



Just Housing: Expanding Economic Opportunity
in the City of Syracuse

Syracuse University
Lender Center for Social Justice





Established in 2018, the Lender Center for Social Justice builds upon Syracuse University's historical commitment to social, cultural, and economic inclusion by strengthening community-engaged research and education partnerships locally, across New York State, nationally, and globally.

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INTRODUCTION TO THURSDAY MORNING ROUNDTABLE (TMR)

Syracuse University's Lender Center for Social Justice and the Office of Community Engagement are co-sponsoring the relaunch of the Thursday Morning Roundtable (TMR), celebrating its 60th anniversary as a trusted public space for local learning, dialogue, and civic engagement on issues that matter to the community. This fall, TMR returns to in-person gatherings with a new 2025-2026 series: *"Just Syracuse: Conversations for a Thriving City,"* featuring rotating community venues, diverse local voices, and on-demand professional recordings. We begin our community conversations with a focus on the complex issue of housing in Syracuse, addressing themes like affordability, health, safety and access, while sharing success stories and new developments.

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SU LENDER CENTER PROJECTS AND CITY OF SYRACUSE RESOURCES

This brief features research insights and policy recommendations from the Lender Center’s “Bridging the Wealth Gap” project. This project takes a multisectoral approach to redefining “wealth,” not only as economic status, income, or capital, but as access to resources from multiple overlapping social systems, like education, quality housing and environments, health and wellness, arts and culture, labor and economic opportunities, and more. These systems interact to create barriers or opportunities for economic empowerment. In this series, we first explore Housing in the City of Syracuse as an important factor in reimagining economic opportunity. We also draw on important City of Syracuse assessments, such as the February 2025, *City of Syracuse Department of Neighborhood and Business Development (NBD)*, *City of Syracuse Five Year Consolidated Plan (2025-2029)* to the *United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)* (hereinafter, *NBD Plan*) and the September 2024 *Syracuse Housing Strategy*, prepared by the City of Syracuse (hereafter, *Housing Strategy*).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Syracuse and its residents are currently facing challenges related to housing. This overview breaks down housing concerns into 3 main measurable categories: housing stock, housing condition, and housing access. Housing stock is the availability and location of housing units in the city either for rent or sale. Housing condition includes many facets from physical and structural quality to deferred maintenance, even the safety of the surrounding environment. We also include one key variable, lead paint, common in Central New York and elsewhere, as the majority of the city’s housing stock was built prior to the 1978 federal ban on lead in consumer products. Lastly, housing access covers topics such as income, affordability, demographics, and neighborhood conditions, and housing costs as a barrier to investment.

MULTIETHNIC / MULTICULTURAL SYRACUSE

The City of Syracuse is a multicultural, multiethnic city in Central New York, and a welcoming resettlement community for refugees and new immigrants. As such, Syracuse comprises a wide array of communities, ethnicities, cultures, and traditions. In 2023, 11.6% of the city’s population reported being “foreign born” (born outside an individual’s country of residence), indicating over 16,000 of Syracuse’s residents were immigrants. In addition to immigrant status, members from many different ethnic and cultural communities call Syracuse their home.

(2023) Population in Onondaga County: 471,611 | (2023)
Population in City of Syracuse: 146,211

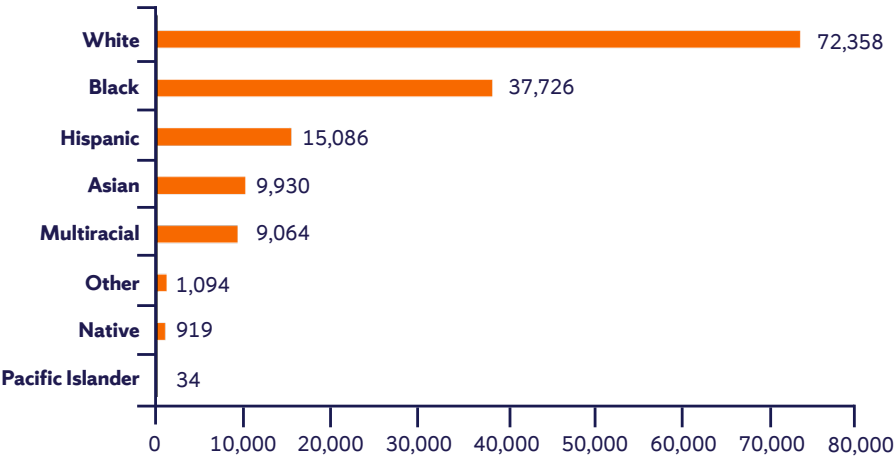
(2023) Gender: Female: 75,760 or 51.8% | Male: 70,451 or 48.2%

