

Reporting & Editing

12 tips to amp your housing coverage

On every front, the US housing market is getting worse. These story ideas are doable.

WHAT DOES SHELTER MEAN TO YOU?

I think that if I could have a shower & clean clothes everyday and a start of a roof over my head I could go find work and be like the rest of the world

Reporter Stefania Lugli in Wichita, Kansas asked people who shunned shelters to say what shelter means to them. This person said "I think that if I could have a shower & clean clothes everyday and a start of a roof over my head I could go find work and be like the rest of the world." (Courtesy: Stefania Lugli/The KLC Journal)

By: [Jon Greenberg](#)

Like the Bob Dylan song says, you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. The perfect storm that is the U.S. housing market is battering Americans from coast to coast.

The rent is too damn high. Or if you like the technical term, a record 50% of renters are cost-burdened, with half of them spending over 50% of their income on rent and utilities.

Buying a home is an impossible dream for millions. With prices rising faster than incomes, it takes five times the median household income to meet the price of the typical home. For decades, a threefold gap was considered manageable.

A record number of people are homeless; over 770,000, a third more than five years ago.

The latest State of the Nation's Housing from Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies documents all of this. The results are not news so much as an affirmation of a stubborn epic fail. No wonder that nearly half of Americans say the cost of housing is a major source of stress in their lives.

And that captures both the opportunity and a major obstacle for newsrooms. In one way or another, this pain touches virtually everyone who reads, sees or hears our work. On the flip side, the sheer familiarity of the problem makes it harder to catch people's attention.

people who tangle with housing about the tactics they bring to their work and if they have any tips for cutting through the fog of familiarity. Here's part of what we heard.

Explore emerging angles

Don't forget the suburbs and towns

Cities get a lot of attention. Miriam Axel-Lute at [ShelterForce](#) said it pays to get outside them. By example, all signs point to cutbacks in federal housing rent vouchers.

“There's a lot of Section 8 in the suburbs,” Axel-Lute said. “It's going to hurt the landlords and the tenants. In the suburbs, they won't have the resources in place to handle this.”

[Mobile home parks](#) caught the attention of Cascade PBS in Washington State. A single company had expanded to about 60 parks across the state. Its formula was to raise rents, add fees and curtail maintenance. Those practices drew investigators and spurred tenant resistance. Nothing dull about that story.

Full-time workers in limbo

One sure sign of an affordability crisis is when a steady paycheck is no protection against getting pushed to the fringes of the housing landscape. Marisol Bello at the [Housing Narrative Lab](#) highlighted a New York Times piece on [shelters that cater to people who work](#). The residents hold jobs at places like LaGuardia Airport or Target, but it's far from enough to cover rent in the area.

woman works mornings and the man evenings, so one of them is always with the kids and they avoid child care costs.

“Affordability helps people connect to the housing issue because everyone, minus the millionaires and billionaires, is feeling the squeeze to afford and keep a place to live in some fashion,” Bello said.

The looming turning point for masses of affordable apartments

In 1995, developers were making use of federal low-income housing tax credits to build thousands of rental homes and apartments. The deal was that they had to keep rents affordable (according to a set formula) for 30 years. The clock is running down.

Over the next 10 years, 845,000 units will age out. In each of the next few years, rent restrictions will end on about 60,000 units. What happens next is unpredictable; much hinges on local circumstances. If market rents are high, building owners are free to do as they like.

One tip from Bello: This is probably happening near you, and it’s a good story; just don’t mention tax credits in your lede. You’ll lose your audience before you even begin. Go to an apartment building that’s at risk and see what’s there. Many owners have already begun to cut back on maintenance.

Also, these tax credit projects have a 15-year option period. It’s possible for rent protections to end halfway through.

The ripple effects of the One, Big, Beautiful Bill Act

control. The GOP tax and spending bill is rife with safety net cuts and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, aka SNAP, is first in line. We have more details in our [timeline of safety net cutbacks](#), but work requirements are expected to cut SNAP by \$5.8 billion in 2026.

On top of that, if you are in a state that expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, you have additional worries with Medicaid work requirements.

Less help with groceries, a loss of free health insurance, and the risk of falling behind on rent increases, which then leads to more evictions. It's worth talking to officials and advocates early.

Sometimes, the simple stuff works

Ride the coattails of an official process

Scores of cities and counties and some states are rethinking their regulations, particularly zoning. If that's taking place where you are, it's an invitation for you to build off that energy. In New York City, a group of housing reporting students at New York University picked neighborhoods where the city was organizing town meetings to [chart new housing rules](#).

Their professor, Donna Borak, saw the chance for them to see how the debate unfolded.

