

Fair Housing/Healthy Homes

Disparities in Housing Conditions for Minorities and Immigrants

Greensboro NC



Greensboro Housing Coalition, the advocate for safe affordable housing
122 N. Elm St. Suite M-6 Greensboro NC 27401
www.greensborohousingcoalition.com

Thanks to a grant from Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation

Fair Housing/Healthy Homes Executive Summary

Greensboro Housing Coalition, through a grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, has examined racial and ethnic disparities in unhealthy housing conditions in Greensboro, assisting minority and immigrant tenants to address health and safety conditions in their housing, and exploring the factors that impact these conditions. We looked at the intersection of several studies—the cost of housing-related health care (Chenoweth, 2007), racial/ethnic discrimination in rental housing (Sills, 2008), the history of housing code violations in high-minority census tracts—with these individual experiences of minorities and immigrants in substandard housing in order to recommend action steps to further fair housing.

Substandard housing compromises health and safety. Minorities and immigrants are more likely to live in substandard housing or near condemned housing and to be denied access to rentals in safe condition. Several factors result in these disparities: Minority and immigrant tenants often rent poorly-maintained rentals because they face obstacles in accessing housing that meets minimum standards; barriers include not knowing better options, actual denial at decent housing, perception that they will only be accepted in poorly-maintained housing, and choices about living near others from their own background. They are often afraid to request repairs because some rental property owners have threatened retaliation, intimidating tenants—and fear spreads quickly. Some rental property owners are slow to respond even when minority and immigrant tenants do make requests, unless required by code enforcement or legal action. When their current housing is in substandard condition, tenants may not be able to move to safer housing; they do not realize that their landlords have already breached the lease binding them, plus they may not be able to find or access safer rentals. Sometimes landlords and neighbors may be intolerant of cultural differences, adversely affecting immigrants. Although occasionally rental property owners or managers may make overtly discriminatory comments, usually the disparities are subtle. However, the cumulative impact is that minorities and immigrants are disproportionately affected by substandard housing. In turn, disparities hurt our community, increasing health care costs, reducing opportunities, and contributing to social mistrust.

Recommendations for action steps:

- A. Proactive housing inspections, so that rental property owners and managers know what is required to be repaired, regardless of the tenant's race, ethnicity, or willingness to complain. Continue Rental Unit Certificate of Occupancy as a powerful tool for reducing disparities by systematically bringing *all* rental properties into compliance with minimum housing safety standards.¹
- B. Fair housing training for rental property owners and managers and for tenants, so that both parties know their rights and responsibilities for impartial leasing and property maintenance. Use fair housing enforcement in cases of overt discrimination.
- C. Collaboration of health care providers, code enforcement inspectors, service providers, and advocates to assure that all housing meets safety standards. Build cooperation and communication among all stakeholders.
- D. Training on cultural diversity to increase tolerance for language and cultural differences between owners and tenants and between neighbors. Prevent adverse action against immigrants or minorities because of misunderstandings of other cultures.
- E. Exploration of state legislation requiring rental property owners to pay relocation costs when housing is condemned, except where the tenant is at fault for the condemnation. Provide incentive for owners to make repairs quickly and for tenants to move if necessary.

¹ Carol Cooley Hickey “Ensuring Housing Quality: Proactive Minimum Housing Code Inspections” of Rental Properties in North Carolina Cities”—full study posted on www.greensborohousingcoalition.com

Fair Housing/Healthy Homes Study

Health impact: Substandard housing conditions are some of the factors in a variety of illnesses and injuries, resulting in costs for health care, school or work absences, and even life-long disabilities. Table 1 shows children’s diagnoses and the related costs in North Carolina in 2006 ² and incidence of these conditions in Guilford County. ³

Health condition	% attributable to housing	Direct health care costs statewide	Indirect disability costs statewide	Total costs statewide	Incidence in Guilford County
neoplasm, cancer, lymphoma, leukemia	1%	\$547,142	\$207,421	\$754,563	
congenital, birth defects: anencephaly, cleft lip/palate, heart defects, hypospadias, limb reduction, omphalocele, spina bifida	18%	\$3,020,612	\$4,530,785	\$7,551,397	10 with birth defects; 70% minorities or immigrants
accidental falls		\$669,588	\$3,330,153	\$3,999,741	
neurobehavioral conditions: autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation	9%	\$3,983,926	\$43,868,883	\$47,852,809	
respiratory problems: acute bronchitis, asthma	52%	\$3,734,396	\$5,732,082	\$9,466,478	
accidental burns	59%	\$1,043,794	\$2,401,669	\$3,445,643	
lead poisoning	Most	\$221,422	\$19,844,174	\$20,065,596	
All conditions		\$13,432,494	\$81,381,608	\$94,814,102	