(2023) Ethnicity and Race: White: 72,358 | Black: 37,726 | Hispanic: 15,086 | Asian: 9,930 | Multiracial: 9,064 | Other: 1,094 | Native: 919 | Pacific Islander: 34

Sources: Data USA. (n.d.). *Syracuse, NY, Profile*. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/syracuse-ny/>

Data USA. (n.d.). *Onondaga County, NY, Profile*. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/onondaga-county-ny/>

Population Demographics in Syracuse, NY (2023)



Source: CNY Vitals Pro. (n.d.). *Syracuse Data Profile*. Retrieved October 20, 2025, from <https://pro.cnyvitals.org/profile/syracuse#pop-race>

I. HOUSING STOCK

For addressing housing challenges in Syracuse, we examine the city’s existing housing stock, the actual amount of housing units within the city. The City of Syracuse comprises 26 distinctive neighborhoods in a 25 square mile area with a largely stable population of about 145,000 people. Syracuse, consistent with national housing trends for both small and large American cities, faces a shortage of available housing units. Housing units can either be available (for rent or sale), occupied (owned, rented), or vacant and not available.

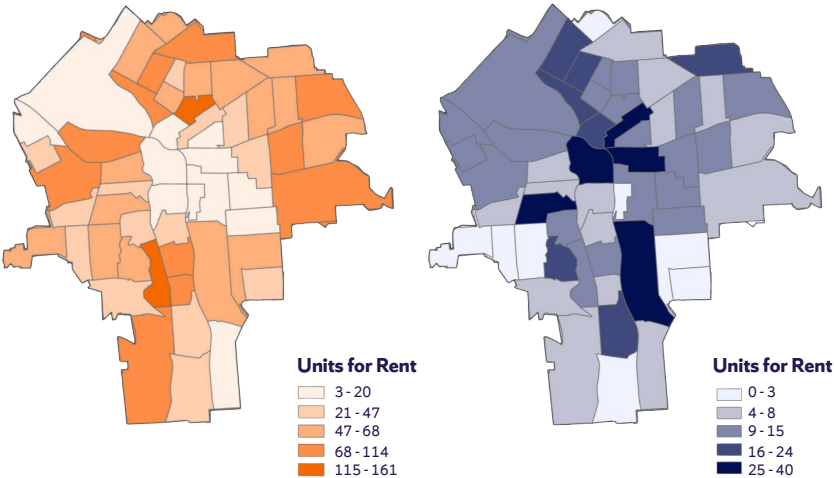
- For rent properties: 5,187 units for rent in 2020, or 7.8%
- For sale properties: 1,539 units for sale in 2020, or 2.3%

It is also important to note the average assessed value of a housing unit to determine how close or out of reach the cost of owning a home in the City of Syracuse may be for prospective residents.

Average median home value in City of Syracuse: \$125,100 in 2023

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). *Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics*. Decennial Census, DEC Demographic Profile, Table DP1. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALDP2020.DP1>

Available Units in the City of Syracuse (2023)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). *Selected Housing Characteristics*. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles, Table DP04. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2023.DP04>

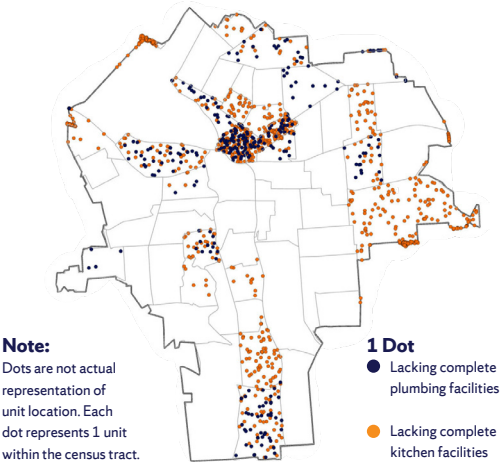
As the *Housing Strategy* found, Syracuse’s housing challenges across its nearly 30 neighborhoods can be summed up by “two significant gaps,” a market gap, where the housing market is too weak and property values are too low to prompt investment, and an affordability gap, where housing costs are too high for most families, who pay 50% or more of their income for inadequate housing. City, community, and development strategies must wrestle efficiently with these twin challenges to make progress.

II. HOUSING CONDITION

Aging and poorly maintained housing units contribute to hazardous living conditions in the City of Syracuse. These conditions include lacking full kitchen and/or plumbing facilities, code violations, or lead paint exposure. The Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) defines a housing unit lacking kitchen and plumbing facilities if it does not have the required facilities for cooking and bathing such as a sink without running water, a stove or range, a refrigerator, a flush toilet, or a bathtub/shower.