"I told them to talk to community board members, just to hear what was happening on the ground," Borak said. "Go there and observe. What do you see? Multifamily. Single family. What does it look like in

They published articles on the role of [basement apartments](#), [activists fighting gentrification](#), the [aging out of federal tax credit projects](#), and more.

Ask your audience for their questions

After years of a concerted effort to cover homelessness, Seattle Times reporters used a straightforward approach to connecting with readers; they asked them for their questions. And they got plenty of responses.

“It’s a good way to see people’s understanding,” said former homelessness reporter Anna Patrick. “There’s a ton of misperceptions, a ton of generalizations and biases.”

Readers thought most of the homeless people they saw were outsiders. In reality, [60% to 70% came from the Seattle area](#). As she had time, Patrick answered more questions.

“You take people from where they are. You lean in and follow up,” she said.

Show the steps from A to Z

Anna’s colleague Heidi Groover has a simple method to take people inside any new plan to build more housing: show people what has to happen to take them from where things begin to where they hope they end up.

housing is all the rage, but the harsh math of building costs, a shortage of nonprofit developers, and the myriad elements that need to come together will test the most saintly determination.

Or laying out the steps can be as quick as taking pictures inside an empty office building to show everything it lacks before it could be turned into apartments — like ample plumbing.

“A picture like that would catch what it really takes to do this type of project, better than me summarizing it,” Groover said.

Occasionally, take the daily turn one step further

Any given housing story can be like the loose strand of yarn in a sweater; pull on it and before you know, you have unravelled the whole thing. It’s all connected, as they say. With just a few extra days, reporter David Dudley with ForJournalism in Oregon took a vote to [cut \\$100 million in eviction prevention](#) money and used it to show the pipeline that leads to homelessness.

It was a simple teachable moment that linked the lack of affordable housing, the impact of tariffs on construction costs, the increased pressure on social services and the personal dislocation of eviction. All in just a few paragraphs, not a major takeout.

Getting inside homelessness

Close-up video is a powerful tool

The excerpts from a yearlong project on a backyard village experiment include shifting camera perspectives, sometimes showing the yard, sometimes people in entrance ways, but there's always a close-up. The visual intimacy goes a long way toward lifting these individuals from a category — “the homeless” — to being actual people. (Hat tip to Juan Pablo Garnham at The Eviction Lab for the links.)

Find the thread that applies to anybody

People without a stable place to call home can still have Netflix or AppleTV accounts and binge on whatever series is hot.

“Ordinary people want to have some way to entertain themselves,” said Lisa Halverstadt, a senior investigative reporter with the Voice of San Diego.

They might have a dog or cat and live in a tent because shelters are only for people.

“We all need companionship,” said Stefania Lugli with The Journal in Wichita, Kansas. “I might sleep outside rather than give up my pet.”

In a time when removing the homeless from public view enjoys broad support, this type of shorthand can instantly narrow the gap between those with a roof over their head and those without.

There's no shame in stock questions

Robert Davis with The Colorado Sun has a favorite one: “If you had three wishes, what would they be?”

their likes and desires? It's a way to get to other parts of their character."

Dudley in Oregon has a stock question, too. He asks, "What keeps you going?"

They usually have a clear answer. It might be their connection with God. It might be the support they give and get from others like them

"When you talk to these folks, you know they've dealt with calamity, right? They've dealt with tragedy. There's some tough stuff, but there's also some beautiful stuff. That's that little shaft of light cutting through the darkness."

Let the homeless speak for themselves

Lugli in Wichita asked people who shunned shelters to [fill out cards with two questions](#): What does shelter mean to you? What resources for health or housing are most important to you?

Their handwriting itself revealed a bit of who they were. Some wrote with a well-rounded script, others in skritch-y chicken tracks. In an echo from a past generation, there were even a couple in cursive.

Their thoughts were always sincere, and sometimes profound.

"Shelter: Somewhere to block the wind. Resources: Security in belonging to a society as a whole."

but it can be simple and effective for any newsroom.

If you have your own housing coverage tips, share them. Email me jgreenberg@poynter.org, or add to my posts on [BlueSky](#) and [LinkedIn](#) and I'll pass them along.

Also, I love being pointed to good work, so share those, too. I just dipped into The Atlantic's [No Easy Fix](#). Reporter Ethan Brooks found three characters that really drive this narrative about homelessness in San Francisco.

Four members of the Homelessness Beat Reporters Collective spent time with me: Lisa Halverstadt – Voice of San Diego, Michael Lyle – Nevada Current, Stefania Lugli – The Journal, Wichita, Kansas, Robert Davis – Colorado Sun. The group wrote [a guide to covering homelessness for Poynter](#). It's well worth your time.

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