



Cokethia Goodman and her children outside their former home in Forest Park, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. The house was condemned shortly after they moved in.

The New American Homeless

Housing insecurity in the nation's richest cities is far worse than government statistics claim. Just ask the Goodmans.

By [Brian Goldstone](#)

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Photographs by Sheila Pree Bright for The New Republic

Last August, Cokethia Goodman returned home from work to discover a typed letter from her landlord in the mailbox. She felt a familiar panic as she began to read it. For nearly a year, Goodman and her six children—two of them adopted after being abandoned at birth—had been living in a derelict but functional three-bedroom house in the historically black Peoplestown neighborhood of Atlanta. Goodman, who is 50, has a reserved, vigilant demeanor, her years trying to keep the kids out of harm's way evident in her perpetually narrowed eyes. She saw the

rental property as an answer to prayer. It was in a relatively safe area and within walking distance of the Barack and Michelle Obama Academy, the public elementary school her youngest son and daughter attended. It was also—at \$950 a month, not including utilities—just barely affordable on the \$9 hourly wage she earned as a full-time home health aide. Goodman had fled an abusive marriage in 2015, and she was anxious to give her family a more stable home environment. She thought they’d finally found one.

As a longtime renter, Goodman was acquainted with the [capriciousness](#) of Atlanta’s housing market. She knew how easily the house could slip away. Seeking to avoid this outcome, she ensured that her rent checks were never late and, despite her exhausting work schedule, became a stickler for cleanliness. So strong was her fear of being deemed a “difficult” tenant that she avoided requesting basic repairs. But now, reading the landlord’s terse notice, she realized that these efforts had been insufficient. When her lease expired at the end of the month, it would not be renewed. No explanation was legally required, and none was provided. “You think you did everything you’re supposed to do,” she told me, “and then this happens.”

A clue lay in the neighborhood’s accelerating transformation. Up and down her street, old, shabby dwellings—many of them, like the one she rented, casualties of the previous decade’s foreclosure crisis, purchased at rock-bottom prices by investors who had simply waited around until they appreciated in value—were being sold, gutted, and [reconstructed](#). In retrospect, a flyer on her doorstep from Sotheby’s International Realty, offering to “pay cash, close quickly, and save you the hassle of multiple showings and cleaning/renovating/staging/pictures,” was an ominous sign. Goodman’s landlord, a doctor who runs an international nonprofit, told me recently that she didn’t renew the lease for financial reasons. “With the area taking off,” she explained, “it was the perfect time to unload the property.” When we spoke, she was preparing to sell the house.

Goodman had 30 days to relocate her family. She began scouring Trulia and Apartments.com for available rentals within her budget. Every night, she waited until the kids were asleep before retreating to the couch with her battered smartphone and a notepad. The list of possibilities remained depressingly short. She hoped to stay nearby in order to spare her children the hardship of switching schools, but she soon understood that continuing to live in this former working-class enclave—to say nothing of adjacent, more thoroughly gentrified communities like [Grant Park](#)—was out of the question. “It was like we’d been kicked out of the entire area, not just that particular house,” she said.

She expanded her search to other parts of the city, but still found nothing. One obstacle was her rental history. Atlanta has one of the highest [eviction](#) rates in the country; in 2017, [22 percent](#) of Fulton County tenants had had eviction notices filed against them. (The number was above 40 percent in some predominantly black neighborhoods.) Goodman once fell behind on rent payments when she was younger, and most landlords and management companies wouldn’t even consider a prospective tenant with a prior eviction, especially since she couldn’t show evidence—per standard application requirements—that her income amounted to at least three times the monthly rent, or provide a co-signer whose income equaled five times the monthly rent.



Cokethia and her children in front of their former home in the Peoplestown neighborhood of Atlanta. When the lease expired, the landlord refused to renew it without explanation, and the family was forced to move out.

Eventually, Goodman came across a listing for a house in Forest Park, which was a 20-minute drive from their current neighborhood. Once white and middle-class, the suburb of just under 20,000 had changed dramatically over the past 20 years, as a generation of poor African American and immigrant families resettled there after Atlanta [tore down](#) its housing projects. Today, Forest Park has a poverty rate of [32.7 percent](#), and Goodman, driving there for the first time, sensed that the area had been hollowed out. A move to this place would further strain her budget. Her rent would increase by \$50, and because her clients were in Atlanta, she would spend more on gas as well. At the house, the landlord, an affable 79-year-old man named Abdur-Rahim Dib Dudar, gave her a hurried walk-through. In exchange for the first month's rent and a \$1,000 security deposit, in cash, he agreed to forgo a credit check and any other requirements. Goodman decided that she had no choice but to take the place.