Safety impact: Minorities and immigrants are disproportionately living in areas with high concentrations of unsafe housing, both the rentals they occupy and surrounding condemned buildings. The City of Greensboro recognizes the dangers of vacant deteriorating buildings in the Minimum Housing Safety Standards in municipal code, describing the rationale for code enforcement: “The owner has abandoned the intent and purpose to repair, alter or improve the dwelling in order to render it fit for human habitation and that the continuation of the dwelling in its (dilapidated) status would be detrimental to the health, safety, morals and welfare of the municipality in that the dwelling would continue to deteriorate, would create a fire and safety hazard, would be a threat to children and vagrants, would attract persons intent on criminal activities, would cause or contribute to blight and the deterioration of property values in the area, and would render unavailable property and a dwelling which might otherwise have been made available to ease the persistent shortage of decent and affordable housing in this state.” Section 11-39 (h)

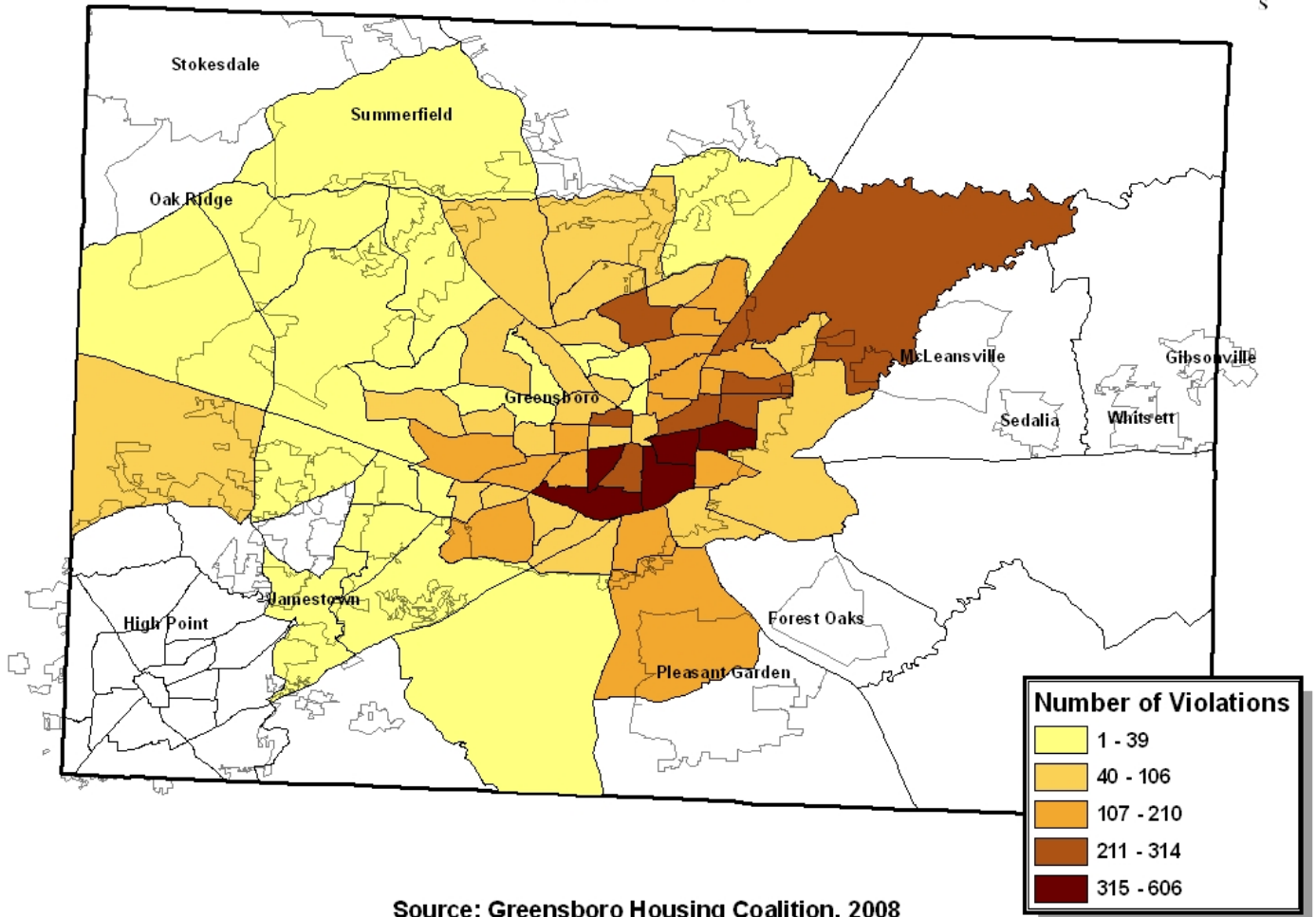
Historically and currently, housing is more likely to have safety risks and substantially more code violation complaints in census tracts with high minority populations. While the largest numbers of cases are in areas with a high percentage of minority residents and low incomes (51% or more have incomes less than 80% of median), minority areas with higher income residents are similar to low income areas with fewer minorities. The exceptions are census tracts with low overall minority populations where

