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Vacant and Abandoned Housing in Buffalo

Abstract

Buffalo has the oldest housing stock in the nation, with the largest percentage (67%) of homes built before 1940. In Erie County in 2013 there were 275 cases of elevated lead levels in children. The City of Buffalo has three of five zip codes in state with worst lead poisoning levels and accounts for roughly 95% of county lead cases. As of 2008, 13%-22% of children in the City suffered from asthma. In 2006, the City received 7,460 calls regarding housing violations and 1,612 regarding violations at vacant houses.

Keywords

Buffalo, Housing/Neighborhoods, Data/Demographics/History, Demographics and Data, General, Fact Sheet, PPG, PDF

Vacant and Abandoned Housing in Buffalo

Marc J. Masson

Housing Occupancy Status in Buffalo, NY (2010 US Census)¹

OCCUPANCY STATUS	Number	Percent	National Average
Total housing units	133,444	100.0%	100.0%
Occupied housing units	112,536	84.3%	88.6%
Vacant housing units	20,908	15.7%	11.4%
TENURE			
Owner occupied	45,836	40.7%	65.1%
Owned with a mortgage or loan	28,909	25.7%	45.4%
Owned free and clear	16,927	15.0%	19.7%
Renter occupied	66,700	59.3%	34.9%
VACANCY STATUS			
For rent	7,511	35.9%	27.6%
Rented, not occupied	291	1.4%	1.4%
For sale only	1,007	4.8%	12.7%
Sold, not occupied	504	2.4%	2.8%
For seasonal, recreational or occasional use	399	1.9%	31.0%
For migratory workers	1	0.0%	0.2%
Other vacant	11,195	53.5%	24.4%

Scope – The City of Buffalo’s Abandoned Housing Crisis

- According to the 2010 Census, the City of Buffalo had a vacancy rate of 15.7%, the ninth highest rate in the nation for cities with populations over 250,000.

Percentage of housing units vacant in City of Buffalo, as measured by the Census (this includes units vacant for any reason; not just abandoned units):²

Year	Vacancy Rate
1970	4.9%
1980	9.9%
1990	10.2%
2000	15.7%
2010	15.7%

- The number of undeliverable addresses measured by the Postal Service in Buffalo rose from 15,651 to 20,692 from the fourth quarter of 2005 to the third quarter of 2010.³
- In 2000, the City estimated 10,170 vacant lots and 8,684 abandoned structures.⁴ By April 2010, 15,897 lots were listed as vacant in the City’s database.⁵
- The City of Buffalo, as of June 2014, owns nearly 7,000 properties, including 300 residential structures and 14 commercial or former public use structures. The rest, nearly 94%, are city-owned vacant lots.⁶

Costs

- In 2007, the City conservatively estimated its direct five-year costs from a vacant residence at \$20,060.⁷
- In 2006, 250 of 399 arsons were in vacant buildings.⁸
- Over the period 2000 through 2013, the City demolished an average of 458 buildings per year, or a total of 6,411 buildings. By 2013, the median price for a demolition was \$16,989.

City of Buffalo Demolition Spending⁹

Year	Buildings Demolished	Percent Emergency Demolitions	Median Price	Total Spending (in millions)
2000	493	36%	\$5,000	\$3.5
2001	639	23%	\$5,090	\$3.84
2002	336	28%	\$4,823	\$2.1
2003	418	27%	\$5,700	\$2.85
2004	315	33%	\$7,785	\$2.55
2005	399	33%	\$8,794	\$4.85
2006	426	40%	\$9,800	\$5.8
2007	378	54%	\$12,904	\$6.0
2008	653	32%	\$13,700	\$12.5
2009	773	45%	\$15,600	\$12.9
2010	616	28%	\$15,474	\$10.1
2011	320	49%	\$16,799	\$5.7
2012	351	22.5%	\$19,457	\$6.82
2013	294	28.2%	\$16,989	\$4.99

- From January 1st to July 1st, 2014, the City of Buffalo recorded \$5.25 million in demolition spending, far exceeding that the previous year in only half the time, with 231 demolitions completed or pending (14% emergency). The median cost of a demolition stood at \$22,734.

Causes of Vacancy and Abandonment

Urban Population loss

Due to suburban sprawl combined with regional population loss, the City lost over half of its population between 1950 and 2010.

City of Buffalo Population¹⁰

1950	580,132
2000	292,648
2010	261,310

Sprawl¹¹

- Between 1950 and 2010, the population of Erie County outside of Buffalo grew from 319,106 to 657,730.
- Between 1990 and 2000, the number of housing units in Erie County outside of Buffalo grew by 20,134, even as the County's population declined by 18,319.¹²
- Between 2000 and 2010 the number of occupied households in Erie County grew from 380,873 to 383,164 while the Erie County and City of Buffalo populations declined from 950,265 to 919,040 and from 292,648 to 261,310, respectively.