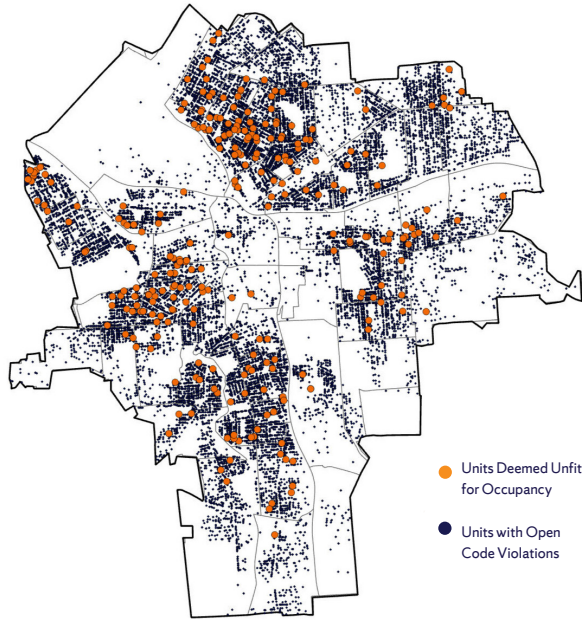
When a housing unit lacks complete kitchen or plumbing facilities, individuals and families are at an increased risk of living in unsanitary conditions or without appropriate means to access healthy food.

Units in Syracuse Lacking Kitchen and Plumbing Facilities (2023)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). *Selected Housing Characteristics*. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles, Table DP04. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2023.DP04>

Units with Open Code Violations and Units Deemed Unfit for Occupancy in the City of Syracuse (2025)

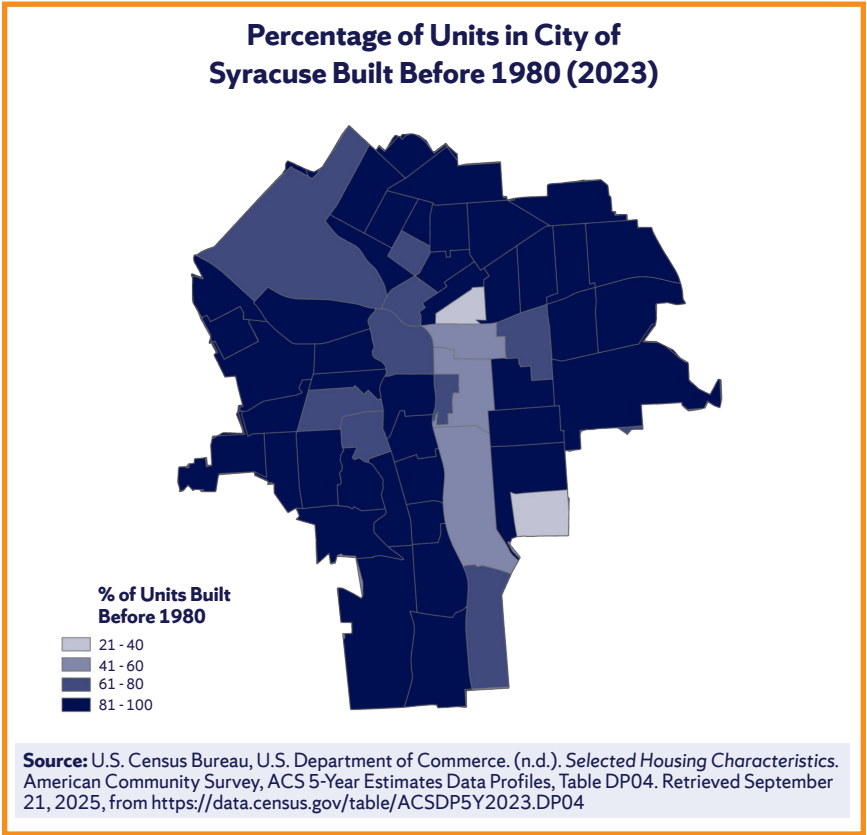


Source: Open Data Syracuse. (n.d.). Code Violations. City of Syracuse Open Data Portal. Accessed 9/21/2025 at https://data.syr.gov/datasets/107745f070b049feb38273a7ab200487_0/explore?location=43.034376%2C-76.139450%2C13.03

An open code violation in the City of Syracuse is defined as a situation where a property is not in compliance with the city's housing and property codes, which may include unsafe structures or properties that do not meet minimum maintenance standards. The below graph showcases geographic clusters within the City of Syracuse where there are open code violations (blue dots) and units deemed unfit for occupancy (orange dots) as a result of code violations that lead to severe health violations (unsanitary, lacking heat, etc.).