² Dr. David Chenoweth: “The Economic Cost of Substandard Housing Conditions among North Carolina Children”—full study posted on www.greensborohousingcoalition.com

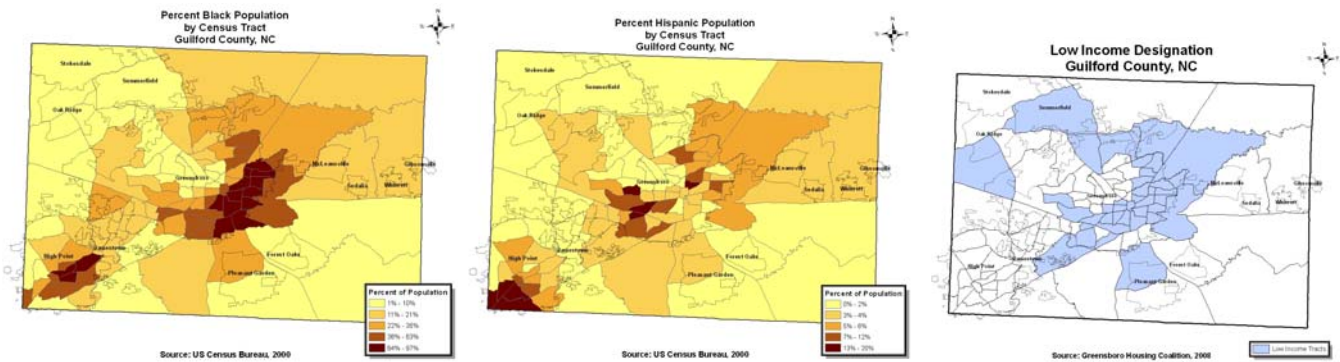
³ Dr. Mark Smith, Guilford County Public Health for incidence of birth defects in Guilford County

particular apartment complexes rented primarily to minorities and immigrants had persistent code violations.⁴

