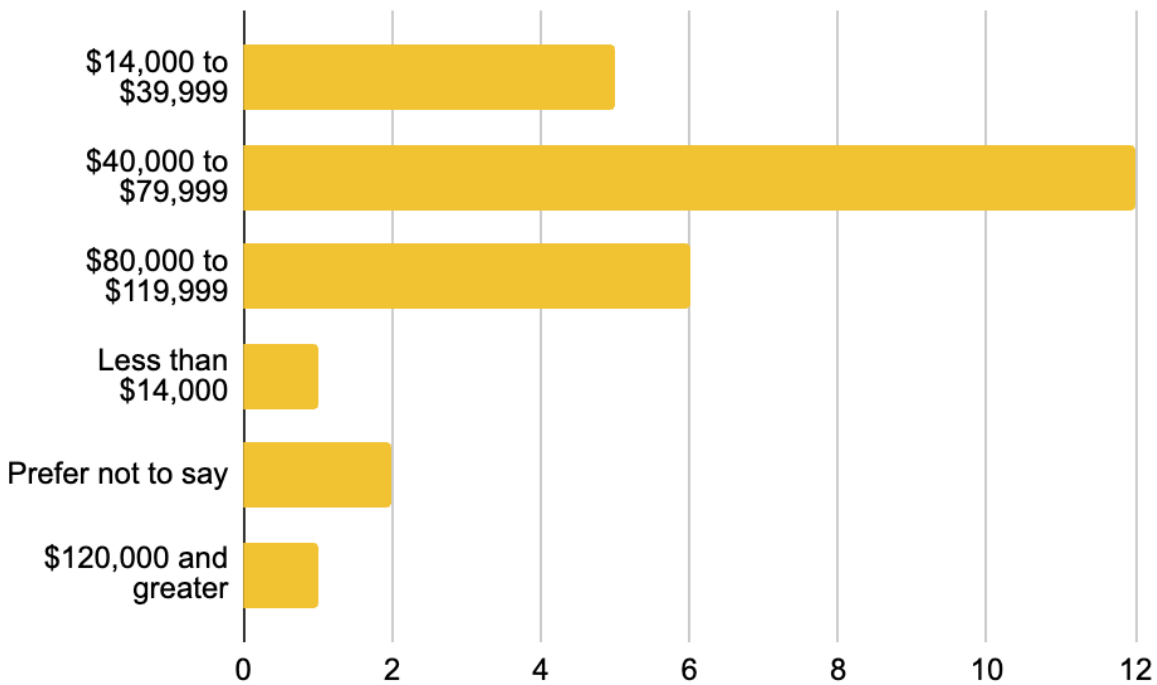
What is your highest level of education?



How many people live in your household?



What is your annual household income?



What year did you move to corporate landlord housing?

2012	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
3.70%	3.70%	3.70%	11.11%	11.11%	18.52%	33.33%	3.70%