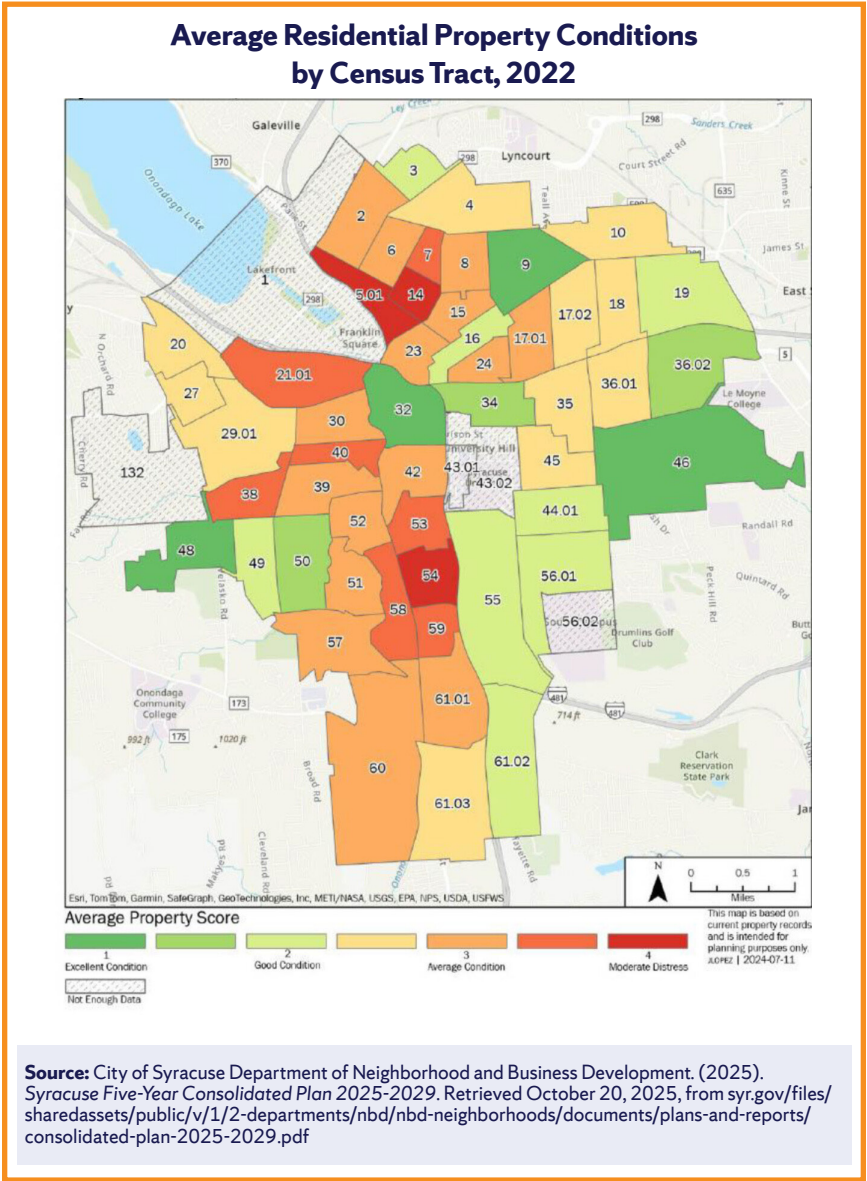
Per the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, lead is known to cause a range of health effects including learning and behavioral difficulties, lowered IQ, and damage to the brain and nervous system in children and reproductive problems, high blood pressure, and nerve disorders in adults. In 1978, the federal government banned the use of lead-based paint in homes; therefore, if a property in the City of Syracuse was built before 1978, it is presumed to have the presence of lead-based paint.

The map below reveals that there is a significant amount of housing in the City of Syracuse at risk of containing lead-based paint, as the darkest shaded areas signify that 81-100% of housing units within that census tract were built before 1980.



The NBD Plan reports that the City of Syracuse utilizes a 1-5 scale to evaluate property conditions, with a score of 1 being the best condition and 5 being the most distressed. Properties at the 1-2 score are average or above, while properties at the 3-4 score are substandard and properties scored 5 are considered demolition candidates (NBD Plan, p. 197). City staff surveyed and rated the exterior condition of each house in the City of Syracuse, reporting that only 8% of the City’s housing stock is in excellent condition, and 5% is in a high level of distress (NBD Plan, p. 142).

The Property Condition Map shows the worst properties (in red) in the Northeast and Southwest regions of the city, primarily residential areas that meet the threshold for low-moderate income (LMI) residents.



A significant number of residents in the City of Syracuse—especially in the Northeast and Southwest regions —are exposed to harmful housing

conditions that may contribute to negative health outcomes. These negative health outcomes are important subjects of research as part of the social determinants of health, with implications for individuals' access to economic opportunity and resources.