Though the house was dilapidated, Goodman coaxed her kids into helping her spruce it up. But it was worse than it had initially seemed: The sinks were clogged up, one of the two toilets wouldn't flush, the floors seemed to be sagging, a shower head was falling out of the wall, and,

when Goodman went to plug in a lamp, the socket, she said, “caught on fire.” “I thought maybe I’d cursed myself,” she told me with a grim laugh. One morning, her car’s engine abruptly died. She had no money to fix it, so she started taking the bus to work, walking 15 minutes to the nearest stop and enduring the hour-plus commute. (Atlanta’s train line does not extend to Clayton County, which, when it was still majority white, [infamously](#) rejected the MARTA transit system’s expansion, as did other suburban counties.)

On October 19, Goodman heard DJ, her 12-year-old son, scream from the kitchen. He’d been doing the dishes, and had gotten an electric shock as he reached his hand into the dirty water. He was crying, saying how bad it hurt. Goodman was livid. She suspected the shock had been caused by exposed wiring in the basement, where there was a pool of standing water. In some states, she could have withheld her rent until these safety issues were addressed. Georgia granted tenants [no such rights](#). Nothing prohibited landlords from kicking a renter out for reporting hazardous conditions to the authorities, what’s referred to as “retaliatory eviction.” (A [state law](#) banning such practices has since passed.) Later that day, Goodman spotted a group of firefighters down the street and asked one of them, Lieutenant Brett Boyle, if he could take a look around. Within an hour, a group of officials from code enforcement, sanitation, Georgia Power, and the fire department had gathered on the lawn. Ken Flemming, a code enforcement officer, had been to the house before. “As soon as he saw it, he started shaking his head,” Goodman said. The electric company, discerning an immediate danger, physically cut the wires leading into the house. Dudar showed up, was handed a citation, and quickly left. A fluorescent orange notice was taped to the front window:

THIS BUILDING IS UNSAFE AND UNSANITARY AND ITS USE OR OCCUPANCY HAS BEEN PROHIBITED BY THE HOUSING INSPECTOR OF CITY OF FOREST PARK, GA.

Goodman did her best to stay calm, but the kids would be coming home soon, and she had nowhere to take them. She couldn’t even go inside to retrieve their belongings. The Red Cross arrived and gave Goodman a prepaid debit card for food and clothing and several nights at an extended-stay motel.



Cokethia and her children outside the Rodeway Inn, where they were placed by the Red Cross after their home in Forest Park was condemned.

That night, as they settled into their rooms at the Rodeway Inn on Jonesboro Road, Goodman told her family not to worry, that their stay would be like a vacation. The kids were distraught, even though they enjoyed eating fast food and were happy to miss school. Special buses arrived each morning to pick up the other children living at the motel with their families, but Goodman was told by a school social worker that it could take a couple of weeks for her transportation request to be processed. In the meantime, she was unable to pay for an Uber to take the children back and forth. Her deepest concerns were about Destinee, her 14-year-old daughter. Destinee’s closest friend had killed himself on Instagram Live earlier in the year, and in the aftermath of the death she had grown quiet and withdrawn. She told her mother how embarrassing it was to be in this situation, how angry it made her feel. When a middle-aged man at the motel began “stalking” her, as Goodman put it, Destinee went to stay with her father, which did little to ease Goodman’s worry.

At the motel, Goodman continued working as a home health aide, leaving the kids with Kiara, her 28-year-old daughter, in the morning, and searching for a way out of their predicament when she returned at night. She had no friends or family to borrow money from—a condition referred to by social scientists as “[network poverty](#)”—and she knew her ability to keep the family

sheltered depended on her monthly paycheck. But the numbers wouldn't add up. It seemed impossible to save enough to get them into another place. When the Red Cross debit card finally ran out, they were forced to leave the motel.

"I grew up in Atlanta," Goodman said. "I graduated from high school in this city. Through my job, I've been taking care of people in this city. And now my kids and I are *homeless*? How does that even happen?"

If the term "working homeless" has not yet entered our national vocabulary, there is reason to expect that it soon will. [Hidden](#) within the world of homelessness has always been a subset of individuals, usually single parents, with jobs; what's different now is the sheer extent of this phenomenon. For a widening swath of the nearly seven million American workers living below the poverty line, a combination of skyrocketing rents, stagnant wages, and a lack of tenant protections has proved all but [insurmountable](#). Theirs, increasingly, is the face of homelessness in the United States: people whose paychecks are no longer enough to keep a roof over their heads.