Violation Cases 2000 - 2007



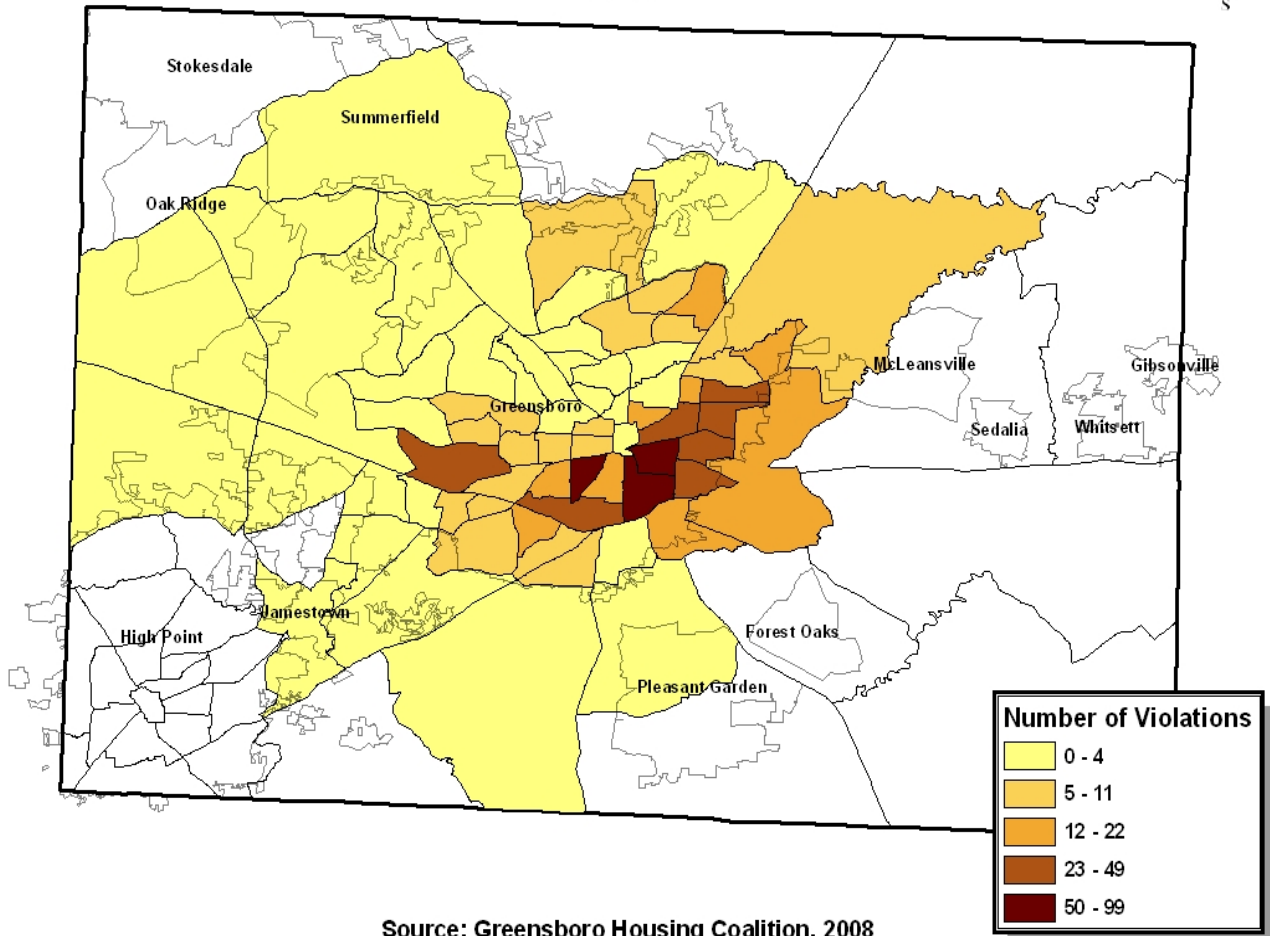
Source: Greensboro Housing Coalition, 2008



However, in comparing current cases, almost all census tracts have reduced the proportion of cases substantially as the Rental Certification program is implemented. Only three census tracts continue to have the highest number of code violations—two with large African American populations and one with diverse ethnic populations. In five other census tracts with minority populations, violations have decreased substantially.

⁴ Data from City of Greensboro Local Ordinance Enforcement inspections, mapped by Guilford County Public Health

Current Violation Cases 2008



Source: Greensboro Housing Coalition, 2008

Discrimination in housing: Paired testing showed that African-American, Hispanic, and white testers were treated differently in seeking rental housing. In paired-testing, two individuals (auditors) are selected with similar background, educational attainment, employment status, age, sex, family status, etc. but of differing ethnic/national origins. Both individuals make an application to the same property for rent. The properties were randomly selected from local advertisements. The sampling frame was limited to “affordable” properties at or below the 2007 Fair Market Rent for a 2-bedroom unit for the Greensboro-High Point HUD Metro FMR Area (\$705). Weekly the study tested about 2-3% of available 2 bedroom rental units meeting this description. White testers (especially females) were steered away from minority neighborhoods. African American testers were often blocked from access to properties at the point of the phone call. Hispanic testers were often preferred, though deposits and rents varied based on documentation available.⁵

What factors contribute to these disparities? Individual stories from housing counselors’ case notes illustrate the following issues:

1. Expectation by some landlords that minorities and immigrants should be willing to accept housing in substandard condition

⁵ Dr. Stephen Sills, “Discrimination in Immigrant Rental Housing: A Paired-Testing Study” study not yet published

2. Slow response by some landlords to repair requests; few repairs are made unless ordered by code enforcement or legal action
3. Tenants' difficulty in moving to safer housing when owners do not make repairs
4. Tenants' fear because of some landlords' intimidation; some owners appear to prefer tenants who are afraid to complain; fearful tenants may accept substandard housing if it allows them to be "under the radar"
5. Intolerance of cultural differences by some landlords and neighbors
6. Racial and ethnic insults against tenants