Urban Poverty¹³

Poverty Rate in the City of Buffalo, Measured by the US Census

Year	Poverty Rate
1999	26.6%
--	--
2009	28.8%
2010	30.2%
2011	30.3%
2012	30.9%
2013	29.9% ¹⁴

Housing Unaffordability

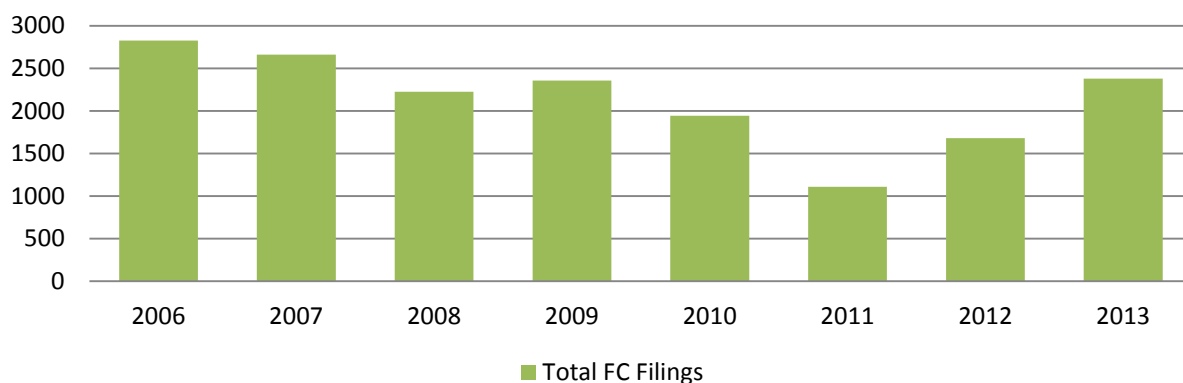
- Energy costs in western New York are 30% over national average.¹⁵
- In Erie County an estimated 5,681 people experienced homelessness at some point in 2012, an increase from 5,050 the previous year.¹⁶
- In 2012, the percentage of households with rents above the affordability threshold (30% of income) was 47.5% in Erie County and 46.2% in Niagara County, a large increase from 43.2% and 39.2% respectively in 2000.¹⁷
- In 2012, the percentage of households with owner costs above the affordability threshold was 22.0% in Erie County and 22.5% in Niagara County, a slight increase from 21.4% and 20.0% respectively in 2000.¹⁸

Inequality

- Buffalo-Niagara is the 5th most racially segregated large metropolitan area in the U.S.¹⁹
- Blacks and Hispanics have much higher rates of poverty than other racial groups in the metro area. 2010 metro poverty rates: white 8.8%; black 28.8%; Asian/Pacific Islander 12.8%; Hispanic 25.8%.²⁰
- The Buffalo-Niagara metro area ranked in the top ten for increase in income segregation in last decade²¹, and in 2014 was ranked 7th most segregated by income.²²

Mortgage Foreclosures

Total Erie County Mortgage Foreclosure Lis Pendens Filings by Year*



Source: Western New York Law Center²³

*In New York State, to initiate a mortgage foreclosure, a lender must file a "lis pendens" with the court. "Lis pendens" is Latin for suit pending. Mortgage foreclosures were unusually low in 2011 due to a change in state law which delayed many foreclosures.

- Mortgage foreclosures in the City of Buffalo rose nearly four-fold from 1990 to 2000, reaching nearly 800.²⁴
- From 2008 through 2013, there were 9,911 lis pendens filings in Erie County.²⁵
- In 2013, the city of Buffalo was 33.3% or 793 of the total filings in Erie County, down from 45% in 2006.
- From January 1 through June 23, 2014, there were 1111 lis pendens filed in the county. The numbers for 2014 are on track to be similar to 2013, in which the total was 2380.
- Unfinished foreclosures are a major problem. In these cases, lenders begin foreclosures but do not finish them, often because they have concluded that their costs will outweigh the

revenue they can gain from a foreclosure sale. In many cases, the owners have moved out and do not reoccupy, leaving the properties abandoned and in limbo. Of the nearly 1,700 foreclosures filed in Erie County in 2012, as of summer 2014 1,005 of them were unfinished – i.e., with no deed transfer. Of these 1,005 cases, 190 had judgments of foreclosure. Of the 815 cases without a judgment, 228 had no RJI filed, meaning that they did not have access to a settlement conference.²⁶

Subprime Loans

- One out of four foreclosures in Erie County in 2007-2008 was subprime.²⁷
- In 2005-2006, Erie County had 6,323 subprime loans, or 22.5% of all its loans.²⁸
- In 2008 there were 9,080 subprime loans in western New York, of which 22% were overdue but not in foreclosure, 5.5% were in foreclosure, and 1.9% had already been foreclosed.²⁹

Tax Foreclosures (Properties Offered at City of Buffalo Foreclosure Auction)³⁰

Year	Number at Auction
2004	1,074
--	--
2007	2,498
2008	2,960
2009	3,304
2010	1,914
2011	2,238
2012	3,239
2013	2,399