Strikingly, this crisis of housing insecurity is erupting in America's richest, most rapidly developing cities. [New York](#), whose economy soared to historic heights between 2009 and 2018, watched its shelter population swell by 72 percent during that time. Washington, D.C., boasts one of the country's highest median incomes; it also has the greatest per capita homeless rate. Seattle is close behind. In Los Angeles and Charlotte, San Jose and Nashville, the trends are similar. Unemployment is at a generational low; corporate profits have surged; the signs of growth—from new construction and consumer spending to the unbridled "revitalization" of urban space—are everywhere. Yet the teachers, maintenance workers, supermarket cashiers, and medical assistants who help sustain these cities are getting relentlessly priced out of them. Last year, [7.8 million](#) extremely low-income renters were classified as severely cost burdened, meaning they spent at least 50 percent of their income on rent and utilities, and more than half a million people were homeless on [any given night](#). Unlike earlier periods of widespread homelessness and displacement, such as during the recession of 2008, what we're witnessing today is an emergency born less of poverty than [prosperity](#)—occurring not despite but precisely because of the economic boom.

Atlanta, the third-fastest-growing metropolitan area in the country, is illustrative. For the city's working poor, there's an inverse relationship between their ability to remain housed and Atlanta's much-celebrated renaissance. Between 2012 and 2016, the city's low-income housing stock [declined](#) by 5 percent each year, to the point that today, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, there are only [25 affordable rental units](#) for every 100 poor families in the Atlanta area who need them. (The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines affordable as costing no more than 30 percent of a household's income.) A recent [report](#) by the Brookings Institution found that Atlanta's income inequality is the most extreme in the nation; another ranked it fifth among places most intensely gentrifying; and a 2019 analysis by the Federal Reserve Bank ranked Atlanta 360th out of 381 cities in terms of economic mobility. To truly grasp the severity of the crisis, however, it's necessary to turn to a somewhat obscure

study—*The Worst Case Housing Needs Report to Congress*—released biennially by HUD. Last published in 2017, the report [tracks](#) the number of extremely low-income renting families who (a) do not receive housing assistance and (b) spend more than half of their income on rent, live in grossly inadequate conditions, or both. In Atlanta, that figure was 127,000, or 49 percent of all very low-income renters—roughly the same proportion as San Francisco, and 6 points higher than the national percentage. Nevertheless, nine out of ten apartments built in 2017 were classified as [luxury](#) units.



Cokethia and her children outside her mother's apartment.

Outrageous rents would be less alarming if wages were increasing at a comparable rate. But the opposite is true. Nationwide, the hourly earnings of high-wage workers rose [41 percent](#) between 1979 and 2013; those of middle-wage workers grew only [6 percent](#). The pay for low-wage workers, meanwhile, decreased by [5 percent](#). Contrast these figures to the [138 percent](#) annual wage growth among the top 1 percent of earners. Factoring in the cost of housing only darkens the picture. Today, there is not a single county in the United States where someone making minimum wage can [afford](#) a two-bedroom apartment. In Atlanta, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition's annual *Out of Reach* [report](#), the "housing wage" needed to pay for a modest two-bedroom unit is \$21.27 an hour. (Georgia's minimum wage is \$5.15 an hour.) In

Boston, a tenant earning minimum wage would have to log 141 hours a week to afford the same residence. In San Francisco, it's 203 hours, or the equivalent of five full-time jobs.

Confronted with housing costs that devour the bulk of their monthly incomes, some choose to move away. But where do they go? Across the nation, the housing crisis now radiates [far beyond](#) major urban centers, pushing up prices in neighboring towns and cities—and, even if cheaper accommodations can be found, relocation may require searching for a new job, or enduring a long commute, which involves additional expenses. But staying put is often equally fraught. Many families are forced to cut back on basic necessities—health care, utilities, food, clothing—and rely on whatever help might be available from local food pantries and nonprofits. As for government support, whether in the form of public housing or Section 8 vouchers to use in the private rental market: It's nonexistent for the vast majority of low-income tenants. Since the mid-1990s, 250,000 public housing units throughout the country have been [lost](#) (many through demolition) without being replaced, and the voucher program, though shown in numerous studies to be a crucial lifeline, is drastically [underfunded](#). Today, only one in four households poor enough to qualify for rental assistance actually receives it. In a country where vital aid is treated as a lottery, families struggling to pay the rent are, with few exceptions, left to fend for themselves.