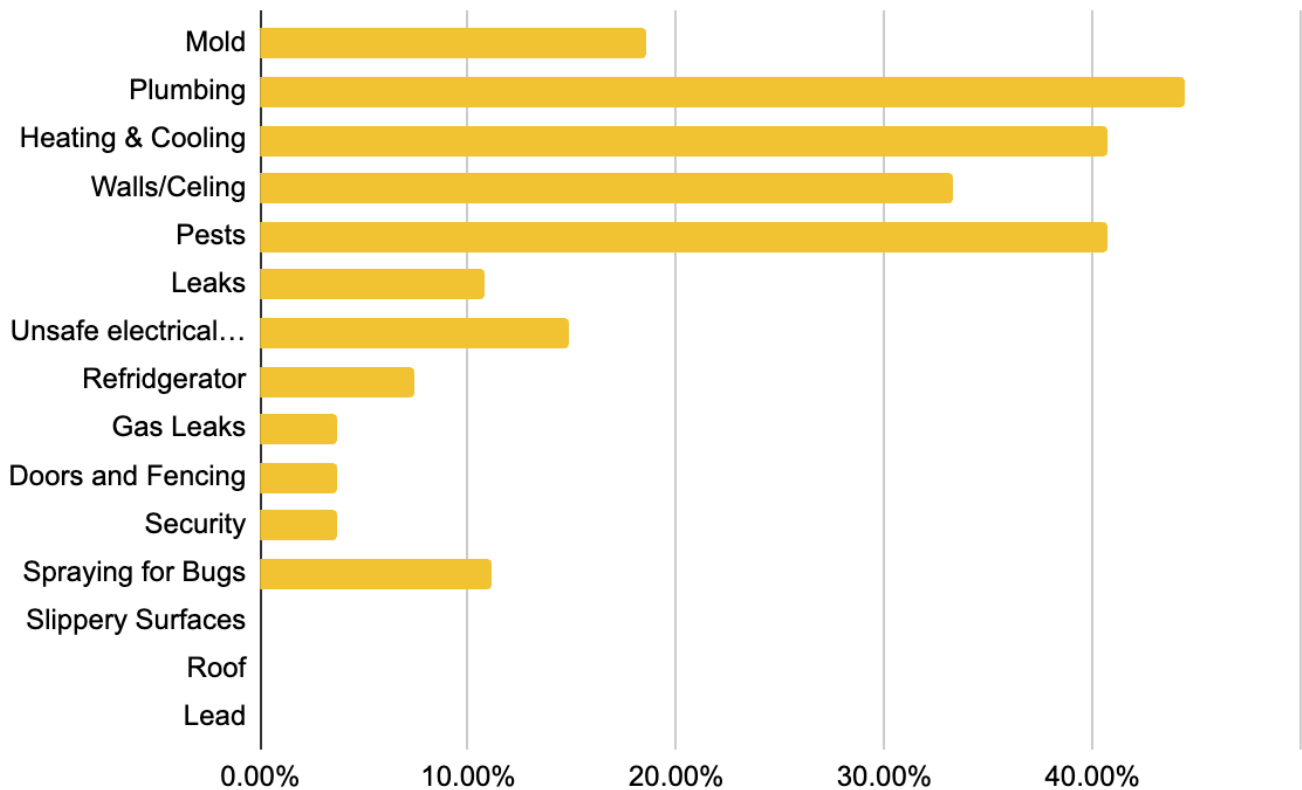
What kind of lease do you have?

10 Month Lease	11 Month Lease	12 Month Lease	13 Month Lease	14 Month Lease	18 Month Lease	24 Month Lease
3.70%	7.41%	74.07%	3.70%	3.70%	3.70%	3.70%

Have you ever met your landlord?

Yes, via phone call	Yes, via email	Yes, in person	Never met my landlord
7.41%	7.41%	18.52%	66.67%

Have you had problems with?



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79. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/2023.
80. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/16/2023.
81. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/24/2023.
82. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/24/2023.
83. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/18/2023.
84. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/1/2023.
85. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/23/2023.
86. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/31/2023.
87. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/4/2023.
88. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/2/2023.
89. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/2023.
90. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/31/23.
91. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
92. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/2/23.
93. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/26/23.
94. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
95. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/26/23.
96. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/26/23.
97. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/29/23.
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114. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
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116. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
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131. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/28/23.
132. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
133. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
134. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/23/23.
135. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/19/23.
136. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/1/23.
137. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/2/23.
138. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/18/23.
139. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
140. Interviews with participants, virtual, 4/10/23; 3/19/23.
141. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
142. Interviews with participants, virtual, 4/10/23; 3/19/23; 3/27/23.
143. Interviews with participants, virtual, 3/27/23; 4/1/23.
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155. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/3/2023.
156. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/3/2023.
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158. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/24/2023.
159. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/2023.
160. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/2023.
161. Interview with participant, virtual, 4/1/2023.
162. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/2023.
163. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/23.
164. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/24/2023.
165. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/2023.
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167. Interview with participant, virtual, 3/27/2023.

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