Repair Problems

- Buffalo has the oldest housing stock in the nation, with the largest percentage (67%) of homes built before 1940.³²
- In Erie County in 2013 there were 275 cases of elevated lead levels in children.³³ The City of Buffalo has three of five zip codes in state with worst lead poisoning levels and accounts for roughly 95% of county lead cases.³⁴
- As of 2008, 13%-22% of children in the City suffered from asthma.³⁵
- In 2006, the City received 7,460 calls regarding housing violations and 1,612 regarding violations at vacant houses.³⁶

Year ³¹	Children Tested for Lead in Erie County	Number with Elevated Lead Level
2003	18,458	420
2008	19,037	342
2013	20,166	275

For more housing publications by Partnership for the Public Good:
www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications/housing/

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www.ppgbuffalo.org
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Notes

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, <http://factfinder.census.gov>

² Id.

³ Anthony Armstrong, “Vacancy, Abandonment, & Revitalization in Buffalo, NY,” available from the author.

⁴ City of Buffalo Comprehensive Plan, p. 24.

⁵ The City uses data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

⁶ City of Buffalo, Department of Real Estate, 6/26/14, http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/home/city_departments/realestate

⁷ City of Buffalo, http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/Mayor/CitiStat/EDPIS/3-9-07/EDPIS.pdf

⁸ Maki Becker, “Arson fires: the firefighters’ nightmare,” Buffalo News, 6/15/07.

⁹ City of Buffalo, Department of Permit and Inspection Services. June 1st, 2014.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, General Population and Housing Characteristics, 2009-2011 3-year estimates (population)

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, General Population and Housing Characteristics, 2009-2011 3-year estimates (population)

¹² City of Buffalo Comprehensive Plan, p. 24.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, General Poverty Status Past 12 Months, 2009-2011 3-year estimates

¹⁴ <http://www.wgrz.com/story/news/local/2013/12/11/buffalo-poverty-/3992749/>

¹⁵ Regional Institute, State of the Region Project, Cost of Living Report, February 2005

¹⁶ The Buffalo News, http://www.buffalonews.com/20130519/number_of_homeless_in_erie_county_increased_16.html

¹⁷ New York State Comptroller, http://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/housing/affordable_housing_ny_2014.pdf

¹⁸ Id. Note that mortgaged homeowners are more likely to be over the affordability threshold than those non-mortgaged.

¹⁹ PPG Buffalo Brief, *Poverty in Buffalo-Niagara* (April 16, 2012).

²⁰ “Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Tonawanda, NY Profile: Economic Opportunities.” *Diversitydata.org*. Harvard School of Public Health, n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2012.

<<http://diversitydata.sph.harvard.edu/Data/Profiles/Show.aspx?loc=248-es=True&rgn=None&cat=5>>.

²¹ Tara Watson, *New Housing, Income Inequality, and Distressed Metropolitan Areas*, Brookings Institute (2007)

²² The Atlantic Cities, <http://www.citylab.com/housing/2014/03/us-cities-where-poor-are-most-segregated/8655/>

²³ Western New York Law Center, <http://wnylc.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/City-of-Buffalo-Distressed-Property-Task-Force-version-PDF.pdf>

²⁴ Ramon Garcia, “Residential Foreclosures in the City of Buffalo, 1990-2000,” Federal Reserve Bank of New York (2003), p. 9.

²⁵ Western New York Law Center, personal communication, January 11, 2013.

²⁶ Western New York Law Center, personal communication, December 10, 2014.

²⁷ Western New York Law Center, *Foreclosing Erie County* (2009)

²⁸ Center for Responsible Lending, “Subprime Spillover,” page 24, <http://www.responsiblelending.org/pdfs/subprime-spillover.pdf>

²⁹ G. Scott Thomas, “WNY avoiding credit crunch,” Buffalo Business First, 2/1/08.

³⁰ City of Buffalo, Assessment and Taxation Department

³¹ Erie County Department of Health, cited in Melinda Miller, “Children still being poisoned by lead lingering in homes.” Buffalo News. October 28, 2014.

³² U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, AMERICAN FACT FINDER, SELECTED HOUSING CHARACTERISTICS, 2006-2010 5-YEAR ESTIMATES.

³³ Erie County Department of Health, cited in Melinda Miller, “Children still being poisoned by lead lingering in homes.” Buffalo News. October 28, 2014.

³⁴ New York State Department of Health, “A Report of Lead Exposure Status Among New York Children, 2002-2003; www.scorecard.org; and “Healthy Homes,” University at Buffalo Graduate Planning Studio.

³⁵ www.asthmawny.org/files/Kaleida_SAM_Presentation_3-26-08.ppt

³⁶ City of Buffalo, http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/Mayor/CitiStat/EDPIS/7-13-07/EDPIS.pdf