The slide from unstable housing into homelessness begins when this tenuous financial footing finally gives way. A missed paycheck due to sickness, a divorce—really any setback or unanticipated expense can be disastrous. Even a single lapsed rent payment can result in an eviction, especially in competitive markets where landlords are assured of a quick replacement. What awaits those evicted, in many instances, is a brutal cycle of job loss, severed social supports, and, above all, the heightened challenge of securing a future lease. Brian Gilmore, the director of Michigan State College of Law's Housing Clinic, [describes](#) an eviction as “the civil equivalent of capital punishment,” leading tenants to “lose not only their housing but also their independence and dignity, often becoming isolated and hopeless.” Suddenly lacking a fixed address, they double up with friends or relatives, move between shelters and cheap motels, or stay in one of the “safe parking lots” that cities have started [opening](#) for their newly displaced residents. A 2017 [report](#) by a pair of University of Washington researchers found that if rents increase by 10 percent in Los Angeles, another 4,000 people become homeless; in New York, that number is 6,000. At Nicholas House, the longest-running family shelter in Atlanta, the director told me that more than half of the parents seeking help there are employed in low-wage jobs.

Nor are these patterns color-blind. More than 50 years after the passage of the [Fair Housing Act](#), African Americans, in particular, continue to face well-documented discrimination at every level of the housing system, from barriers to homeownership to the disproportionate number of black renters who are evicted each year. While making up just 13 percent of the general population, African Americans represent a [full 40 percent](#) of those experiencing homelessness. In Atlanta, the disparity is even starker: 85 percent of the city's unhoused population is black. It may be true, as the cliché has it, that anyone can become homeless. But it's a great deal more likely to happen to some people than others.



The intake counter of the Gateway Center in Atlanta.

Gateway Center, one of the primary hubs for homeless services in Atlanta, is a four-story, 110,000-square-foot former jail only a short walk from the State Capitol. The surrounding area is crammed with institutions (the Department of Community Supervision, the Municipal Court, the Division of Family and Children Services) charged with overseeing the urban poor and businesses (bail bondsmen, private probation companies) that profit off them. When the unhoused are arrested for panhandling, sleeping in public, or any other violation of the city’s “quality of life” ordinances, they are taken to Gateway’s next-door neighbor, the Atlanta Detention Center. It’s not uncommon for people to cycle back and forth between the two facilities, occasionally ending up at the public hospital’s emergency room, which is also nearby. Gateway itself, in addition to offering beds to 350-plus men through its residential programs, serves as the main access point to the countywide [Continuum of Care](#)—an initiative mandated by HUD to streamline cooperation among local shelters and aid organizations. The idea is that assistance should be delivered at a single, centralized source. In practice, this means funneling Atlanta’s homeless—from those who have been living on the streets for years to the more recently displaced—into a crowded building where scarce resources are parceled out by way of a kind of triage.

In January, three months after losing her home, Goodman arrived at Gateway for the first time. The morning was windy and bitterly cold, and to get to the front entrance she had to step

gingerly around baby strollers and handcarts and small clusters of men and women wrapped in blankets, their belongings stacked beside them on the sidewalk. Goodman had spent the past several weeks reaching out to emergency family shelters and nonprofits, and the responses, when she received a response, were always the same: She first needed to undergo an assessment through Gateway's coordinated entry system, and it had to be done in person. Even so, she found herself delaying the visit, not just because of the logistical challenges of getting there early enough to be seen (she'd been told that people often began lining up in the middle of the night to secure an appointment the following day), but because going to Gateway felt like a final, tangible admission of defeat. She was angry and exhausted, and she was ashamed. But she was desperate, too.

The building's interior was spacious and clean, if not quite welcoming. An airport-style metal detector opened onto a reception counter, a security guard station, and a few dozen chairs, occupied by people dozing or staring ahead while waiting for their names to be called. In a corner of the lobby, alongside a medical clinic run by Mercy Care, a local community health center, a hallway led to public showers and a clothing bank; in the opposite corner, there was a glass-enclosed room filled with kids and their mothers. Since 2013, Gateway's overnight accommodations have been provided exclusively to men, but women with children are permitted to stay in this small room—with no furnishings, no privacy—when outside temperatures fall below freezing. Advocates have long accused city leadership of putting the homeless [at risk](#) during dangerous weather, both by refusing to open a sufficient number of warming centers and by declining to make existing ones available unless absolutely necessary. In December, a homeless advocate [reported](#) finding a woman named Lillian Hilman frozen outside the Georgia-Pacific Tower; days earlier, a man had succumbed to hypothermia near a downtown MARTA station. The Direct Action Hunger Alliance, a group led by formerly homeless individuals, responded with a [demonstration](#) in the City Council chambers, during which activists fell to the floor to represent those who had died avoidable deaths.

