

NEIGHBORHOOD DEFENDERS: Participatory Politics and America's Housing Crisis

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PUBLIC MEETINGS

The Boston metropolitan area—like many across the country—is not producing enough housing to meet demand. This insufficient supply has led to exploding housing costs, pricing out middle- and lower-class homebuyers and renters from many neighborhoods. Economists blame land use regulations, while public opinion researchers focus on not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) sentiments. Our research shows that a combination of the two is to blame: land use institutions amplify the voices of an unrepresentative group of community residents, who in turn diminish the supply of housing in places that need it.

Land use regulations frequently require multi-unit housing developments to go through multiple planning/zoning board meetings. These meetings typically solicit input from the public, especially abutters.

To study public meeting participation, we collected data on public meeting commenters from 97 towns in eastern Massachusetts and compared them to registered voters.

NEIGHBORHOOD DEFENDERS

Public meetings offer opportunities for neighborhood defenders to obstruct or delay unwanted projects by voicing concerns they might have about a development. Largely motivated by the concentrated costs of proposed housing development, these individuals are unrepresentative of their broader communities.

- Compared with voters, commenters were disproportionately white, male, older, and homeowners.
- These trends persist in high- and low-cost cities, and contribute to an inadequate housing supply in highly desirable neighborhoods.
- Neighborhood defense in advantaged neighborhoods pushes development into less affluent communities, leading to gentrification and displacement.

MAJORITY OPPOSITION

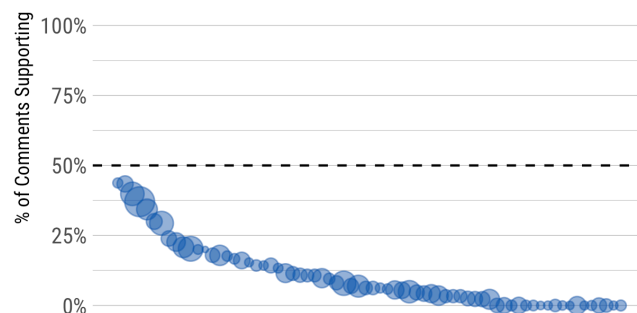
In every town we studied, the majority of comments were in opposition to new housing.

- Through expertise, persuasion, and threat of legal action, neighborhood defenders stop or delay unwanted housing developments.

Differences Between Commenters & Voters

	Commenters	Voters	Diff.
Women	43.3%	51.3%	-8.0%
Whites	95.0%	86.7%	+8.2%
Age > 50	75.0%	52.6%	+22.4%
Homeowners	73.4%	45.6%	+27.8%

Majorities Oppose Multifamily Housing in Every Town



Differences in Support by Race and Homeownership

