



Housing Reporting Rx

A Journalist's Guide to
Covering the Housing Crisis

RJ RENAISSANCE
JOURNALISM

Sam Gilmore

Corbin Hillgoss

Lola Wickersha

Ryan Dieu

Noah Morales

Liao

Introduction & Overview

Are journalists missing the “big picture” on the housing crisis?

A crisis in housing insecurity and affordability is imperiling the lives and well-being of people in cities, suburbs and rural lands across the country. With the nation’s wealth gap becoming wider every day, people of color, immigrants, the poor and other “minority” groups are disproportionately jeopardized by the structural and racial inequities that riddle our nation’s housing sector. The inequities can manifest themselves in many ways, from discrimination in mortgage lending to dilapidated and unhealthy housing conditions to unbridled gentrification pressures that invade vulnerable neighborhoods, jack up housing prices, and displace longtime residents. The result is a **growing crisis in housing affordability and insecurity** that is even ensnaring many middle-class families.

The terms that pop up in news headlines atomize the crisis into a multitude of single flashpoints: Rocketing Housing Prices, Rampant Homelessness, Mass Evictions, Rapid Gentrification, Lack of Affordable Housing. But these are not distinct problems. Rather, they only start to define the boundaries of a much larger set of linked issues. However, by reporting these problems in isolation, journalists and their news organizations are **missing the larger picture**. And, in the process, may actually be exacerbating the problem.

You can make a difference.

Journalists and the news media shape public opinion and influence public policy and laws, such as tax legislation and rent control, which in turn have a profound impact on the housing sector—and on the lives of millions of everyday Americans, for better or worse.

Because of this, Renaissance Journalism set out to discover ways to transform how journalists think about and approach coverage of housing issues. This guide highlights some of our significant findings and observations. It identifies major pitfalls to avoid and offers practical tips on how to improve and expand coverage of the housing crisis in all its complexity and nuance.

Three Major Pitfalls to Avoid

Pitfall #1: Tunnel Vision & Oversimplification of Complex Issues

Journalists have a strong tendency to focus on a single event, controversy or disaster, such as homelessness, in isolation from the larger structural, systemic and historical drivers that contribute to the housing crisis and point to possible solutions. News coverage, as a result, is often skewed by oversimplified generalizations, such as “good vs. evil” battles between tenants and landlords or debates over development proposals. According to an analysis of 12 major newspapers by the [Center for Media & Social Impact at American University](#), news coverage in 2018 “oversimplified and isolated” housing stability issues. “Nearly 90% of articles about housing stability focused exclusively on one of three main issues (homelessness, affordable housing or gentrification). In other words, the intersections and relationships between these issues are overwhelmingly being ignored.”

And, while journalists are trained to react quickly to events, they can miss the “slow-moving disaster,” such as the subprime mortgage crisis or gentrification’s impact on displacement. It is not uncommon for in-depth examinations of complex matters and trends to receive low priority, given daily deadline pressures and these cash-starved times for many local newsrooms.

The problem with this kind of coverage is that it often ***stresses the individuality of each situation***. Yet these issues cry out for stories that would “connect the dots” by encompassing policy, structural and historical factors. A more comprehensive approach would help the public and elected officials to understand the many ways in which housing issues affect them and their communities—and help them envision effective remedies.

Pitfall #2: Sources Reduced to Stereotypical or Scripted Characters

Reporters often utilize homeowners, renters, workers, small business owners and homeless individuals to illustrate and humanize a story. While this is a common practice in journalism, it risks reducing people to scripted, stereotyped characters who lack agency. At worse, news coverage can also unwittingly reinforce racial stereotypes that associate the housing crisis and homelessness to “just” people of color.

When it comes to analyzing and solving complex problems, journalists often consider government officials, big business leaders, academic experts and other well-known sources as the most authoritative sources. This “top down” practice ultimately deprives “average” everyday Americans a larger voice in the decisions that affect their neighborhoods. “Cities are never lacking in wise, energetic, passionate, and dedicated citizens who know best how to rebuild their communities,” writes Roberta Brandes Gratz [in her book](#) “We’re Still Here Ya Bastards: How the People of New

Orleans Rebuilt Their City.” Gatz is a journalist who investigates urban development and disaster recovery scenarios.

Similarly, while journalists may quote homeless individuals in their stories, they are often relegated to describing their experience of homelessness as *victims*—not as experienced stakeholders who might offer solutions.

Pitfall #3: Reliance on the “Market Narrative”

In the United States, public discourse about the housing sector is generally viewed within a market or commercial framework, and journalists tend to follow suit. Within this framework, a house is a commodity whose price is subject to the *demands of the market* and the negotiations between a buyer and seller. Home ownership is represented as a key mechanism for generating wealth. If housing demand exceeds supply, then developers will build more units. In the places where the market fails to meet the needs of low-income families, local governments are expected to provide public housing and rent subsidies.