A polite case manager named Fred Menefee conducted Goodman's assessment. The meeting, in a bare, windowless office with cinderblock walls, was over almost as soon as it began. Menefee explained that he needed to ask Goodman a series of questions—some of which, he added, were “pretty sensitive”—in order to determine how best to assist her. Had she ever been diagnosed with a behavioral health disorder? Did she have any chronic medical conditions, such as HIV? Since becoming homeless, had she attempted to harm herself in any way? How many times had she been hospitalized in the last year? Had she ever been arrested or spent time in jail? How often did she drink or use drugs?

To each of these questions, Goodman replied proudly: no, none, never. “It's not like all that,” she said, as if there had been a misunderstanding. “I've got a job. I pay my bills.”

Menefee tapped at his keyboard. And where were they living now? he asked.

Goodman said that after weeks of moving between different places—a couple of weeks at a motel, a few nights with a friend—some relatives had been letting her and the children stay in their tiny apartment. One of these relatives was her biological mother, who, according to Goodman, decided when her daughter was an infant that she no longer wanted her, and left

Goodman to be raised by her grandfather's girlfriend. The other was a brother. Goodman had been estranged from both for many years, and it was only because she offered to pay for utilities that the older woman grudgingly agreed to take the family in. (Her mother was bedridden with severe health problems, and made it clear to Goodman that she expected to be taken care of.) She told Menefee about the hateful way her mother treated them, and how her brother screamed obscenities at the children and demanded that they stay confined, when he was at home, to the small bedroom upstairs. She said the decrepit apartment had become unbearable—it was infested with bedbugs, and she feared for her children's health. "We have to leave," Goodman concluded. "They don't want us there no more."

Menefee looked up from his computer and sighed. The purpose of this assessment, he said, was to figure out who most urgently needed help. Based on the answers she provided, it was clear that her "vulnerability score," as he called it, would be very low—probably too low to receive assistance.

"But I was just being truthful," Goodman said. She grew agitated as she realized that all those things she had been so proud of—her job, her avoidance of drugs and alcohol, her clean record—were making it more, not less, likely that she would leave Gateway empty-handed.

"I appreciate that, and I'm sorry," Menefee said gently. "But the housing resources in this city are extremely limited. And the fact that you're not literally homeless, that you have family you can stay with—"

"I said we *don't* have a place to stay, or at least we won't. I'm trying to tell you, we can't take this any longer."

Goodman's predicament is increasingly common as the ranks of the working homeless multiply. The present support system, according to advocacy groups, effectively ignores scores of homeless families—[excluding them](#) from public discourse and locking them out of crucial support. This is due, in large part, to the way that HUD tallies and defines homelessness. Every January, in roughly 400 communities across the country, a battalion of volunteers, service providers, and government employees sets out to conduct the annual homeless census, referred to as the Point-in-Time count. Usually undertaken late at night and into the early morning, the HUD-overseen census is meant to provide a comprehensive snapshot of homelessness in America: its hot spots and demographics, its causes and magnitude. Last year, on the basis of this data, HUD reported a [23 percent decline](#) in the number of families with children experiencing homelessness since 2007. The only problem, according to critics, is that HUD's definition of "homeless," and thus the scope of its Point-in-Time count, is [severely limited](#), restricted to people living in shelters or on the streets. Everyone else—those crammed into apartments with others, or living in cars or hotels—is rendered doubly invisible: at once hidden from sight and disregarded by the official reporting metrics.

Julie Dworkin, the director of policy at the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, has called attention to the profound consequences of this neglect. Not only are families denied housing assistance from HUD and its local partners, but, as the federal agency's figures make their way into the media, the true scale and nature of the crisis is also obscured. In 2016, Dworkin and her

colleagues began conducting their own survey of Chicago's homeless population, expanding it beyond the HUD census to include families doubled up with others. Their total was [twelve times](#) that of the Point-in-Time count: 82,212 versus 6,786. "The idea that these families aren't 'actually' homeless because they're not in shelters is absurd," Dworkin told me. "Oftentimes the shelters are full, or there simply are no family shelters—in which case, all these people are essentially abandoned by the system." She noted the myth that families with children living in doubled-up arrangements are somehow less vulnerable than those in shelters, when these conditions can be just as detrimental to a child's education, mental and physical health, and long-term development.