African Americans:

- Six African-American tenants in an apartment complex with persistent roof leaks, plumbing leaks, and sewage backups—spanning 18 months to several years—had been unable to get the management's attention to repair requests. When they called me to ask what they could do to move out, I helped each find rentals at similar rents but in significantly better condition. The tenants who had Section 8 subsidies requested Greensboro Housing Authority inspections; when the apartments did not meet Housing Quality Standards, they were issued "moving papers" to allow them to use their subsidies in the apartments to which they moved. Four other African-American tenants in this complex were finally able to get repairs made, perhaps because inspectors and a tenant lawsuit captured the owner's attention. One additional African-American tenant chose to join the lawsuit.
- In another apartment complex with many minority and immigrant tenants, residents had extraordinarily high water bills—\$100-\$400 rather than the typical \$30 to \$80 per quarter—resulting from plumbing leaks that damaged their belongings and increased health risks. Despite repeated requests for plumbing repairs, management did not get this corrected. Seven African-American tenants asked me for assistance in moving to safer housing. Two more African-Americans finally got a response to their requests after code enforcement inspectors ordered plumbing violations corrected and repairs were made in two other apartments for African-American tenant households at approximately the same time. The apartment of one family was condemned but when she went to court, the owner got the condemnation lifted without completion of repairs; the leaks from the apartment above continue to soak her belongings.
- An African-American tenant with an excellent rental history needed a larger house for her five children. The owner raised the rent from \$800 to \$950 when he heard she was interested in one of his houses and said that she should paint and clean it. She saw that the previous tenant had left belongings in the house and dogs in the yard and that there was extensive damage to the house, so that it failed inspection. The owner said to the tenant, "*You* fix the house and take care of the dogs. Did you expect just to move in without doing any work?"
- A large apartment complex with many African American and Hispanic tenants had serious roof leaks, drenching residents and causing water damage. Tenants were unable to get managers' attention to their repeated repair requests until they invited the healthy homes bus tour to bring community leaders to see their concerns. Almost immediately, new management was announced and owners informed city code enforcement that they were planning major renovations. Six months later, the renovations addressed many of the tenants' complaints.
- Several African American households had lived in a small apartment building until the dangerous conditions prompted many to leave; finally, the city inspectors condemned the building because the owner had not made the required safety repairs. The manager demanded rent from the remaining tenants as they tried to move out, even if it is illegal to collect rent on condemned units.
- A single mother and her two young sons paid deposit and rent, moving into a house that she later found out had been condemned almost two months before. When the inspector discovered this, he informed the owner that it is illegal to rent a condemned building and referred the tenants to

Greensboro Housing Coalition for help in finding a safe place to live. The owner was unconcerned; he has rented condemned homes in the past.

Africans:

- A couple from Cote D'Ivoire asked for repairs because their home was infested with mold and mildew. The front door and basement door could not be locked. The landlord refused to fix the problems stating that the tenants caused these problems and filed eviction papers as a result. This couple moved out and found another house where the landlord offered them a discount if they were willing to move in despite the bad housing condition: an old smelly carpet, mildewed bathroom, a beat up refrigerator and a very old stove. The landlord stated that he preferred to lease to African immigrants and Latinos because they are hard working people and are not more likely to do drugs and destroy your property.
- A family from Togo, Africa, lived in an apartment with a stove that was not working. She had water leakage coming from her ceiling, roach problems and gas unit burst. She addressed the problem to the management and they told her that her children had caused the gas unit to burst and therefore the management is not responsible. They charged her \$60 for that repair. She pleaded with the management to fix the rest of the problems that she was having in her unit. They declined to entirely fix the problem but made some minor stove repairs. A few days later, the stove broke down. I placed several phone calls to the manager and they did not show the interest of meeting this lady's demands or work out a plan to help her. She decided to do the repairs at her own expenses and was not compensated.
- A family from Benin, Africa, had exorbitant utility costs because of conditions in her apartment. Her current rent was \$575 for a 2bedrooms and 1 bath. We assisted her in finding an affordable place at the cost of \$475, minimizing household cost in the process.
- A native of Niger asked the landlord to fix the leakage from her ceiling, stove, mold and mildew in her apartment unit. She tirelessly asked the management to fix these problems on numerous occasions. The management fixed the stove only but couldn't fix the rest of the problems in the apartment. I contacted the apartment management to see if there was a way to fix her problems. The manager assured me that they will take a look at her complaints but didn't. She was sent a letter and asked to vacate as a result. She wasn't taken to court for appropriate eviction procedures. She was terrified and asked if I could find an affordable place for her and her two children. I helped her find a place. I then called the leasing office and spoke with the manager on the tenant's behalf. She explained to me that the tenant didn't keep her apartment clean. She broke a lot of rules by cooking in big pots and putting stuff on top of the refrigerator and that she didn't quite understand how things worked in the United States. I explained to her that the woman from Niger spoke a little English and that she had spoken with one of the managers in the lease office to address her problems. The tenant expressed to me that she felt singled out because she was an immigrant from Africa. She added that she wanted to move out because she was fed up with this landlord. She had proof of paying rent on time for the 11 months she had lived in the apartment.
- A family from Morocco moved in a house that had numerous unsafe violations. The wife asked the manager to fix several things in the house. The kitchen wooden cabinets were in no condition to be used, black oily floors, the stove had tough black oil that could not come off. The bathroom floor looked like it was collapsing, the bedroom windows had black moldy look substances and the carpet had an awful smell. I contacted the landlord to advocate for this family. He basically told me that the tenant was given a great rental deal. He stated, "I was renting that house for \$650, I did them a favor by renting it to them for \$550. The wife has done nothing but complain since they moved in three days ago. I had sent a repairman to fix the water pump and that about all I can do. I will not make any other repair; they have to do it themselves. I understand you (the Greensboro Housing Coalition) are doing a wonderful work for people in the community. Why are these people complaining about the kitchen condition or the carpet for that matter? They are