This framework has become the **dominant narrative** that both the public and media use to think and talk about the housing sector and all that ails it. It allows us to believe that housing conditions—good and bad, for better or worse—result from what the FrameWorks Institute, a communications think tank, describes as the **“impersonal and immutable force”** of the market.

Seeing housing issues through this market narrative or “consumerist lens” can be problematic. “Consumerist thinking makes it easy to conclude that differential access is normal and natural; people figure that, while it is unfortunate that some may not be able to afford what they want, that’s just how market forces work,” according to the **FrameWorks Institute**. “Ultimately, consumerist thinking leads Americans to believe that nothing can or should be done about housing affordability.”

Ultimately, the market narrative shrouds the reality that the housing crisis—specifically many of the structural and racial inequities in the system—is interconnected with tax laws, land use and transportation plans, health and education concerns, and past and current government programs and policy decisions. It is, at its core, a public problem that demands policy solutions.



Our Top Tips for Rethinking News Coverage

Now for some good news. Despite the obstacles, shrinking news budgets and the pitfalls we've outlined, many journalists—from both small and large news organizations—are starting to rethink and even experiment with different ways to strengthen and improve their coverage of the housing crisis. Based on Renaissance Journalism's research of these efforts, we have pulled together our top tips for enhancing and expanding your reporting and coverage of the housing crisis. And we've included some strong story examples to inspire you.

Tip #1: Connect the dots.

Tell the story of the housing affordability and insecurity crisis more holistically and comprehensively. Ask yourself: Is there a better way to report the crisis in all its depth, complexity and meaning? Am I "connecting the dots" on this complex, multifaceted issue or focused on a single aspect of it, such as homelessness?

Start by looking beyond day-to-day events and understand that the **housing crisis is essentially a cross-cutting issue**, one that connects and intersects with educational equity, economic justice, structural racism, health outcomes, the legacy of poverty, the wealth gap, transportation and infrastructure, the rural/urban divide, and access to opportunities and services.

Similarly, we encourage you to take **a systems and structural approach to your reporting**, which would encompass looking at the policies, root causes or systemic drivers, and historical factors that contribute to and impact the housing crisis. For example, consider how the nation's history of redlining and institutional racism has led to segregated housing and the persistent wealth gap between white and black families. Or consider: What is the **disproportionate impact** of the housing crisis on a specific group of people, such as communities of color, immigrants, youth, homeless individuals, seniors and people with disabilities?

Tip #2: Make housing issues a priority.

Many news organizations are starting to invest in coverage about housing and, as a result, they have been able to provide improved, in-depth and contextual coverage. The Mercury News, for example, assigned four reporters to cover housing as a beat, which provides the capacity to monitor spot news events and to develop in-depth reports. Their project **“The Price We Pay”** explains how population growth, rising income levels, and stretched housing supplies are changing the entire region. Another news outlet that has demonstrated a strong commitment to covering housing is **CityLab**, launched in 2011 to focus on the ideas, issues, policies and politics that impact cities, with stories examining local, national and global circumstances.

Tip #3: Seek out community sources as experts and for new story ideas.

Need an expert, whom do you call? As noted, most journalists turn to government officials, academics and CEOs or other business leaders for expert analysis. Try flipping this practice and take a “bottom-up” approach. Tap community members first—residents, renters, RV dwellers, homeless families, community activists—for their expertise on the housing crisis and possible solutions. This approach can often yield compelling and in-depth stories that you might have otherwise missed.

For example, three Fresno Bee reporters enlisted local nonprofit groups to help them investigate severely substandard and dilapidated housing conditions that have plagued renters for decades. The nonprofit leaders helped the reporters understand the long history of the problem and introduced them to low-income, Latino and Hmong residents who had been afraid to complain. Their five-part print and video investigation, **“Living in Misery,”** blamed the crisis on “poverty, racism, urban sprawl and neglect.” Spurred by the series and community advocates, the city adopted groundbreaking new ordinances to monitor conditions in rental housing.

Tip #4: Collaborate to expand impact.

Driven by reduced reporting staffs and budgets, many news organizations have found that they have more impact by collaborating with one another, a step that would have been unthinkable in past decades. Collaboration can mean many things. For the [San Francisco Homeless Project](#), coordinated by the San Francisco Chronicle, it meant that news organizations worked independently, but published/broadcasted during the same week in 2016 in order to maximize public awareness. In the case of [Resolve Philly](#), more than 20 news organizations work closely on covering critical social issues, such as the housing crisis, and exploring possible solutions. In a 2019 collaboration called [“Who Owns Silicon Valley,”](#) Reveal (Center for Investigative Reporting), The Mercury News, Telemundo and others pieced together property records to determine who is profiting from the San Francisco Bay Area’s housing crisis.

Tip #5: Mine databanks to reveal stories of injustice.