In Atlanta, where city leaders (and local headlines) have touted a drop in homelessness over the past four years, there has been no comparable effort to track the number of unhoused families who fall outside the official count. Data collected by other federal agencies does exist, however, and the chasm between their respective findings is similarly striking. The Department of Education [defines](#) as homeless anyone who lacks "a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence," which explicitly encompasses those in motels and doubled up. During the 2016–2017 school year, the Department of Education [reported](#) 38,336 homeless children and youth enrolled in Georgia public schools; that same year, the state's HUD-administered total, not just for children and youth but for the entire homeless population, was 3,716. Politicians cited the smaller number when shaping the public narrative about homelessness in the state; that figure also helps determine the amount of money allocated to homeless services the following year. Meanwhile, the parents of those 38,336 students are caught between two parallel definitions. At their child's school, they are homeless. At Gateway, they are not.

"Let me ask you something," Goodman said as her meeting with Menefee concluded. "Would you be able to get us into a shelter, just for a little while?"

Menefee turned to his computer. He used his finger to navigate the Excel document on the screen.

"It looks like there's availability at one facility," he said. "Oh, but wait. There's only space for a single woman. You wouldn't be able to bring the kids."

Goodman shook her head, thanked him, and walked out the door.



A homeless encampment outside the Atlanta Day Shelter for Women and Children, one of many such encampments throughout the city. Many of the camp's inhabitants use a hose behind the dumpster at a nearby Chick-fil-A to shower in the morning.

Once upon a time, mass homelessness did not exist in the United States. The population of people without stable living situations periodically surged, but these waves were temporary, subsiding as the economy improved. The phenomenon we now know as homelessness—pervasive, unremarkable, seemingly intractable—arose only in the 1980s. What had been anomalous suddenly became “the common misery of millions,” observed the writer and activist Jonathan Kozol in his 1988 [book](#) *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America*. Set in a towering New York shelter that Kozol likened to an urban refugee camp, the book sought to excavate the causes of this great displacement. Kozol refused the dominant explanations, all of which emphasized some mix of individual and group pathology: teenage pregnancy, mental illness, drugs, a “culture of poverty.” He offered a different view. In 1970, the United States had a surplus of 300,000 affordable rental homes; under President Reagan, federal spending on low-income housing plummeted from \$32 billion to \$7 billion. (“We’re getting out of the housing business. Period,” said a top HUD official at the time.) Affordable units evaporated, and with them many of the legal safeguards allowing poor tenants to stay in the relative few that remained. Kozol condensed his findings into a single italicized sentence: “*The cause of homelessness,*” he wrote, “*is lack of housing.*”

Across the country, beleaguered renters and their allies have taken this perspective as a starting point and [begun to organize](#), fighting their own displacement through a variety of measures. They have formed tenant unions, staged rent strikes, and employed a sort of harm reduction approach to rampant gentrification. In Atlanta, the [Housing Justice League](#), a community-led organization affiliated with the national Homes for All campaign, has engaged in the difficult but vital work of ensuring that low-income residents, overwhelmingly people of color, will no longer be the victims of their city's success. The group wants a new language for talking about housing. Is safe and stable housing a luxury conferred only on those rich enough to afford it? Or is it a basic right, no less fundamental than literacy or access to food and medicine?

“When someone loses their home because it was treated as a commodity to be exploited for profit,” Natalie McLaughlin, an organizer with the group, told me, “what’s needed is not charity but justice.”

It’s not enough, these activists insist, to try to pull people out of homelessness. The task is to prevent it from happening in the first place, by striking at its root source: the vastly bigger but less conspicuous problem of housing insecurity, now afflicting the nearly eleven million renter households that are severely cost-burdened. Homelessness, as Kozol perceived, is merely the tip of this colossal iceberg.

The surest way to stem the housing emergency is to protect tenants in the homes they already occupy. Princeton University’s Eviction Lab found that roughly [2.3 million people](#) were evicted in 2016—a rate of 6,300 every day. And nowhere is the power asymmetry between landlords and renters more apparent than in these proceedings: While landlords virtually always appear with lawyers, tenants almost never do. Since spurious cases tend to be dropped when there’s an attorney on the other side, providing low-income renters with access to legal representation, similar to the right to counsel in criminal trials, is a [logical first](#) step in curtailing unwarranted removals.

Other measures include temporary cash assistance for vulnerable tenants, just cause eviction laws, and prohibitions against landlords using nefarious tactics in their attempt to—as the lingo has it—“unlock value” from their properties. (When the Darlington Apartments, a 612-unit complex in Atlanta, was [sold](#) to Varden Capital Properties in 2017, its tenants, many of them seniors on fixed incomes, were given 60 days to move elsewhere. After they protested, the building’s air conditioner stopped working—it was the middle of August—and trash was left to pile up. Two months later, the apartments were empty.) Then there’s rent control, a controversial and, according to numerous studies, potent weapon against skyrocketing costs. Long reviled by the real estate industry, rent stabilization laws are now being considered in jurisdictions throughout the United States. In February, Oregon became the first to pass [statewide legislation](#) of this kind. “Rent control is one of the most effective tools to alleviate our renter crisis,” argues a [report](#) co-published by the Center for Popular Democracy, Right to the City Alliance, and PolicyLink.