III. HOUSING ACCESS (Income to Home Values)

Housing access is the capacity for individuals and families to secure safe, affordable, and adequate housing that meets their needs including managing housing costs like rent, mortgage, utilities, upkeep, etc. Housing cost burden in the City of Syracuse is a significant barrier to housing access, impacting roughly 21,547 households or 45% of all households (*NBD Plan*, p. 18). The U.S. federal government uses the 30% rule to determine “cost burden,” which is defined as spending more than 30% of household income on housing costs; “severely cost burdened” is defined as spending more than 50% of household income on housing costs.

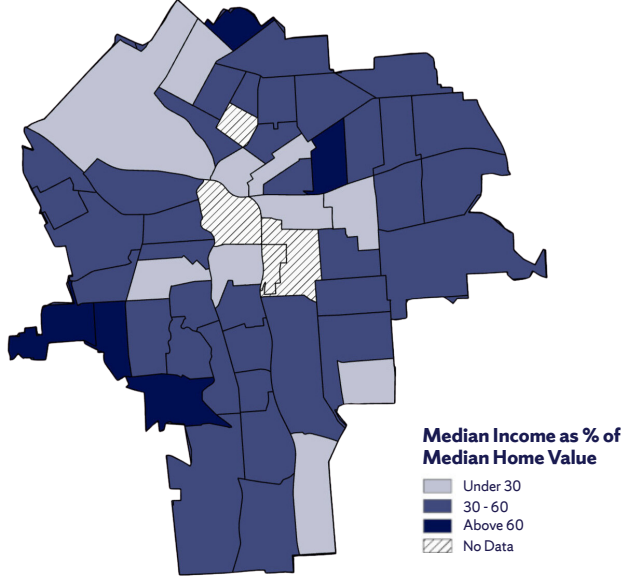
Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report: Housing Cost Burdens in 2023: In Brief (R48450), March 11, 2025, available at: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48450>

The map on the next page displays potential housing cost burdens by comparing the percentage of income that an individual earns to the value of a home within their census tract. As an example, the percentage will be 100% if an individual earns \$50,000 per year and the median home value in their census tract is \$50,000. If an individual earns \$20,000 a year and the median home value in their census tract is \$50,000, their income only reflects 40% of the home value, meaning the housing unit is further out of reach in terms of affordability.

As presented in the map, the majority of individuals' income in the City of Syracuse falls between 30-60% of the median home value in their census tract, thereby making the cost of owning a home moderately out of reach. However, the Northeast and Southwest regions of the city continue facing greater disparities than surrounding areas as their income falls below 30% of the median home value in their census tract.

Due to Syracuse University being located on large campus grounds, the region doesn't produce data on income as a percentage of home value and is therefore omitted in the map.

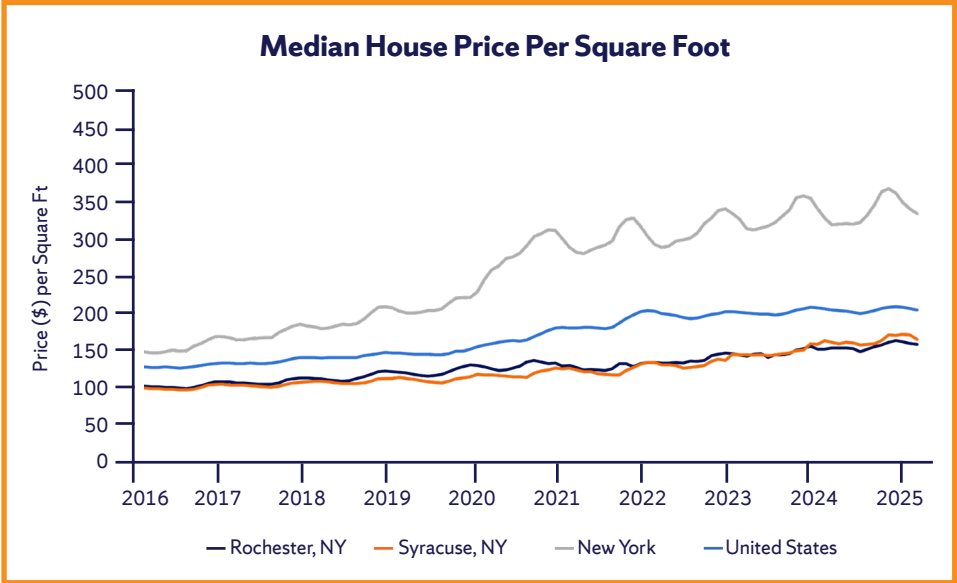
Median Income as Percentage of Median Home Value By Census Tract in the City of Syracuse, 2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). *Income in the Past 12 Months*. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles, Table S1901. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S1901>



While the City of Syracuse has seen steady growth in the price of housing over the last decade, when compared to Rochester, New York (another city of similar size/population), New York State, and the United States, Syracuse has the lowest price per square foot of housing, highlighting the previously discussed “market gap” - where the housing market is too weak and property values are too low to prompt investment.