giving me lots of problems and they have been there for just a few days. I understand they are not from here, they probably don't see how good of the deal they have it here..." I told him that I was just advocating for safe and decent housing for the family. They did not deserve to move into an unsafe house if the maintenance work was not fully performed. A city inspector was assigned to inspect the house. I made several telephone calls to follow up with the wife. She told me that her husband didn't want to proceed with this housing matter so the inspector was able to do inspection in their house.

Hispanics:

- A family from Mexico had a leaking toilet and drains that did not work; the managers for the apartment complex ignored their repair requests—as well as requests from other immigrant tenants—until a housing counselor wrote a letter of complaint and an attorney intervened.
- A Mexican family had to go to a nearby fast food restaurant to use the bathroom because the one in their apartment was inoperable. The apartment had mold and mildew and a terrible smell throughout the apartment; the ceiling was leaking because the upstairs bathroom leaked into her apartment, with parts of the kitchen ceiling falling apart; and apartment was not secure because the windows locks did not work. When they signed the lease, they were promised that the apartment would be made clean and safe. When these problems were not corrected, even after a letter requesting repairs, the family moved out.
- A family from Mexico asked the property manager to repair the glass in their entry door because mosquitoes were getting in; the landlord did not expect someone who looks Latino would complain and made token repairs.
- Two men from Mexico were working for a landlord who provided housing—but no pay. They were unwilling to be treated as slaves, so they quit working; and she disconnected the utilities and put them out of the house. They explored filing a complaint with the Labor Board and challenging the eviction but decided not to file a claim.
- Mexicans living in a trailer park face threats of deportation and racial insults—being called “wet backs”—and their children are not allowed to play outside. They had to park their cars outside the trailer park, while white residents are allowed more parking spaces on site. The grounds are unsanitary because the manager's dogs run loose, water drainage problems breed mosquitoes, and the garbage dumpsters smell terrible. Managers charge exorbitant fees for water services without documentation of water usage and demand double rents by denying that they received the on-time payment. These conditions persist even with investigation and intervention by housing advocates and state Fair Housing enforcement because the trailer park is located outside Greensboro's jurisdiction.
- A Mexican family without a written lease was given 10 days notice to move. The man they paid rent to—who may not even be the owner—only accepts cash and does not provide written receipts so there is no record that they have met their obligations and there is no way to enforce their rights.

In conclusion: Minorities and immigrants face barriers in negotiating fair access to housing in safe condition and are subject to subtle or more overt negative comments—even threats or eviction—if they request decent conditions. Without advocates and enforcement of fair housing and minimum housing standards, their efforts to achieve safe housing are often frustrated. To prevent disparities in health problems—affecting our whole community—we must have proactive housing code enforcement, landlord and tenant education, broad collaboration, appreciation of cultural diversity, and protection of tenants' rights to “safe, sanitary, and habitable” condition.