Most advocates agree, however, that lasting change will come only through massive government reinvestment in low-income housing, livable wages (including pay protections for the growing number of gig workers), and an openness to alternative models, such as community land trusts

and [limited-equity cooperatives](#). The fruit of the laissez-faire approach—deregulating the private market and hoping that, with enough new construction, affordability will trickle down—can be seen, they suggest, in the hundreds of thousands of Americans doubled up or living in shelters and tent cities.

“It’s time to stop nibbling around the edges,” argued Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, who has made addressing the housing crisis one of her chief priorities. Last September, the Democratic presidential candidate introduced a [bill](#), the American Housing and Economic Mobility Act, that is by far the most consequential and far-reaching housing plan to be proposed by a national politician in decades. Among the bill’s provisions are a [\\$450 billion](#) infusion of federal funds into the building and preservation of affordable rentals; an expansion of the Fair Housing Act to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation, marital status, gender identity, and income source; incentives for local neighborhoods to overhaul zoning ordinances restricting high-density development; and, in a particularly striking move, an attempt to close the racial wealth gap by offering down payments to first-time homebuyers in formerly redlined or segregated areas.

Whether Warren’s bill will go anywhere is an open question, but it seems to have shifted the terms of the national conversation about homelessness and housing instability. Maintaining the current state of affairs—or, as President Trump and his Cabinet seem intent on doing, [exacerbating](#) the crisis—would be catastrophic. In early March, the administration released its fiscal 2020 budget request, which, if passed, would [cut](#) HUD funding by an astounding \$8.6 billion. Diane Yentel, the president and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, called the proposal “cruel and unconscionable.” Section 8 vouchers and homeless services, public housing repairs and emergency rent assistance: All would be even further reduced, in the name of encouraging “[self-sufficiency](#),” as HUD Secretary Ben Carson put it.

Yet this demand for self-sufficiency, both today and under previous administrations, is directed only at certain people. (“We all too often have socialism for the rich,” Martin Luther King Jr. famously noted, “and rugged free-enterprise capitalism for the poor.”) For years, government spending on the Mortgage Interest Deduction, an entitlement for upper-class homeowners that, in the words of sociologist Matthew Desmond, “may very well be the [most regressive](#) piece of social policy in America,” has eclipsed spending on low-income housing by many billions of dollars—with households earning more than \$100,000 receiving roughly 90 percent of the benefits in 2015. Here, in budgetary form, is a kind of microcosm of what cities such as Atlanta are increasingly looking like: extreme and mounting wealth on one side, loss and destitution on the other, and a credo of *hard work will be rewarded* somehow persisting despite it all.

As the weeks went by, Goodman’s hope of finding her family a place to live dissipated. Rumors swirled that the city would soon be demolishing her mother’s apartment complex for health and safety violations, but neighbors had been saying that for months. Every night, Goodman and her children arranged themselves crosswise on a single mattress. Winter air poured in through a large gash in the drywall, and they tried to keep warm with the few blankets and bath towels they’d

brought with them. The bedbugs gnawed their skin. If it wasn't so cold that time of year, Goodman said, they would have preferred to sleep on the sidewalk.

She had given up on receiving assistance from local agencies. One organization, whose stated mission is to “provide emergency assistance to low-income working Atlantans to help prevent homelessness and hunger during periods of crisis,” told her it could offer aid to people when they were at risk of losing housing, not once they'd already lost it. The group gave her a list of other agencies, and suggested contacting churches in the area. A family shelter told her that it might have enough space for her and the children, but first she needed a referral from Gateway, which never materialized. Yet another agency reported that President Trump's shutdown of the government over the border wall had wiped out its limited resources. Her several emails to the Atlanta-based filmmaker Tyler Perry, known for his high-profile donations to homeless shelters, went unanswered.

For Goodman and her children, the emotional and physical toll of their plight grew acute. After Destinee, her 14-year-old, was expelled from school for getting into a fight, Goodman found herself taking fewer and fewer shifts at work. The little income she continued to earn went to her mother to cover utilities, along with the fees—a total of \$300 a month, plus \$7.95 for insurance—for three storage units where their possessions were kept. The prospect of clawing their way out of this hole seemed ever less likely. One day, Goodman told me that she understood how some people could become homeless and never come back. When we talked, there were long stretches of silence. At times, she fixed on a certain phrase and repeated it again and again: “I'm tired. And when I say I'm tired, I mean I'm tired, I'm tired, I'm just tired ...”