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis. (n.d.). *Housing Inventory: Median Listing Price per Square Feet in Rochester, NY (CBSA)*. Retrieved October 5, 2025, from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MEDLSPRIPERSQUFEE40380>

Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis. (n.d.). *Housing Inventory: Median Listing Price per Square Feet in Syracuse, NY (CBSA)*. Retrieved October 5, 2025, from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MEDLSPRIPERSQUFEE45060>

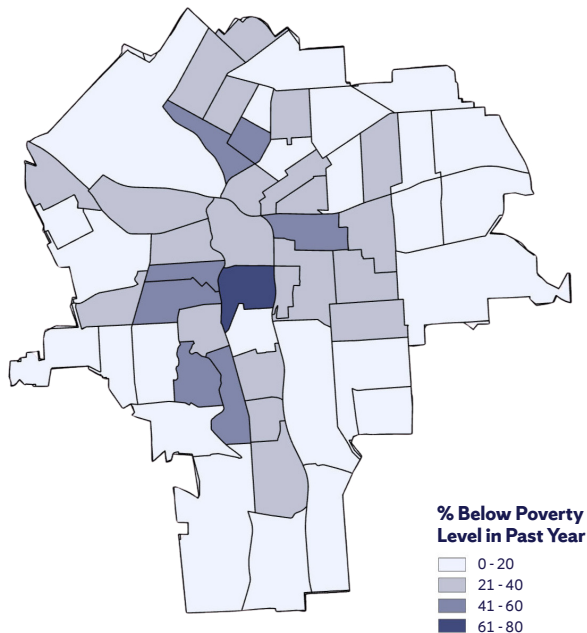
Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis. (n.d.). *Housing Inventory: Median Listing Price per Square Feet in Springfield, MA (CBSA)*. Retrieved October 5, 2025, from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MEDLSPRIPERSQUFEE44140>

Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis. (n.d.). *Housing Inventory: Median Listing Price per Square Feet in New York*. Retrieved October 20, 2025, from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MEDLSPRIPERSQUFEEENY>

Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis. (n.d.). *Housing Inventory: Median Listing Price per Square Feet in United States*. Retrieved October 20, 2025, from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MEDLSPRIPERSQUFEEUS>

Although housing values in the City of Syracuse are lower than the national average, due to the **market gap** phenomenon, a significant number of the city’s residents are impacted by the second significant housing gap, the **affordability gap**, where housing costs are still too high for most families, meaning many households face such extreme poverty that the lowest-cost housing available in their region is still out of reach. In the City of Syracuse, while the average median home value is \$125,100, 88% of renters and 79% of homeowners make less than \$20,000 per year (NBD Plan, p. 18). With housing costs so far out of reach, individuals below the poverty level are at risk of experiencing homelessness and falling into cyclical poverty.

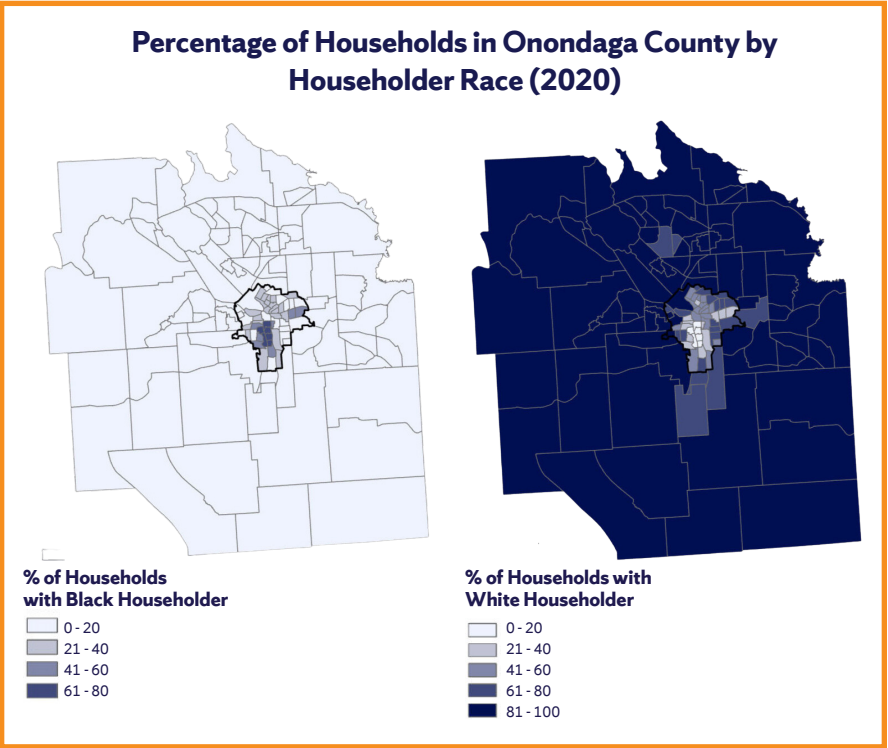
Percentage of Adults 20-64 Below the Poverty Level in the City of Syracuse During the Past Year (2023)



Source: : U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). *Employment Status*. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles, Table S2301. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S2301>

Black and Hispanic households face higher rates of severe housing cost burdens compared to the general population: 4,140 Black or African American households and 1,410 Hispanic households face a housing cost burden greater than 50%. As housing cost burdens rise beyond 30%, the ability to secure and maintain housing grows further out of reach (*NBD Plan*, p.38).