Newsrooms that have the technical know-how to excavate and analyze large databases can break open previously hidden stories. One exceptional example is [“Kept Out,”](#) an expose into modern-day redlining published by Reveal (Center for Investigative Reporting). The project showed that banks routinely rejected mortgage applications from people of color—and especially African American and Latinos—in 61 metro areas throughout the United States. The analysis of 31 million records also showed that the Trump Administration has weakened the standards that banks must meet under the 40-year-old Community Reinvestment Act. [The New York Times](#) combined U.S. Census and Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data to document new racial shifts in cities across the nation: Predominantly minority neighborhoods near downtown are growing whiter and suburban neighborhoods that were once largely white are experiencing an increased share of black, Hispanic and Asian American residents.

Tip #6: Experiment with podcasts and other new mediums.

Capitalizing on their growing popularity, many news organizations are using podcasts to provide serialized, multilayered coverage that capitalizes on the medium’s intimate feel. One example is [“We Live Here” by St. Louis Public Radio](#), a podcast started in the aftermath of the Michael Brown shooting death in Ferguson to examine race, class and housing. One episode focused on the people who live, work, worship and teach in a neighborhood undergoing gentrification. Another example is [“The Promise: Life, Death and Change in the Projects.”](#) a six-part series by Nashville Public Radio, that examines day-to-day life in a housing project from the perspective of residents. And in [“There Goes the Neighborhood: Los Angeles.”](#) a collaboration by KCRW and WNYC, listeners learn about gentrification’s different causes, impacts and solutions in the so-called “city of dreams.”

Tip #7: Add humor or satire.

The skillful use of satire or humor can also be effective in helping the public better understand the housing crisis or any complex social issue. For example, in April 2019, the comedian John Oliver on HBO's "[Last Week Tonight](#)" effectively employed satire—combined with some solid in-depth reporting—to break down and analyze the complex topic of mobile home owners and how investment firms are exploiting them for profit.

Tip #8: Listen, really listen, to your community.

It's time to rethink how we engage and interact with our community members. Some news organizations have decided that they have a responsibility to convene conversations to better understand and solve community problems, rather than just report about them. One example is "[Solving Homelessness](#)" sponsored by San Francisco Public Press. The daylong gathering attracted more than 200 activists, architects, journalists, city officials, policymakers and homeless men and women who discussed ways to reduce homelessness in San Francisco. With support from Renaissance Journalism and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, Bay Area news organizations hosted "[On the Table](#)" gatherings—intimate, meal-time conversations about housing with residents at community centers, local restaurants and churches.

Tip #9: Cover “hidden” communities and tell untold stories.

Historically, mainstream news media have been criticized for overlooking many people and groups within their regions. This is where ethnic media and grassroots media initiatives demonstrate their special value. "[Box City](#)," a television documentary produced by The Filipino Channel (ABS-CBN), offered an intimate look at one San Francisco homeless encampment. To outsiders, the collection of plywood boxes and tarps was unremarkable. But to The Filipino Channel it represented a community of immigrants who had organized themselves to survive and to retain cultural ties. In concert with the documentary's broadcast, the network reached out to Filipino American community leaders, elected officials and nonprofit advocates to assist the residents of Box City. Similarly, in Oakland, [El Tímpano](#) is a fledgling, "participatory reporting" initiative designed to serve Spanish-speaking residents ignored by other news organizations. In one effort, El Tímpano sent a "community microphone" out into the community to give Spanish-speaking immigrants an opportunity to record and share their stories, questions and concerns.

About This Guide

The **Ford Foundation**, which has invested resources to help communities address the crisis in housing affordability and insecurity, commissioned Renaissance Journalism to explore news media coverage and how to tap into the expertise, concerns and ideas generated by communities. We organized **three roundtable discussions**—in Pittsburgh, Fresno and San Antonio—that brought together leaders from media, philanthropy and the nonprofit/community sectors. Through a facilitated dialogue, we discussed current media practices, imagined new possibilities, and considered ways to improve coverage. Renaissance Journalism also sampled stories from around the country to identify strengths and weaknesses. We reviewed studies and critiques prepared by academic, policy, communications and nonprofit specialists. Our research is also informed by our own work with journalists and nonprofit organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area and throughout the United States. This guide highlights our major findings and observations.

Project Team

Renaissance Journalism & Storytelling Center

Jon Funabiki, Founder and Executive Director

Valerie Bush, Deputy Director

Kaylee Fagan, Media & Research Coordinator

Laura Moorhead, Consultant and Assistant Professor, San Francisco State University

Journalism + Design, The New School

Heather Chaplin, Founding Director

Kayla Christopherson, Program Associate, Systems Thinking

Cole Goins, Engagement Lead

Neighborhood Funders Group

Sarita Ahuja, Interim Co-Director

A person is shown in profile, writing on a whiteboard. The scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The whiteboard contains handwritten notes in black ink. The main text of the image is in large, bold, white font.

Stores, infrastructure
- Housing Quality
- ignore general needs
Stakeholders
Employers/Farmers
Existing Residents
Media
Schools

Founded in 2009, Renaissance Journalism promotes equity and social justice through journalism and storytelling.

www.renjournalism.org

RJ RENAISSANCE
JOURNALISM