She mainly spoke of figuring out how to get the landlord to return the \$2,000 she believed he owed her—\$1,000 for the security deposit and \$1,000 for a month's rent. Not long after the Forest Park house was condemned, while they were still at the Rodeway Inn, Goodman contacted Dudar, asking when she could expect to be reimbursed. She reasoned that she might be able to apply the refund toward another residence; there would also be the expense (\$200, it turned out) of renting a U-Haul to move their belongings out of the house. But Dudar, who owns numerous rental properties in the area, did not respond to her texts or voice mails. In late October, Goodman checked the mailbox at the deserted house and discovered an order to appear at a dispossessory proceeding at the Clayton County courthouse. She was being evicted from a house she was legally unable to occupy.

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Percentage of Chicago's homeless population in 2016 living “doubled up” with family or friends. Chicago is the rare city that includes people in such circumstances in its tallies; most descriptions of homelessness exclude them.

Source: Chicago Coalition for the Homeless

The notice accused Goodman of “malicious destruction of premises and violation of ordinance and misuse.” Goodman panicked. She saw the order as Dudar's way of punishing her for asking the fire lieutenant to inspect the house—and avoiding paying her back. (For his part, Dudar has

disputed his former tenant's account of what happened, and claimed that she deliberately flooded the basement.) Goodman scrambled to find a lawyer before the court date, and secured the help, through a social worker at her children's school, of a volunteer Legal Aid attorney named Farley Ezekiel. The lawyer, seeing that Goodman had lived in the house for just part of the month, believed they had cause not only to resist the eviction but to file a counterclaim against Dudar for the unused rent and relocation costs. Goodman felt optimistic as they waited in the courtroom. After both sides argued their positions, the judge rendered his verdict. "Neither party," he wrote on the judgment form, "presented sufficient evidence." He dismissed both the main claim and the counterclaim.

In early February, Goodman and I were driving near her old rental home in Peoplestown. It was a lovely morning, the temperature in the low 60s, and Atlanta was packed with visitors in town for the Super Bowl, which was taking place that Sunday. "It's more than about the game," insisted Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms at a news conference, defending the \$28 million the Super Bowl would [cost the city](#), "it's about a lasting legacy." Bottoms said nothing about the other controversy surrounding the festivities: A few days earlier, the Southern Center for Human Rights had [denounced](#) the city's sudden crackdown on homeless encampments, calling the mass arrests an immoral attempt to "sanitize the image of downtown at the expense of our homeless citizens."

We pulled up in front of the small brick house, and Goodman got out of the car to snap some photos. Among the surrounding homes, it appeared incongruously run-down. Goodman pointed to one of them, a fresh two-story bungalow with a wide front porch. Her old rental would soon look like that, she remarked, after it had been purchased and torn down.

She asked if I'd been to the Beacon yet, and I told her I hadn't. "Oh, then you have to see it!" she exclaimed.

Located a block away, the Beacon was Atlanta's latest urban rustic "retail, dining, and cultural destination" to appear alongside the [BeltLine](#), a multibillion-dollar megaproject consisting of a 22-mile mixed-use trail around the perimeter of the city. Since its inception, the BeltLine had become the ultimate signifier of a new, stylish, green Atlanta. But it had its critics, too; the Housing Justice League had made it the central [focus](#) of much of its activism, alleging that the city never took real steps to honor its pledge to ensure that working- and middle-class residents wouldn't be displaced by the project. A 2017 investigation by *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* found that, while Atlanta BeltLine Inc. had guaranteed the creation of at least 5,600 affordable housing units, halfway through the development's completion, [only 785](#) had been funded.

The Beacon resembled similar establishments in the city—Krog Street Market in Inman Park, Ponce City Market in Old Fourth Ward—and as we made our way slowly around the enormous shared art space and six former industrial buildings, spread out over nine acres, we took in the passing names. Goodman recited them one by one, giggling at a few: Salon Vagabond, Baker Dude Bakery Cafe, Heal Thyself Atlanta, and, her favorite, Kids Dental Studio. "What in the world is a 'dental studio'?" she laughed. Her mood was more buoyant than I'd seen since we

met. She commented on how beautiful the place was. And then, just as swiftly, her smile disappeared.

“I don’t know why I’m so excited,” she said. “This isn’t my neighborhood anymore.”

Brian Goldstone’s most recent article for *The New Republic*, “No Shelter Here,” was published in the July-August 2018 issue.