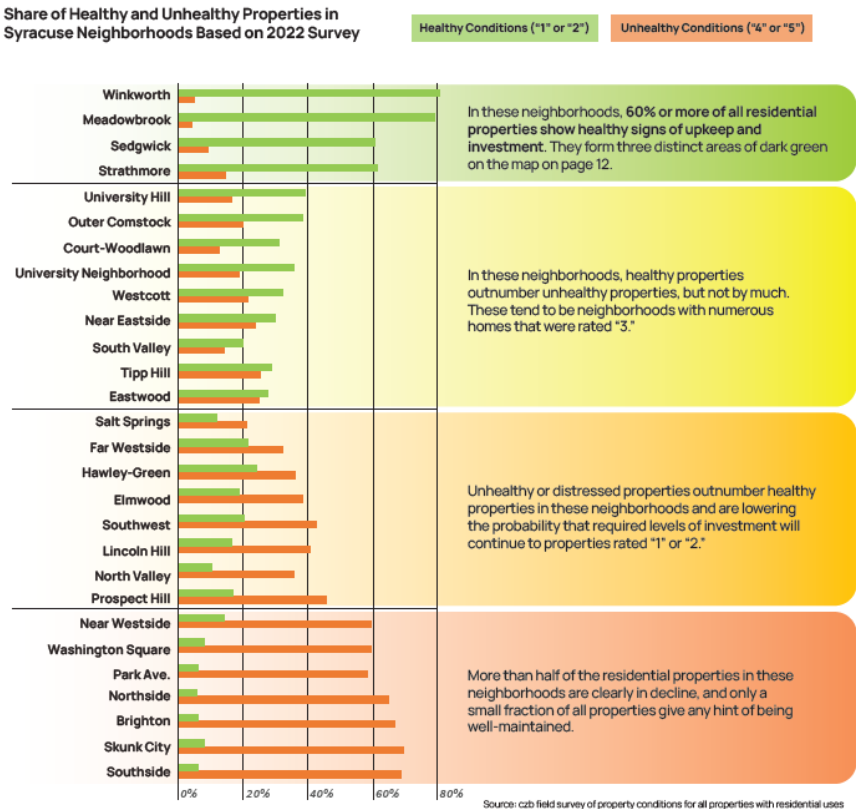
The Percentage of Households maps represent Onondaga County households with either White or Black residents or “householder.” The City of Syracuse is outlined in black. Most Black householders are concentrated within the bounds of the City of Syracuse, whereas a significant majority of White householders live outside the City.



Source : Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2020). *Race of Householder*. Decennial Census, DEC Demographic and Housing Characteristics, Table H6. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from [https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALDHC2020.H6?g=050XX00US36067\\$1400000&y=2020&d=DEC+Demographic+and+Housing+Characteristics](https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALDHC2020.H6?g=050XX00US36067$1400000&y=2020&d=DEC+Demographic+and+Housing+Characteristics)

Barriers to housing access can drive individuals or families to reside in poor quality and/or unsafe housing units, face eviction, or experience homelessness. One significant cause of homelessness is rental evictions in the City of Syracuse.

This neighborhood table, “Share of Healthy and Unhealthy Properties in Syracuse Neighborhoods Based on 2022 Survey,” from the *Housing Strategy* (2024: p. 13) shows Syracuse’s many neighborhoods and their highly uneven housing conditions in both their maintenance and investment. A sizeable proportion of neighborhoods’ housing (over 40%) has moderate to severe distress, even as a few neighborhoods exhibit well-maintained properties. Most reveal mixed conditions, where distressed properties outnumber well-maintained properties, and where few are able or willing to invest in investment or upkeep.



KEY FINDINGS

1

With only 10.1% of housing units available for rent or sale, the City of Syracuse is experiencing a housing shortage. This shortage is a growing concern with large economic development projects like the I-81 transformation and the prospect of Micron contributing to a growing population.

2

Due to the risk of toxic lead exposure, persistent open code violations, and housing units lacking complete kitchen and plumbing facilities, a significant number of families in the City of Syracuse are experiencing poor quality housing conditions, increasing their risk of detrimental health outcomes.

3

Over the last 10 years, the price of housing has steadily increased in the City of Syracuse. This increase combined with a lack of available housing has contributed to financial and social barriers for residents in the City of Syracuse.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The City of Syracuse has conducted robust analyses of its housing and community needs through several assessment programs with resulting planning documents, identifying important goals and areas for targeted interventions. These include neighborhood revitalization efforts focused on specific distressed properties and regions, preserving the quality and safety of existing housing, promoting economic development with implications for housing market gaps, and addressing specific problems, from homelessness to affordable homeownership, access to public services, and improving neighborhood health and vibrancy.



Yet, many of the current plans, while they provide strong recommendations for improving housing and neighborhoods, tend to focus on funding and direct spending. While necessary, these funding-focused policy measures may strain City and New York State finances, and they may face currently constrained resources at both the state and federal levels. NY State's Financial Plan, for instance, reveals a growing structural budget deficit with a cumulative three-year budget gap of \$34.3 billion, as forecasted by the NYS Division of the Budget (DOB). Critically, these funding-based policy measures also do not explicitly address how Syracuse can attract new residents through sustainable economic growth and economic and social entrepreneurship.

This broader lens, focused on economic opportunity, inclusive productivity and growth, and expanding current neighborhoods and communities is important, given the large-scale development efforts currently underway. These efforts require engaging with the many state-designated agencies responsible for such development, such as the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC), and NY State's Empire State Development (ESD) agency.

Source: Report from the Office of the State Comptroller, Thoms P. DiNapoli, *Report on the State Fiscal Year 2026 Enacted Budget and First Quarterly Financial Plans* (August 2025), available at: <https://www.osc.ny.gov/press/releases/2025/08/dinapoli-state-faces-343-billion-cumulative-budget-gap-through-state-fiscal-year-2029>

We thus draw on this broader lens, which we describe as economic empowerment, to synthesize insights from municipal housing reports, input from community-based organizations focused on housing, residents, and other local and regional stakeholders, as well as our own Lender Center researchers, to develop policy recommendations. Our focus is on where the university-based research center can expand the conversation and the voices and perspectives to be included in creative problem solving and next steps:

Convening multiperspectival conversations and sharing knowledge resources:

- Share interdisciplinary housing research outcomes that may be pertinent to City of Syracuse critical need areas.
- Bring university-based researchers into conversation with stakeholders and thought leaders in ongoing City of Syracuse efforts to address housing challenges.
- Convene coalitions of interdisciplinary researchers, developers, and community-based organizations and nonprofits with expertise in housing as critical agents in housing development efforts.
- Encourage student volunteers to become interested in civic engagement around housing issues, engage with community organizations devoted to housing, and contribute to addressing housing issues in their own hometowns.
- Foster relationships between faculty researchers and community-based organizations and use their methodologies to better understand residents' preferences and needs.

Building Relationships, trust, and collaborative models to promote economic success:

- Work together with the municipality and community-based organizations to create open-source data for sharing information about Syracuse housing challenges and their overlap with other economic barriers and opportunities.
- Promote and build relationships with all relevant voices invested in making progress in housing and development in the City of Syracuse.

- Initiate University-City of Syracuse partnerships to attract large enterprises and supporting startups and entrepreneurship programs.
- Encourage partnerships with major corporations (e.g., Google, JPMorgan Chase, or similar firms) to establish offices in Syracuse to generate large-scale employment across multiple levels, directly improving household incomes and overall affordability.
- By cultivating a startup ecosystem, Syracuse could retain young talent and attract new residents, as the City already has strong university and youth assets, though many students leave after graduation.
- Such efforts, together, would help to expand the tax base, drive private investment, and align with municipal housing strategy goals to improve the market and affordability gaps.
- Linking housing revitalization with business attraction could create a self-sustaining cycle: new jobs ➡ higher income ➡ stronger housing demand ➡ reinvestment in neighborhoods

CONCLUSION

The Lender Center for Social Justice remains dedicated to serving the Syracuse community, and we have a role to play in helping the city face its housing challenges. Our faculty are able to provide a research-based lens to neighborhood and community development that will contribute to sustainable and tangible results in that sector. Events such as today's roundtable highlight the Center's ability to convene community-based organizations and facilitate thoughtful dialogue on complex topics. Finally, our position in higher education gives us access to a wealth of capable and motivated students who could contribute their time and intellect to supplement the work being done by the city government and community-based organizations.

Source: City of Syracuse Department of Neighborhood and Business Development. (2025). *Syracuse Five-Year Consolidated Plan 2025-2029*. Retrieved October 20, 2025, from syr.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/2-departments/nbd/nbd-neighborhoods/documents/plans-and-reports/consolidated-plan-2025-2029.

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