

Rental Housing Costs Impact on Sonoma County

By

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Abstract

Several interviews were conducted, and data was collected from 13 residents who reside in Sonoma County and 7 experts who work within the rental housing market in Sonoma County. The purpose of this study was to gather in-depth research from both sides to determine what factors may have fueled the rise in the cost of rentals which have impacted the county. Results showed that multiple factors played a role into its impact such as the rise in housing prices but not a rise in earning wages. Families have had to either learn how to manage their spending habits and utility usage at home in order to compensate for the rise in housing.

Introduction -

How has the rise in housing rentals impacted Sonoma County? Sonoma County is known for its wineries and beautiful suburbs, and this attracts many tourists, this is one of the reasons why rental housing is expensive. Low-income families struggle to find affordable housing and assistance. This has resulted in Sonoma County being one of the highest areas of per capita homelessness in the country.

As a team, we decided to investigate in-depth the causes of the rise of housing, find out how the county is finding solutions and how it is impacting residents. We conducted qualitative research through open-ended interview questions. The questions we created were targeted toward professionals and residents in the county. As we know, Sonoma County has suffered from wildfires, and that caused people to lose their houses and building units.

In addition, in the year 2020 Covid-19 hit worldwide, and in California, the positive covid cases rose rapidly and caused many people to lose their jobs. Many people were evicted from their homes, for not having the financial need to pay their rent. We anticipated that these past events could have impacted the 13 renters we interviewed. A couple of our questions for

residents of Sonoma included knowing how much their income is and how much of it goes towards their rent. The lack of affordable rental housing is an issue that needs to be heard and solved. With our research, we want to communicate to others the resources and programs Sonoma County has, and advocate for those who are less fortunate so that the city gets more involved and helps those in need.

Research Question:

Our research question is how has the rise in housing rentals impacted Sonoma County? Our aim is to find how the rent increase affected individuals or families who are renting. To be able to understand renters we want to know if they have received any assistance or have had to try different methods to be able to carry on with rent increases as demand grows.

Literature Review

Affordable housing

Sonoma County is one of the least affordable areas to live in California and many families need assistance. According to the article “Affordable Housing in Sonoma County”, households who pay more than 30 % of their monthly income are considered rent overburdened and that is a total of 53.86% of households in Sonoma County. Low-income families suffer from housing and transportation costs (Kovner 2012).

The North Bay Organizing Project (NBOP) is a nonprofit organization that focuses its work on social, economic, and environmental justice. The NBOP shares in their website that they strongly believe in the work of “de-commodified” housing. De-commodified housing aims to “remove housing and land from the speculative market to maintain affordability forever and prioritize community control of land and housing as a universal human right”(NBOP).

In addition, The Sonoma County Tenants Union is a program from the NBOP that helps many people in the community by providing them with their housing rights. Their goal is to terminate housing policies or practices that are embedded in White supremacist systems that exploit people of color.

The Tenants Union supports residents by sharing resources, direct action, and mutual aid. In Addition, Section 8 is an affordable housing program that helps people from low-income families. Tenants that are enrolled for Section 8 pay about 30% of their income towards their rent. Other programs available for low-income families, elderly and disabled households are USDA rental Assistance, HUD section 202, and Section 811.

The wildfires and Covid-19 have made it harder for the people of Sonoma to find affordable housing. During the pandemic, people moved out of Sonoma County and sold their homes for a much higher price. Buyers from San Francisco and other places in the Bay Area were the ones buying houses in Sonoma County. After the pandemic started, the median sales prices for single-family homes increased by 10% in 2021. For example, in Petaluma in 2020 the average single-family home was \$700,000 and the price went up to 769,000 in 2021 (Varian, 2022).

In 2020 half of 6,000 homes were still under construction from the wildfires, and Covid-19 caused a shortage of supply that made it difficult to rebuild these homes. As a result, many residents of Sonoma County move to different states to find an affordable place to live, while others sold their houses for high prices. According to the Census of 2020, the population of Sonoma County was 488,863 and so far in 2022, the population decreased to 481,415.

Over the years there have been multiple attempts to grow affordable housing in Sonoma County. Neighborhoods get opposed to affordable housing projects because, “they are afraid of loss of home value [and] fear low-income solutions near them” (Coates, 2021). Since 1970, the County of Sonoma has had a general plan to build affordable housing and fix housing conditions but has failed to make that happen. The youths who are coming into the workforce and farmworkers are an example and representation of people who can’t afford rental housing.

According to the article, “County to Step up Oversight of Affordable Housing Compliance after PD Investigation” the Housing Element of Sonoma County needs to make room for 311 units in the coming years starting in 202 (Varian and Graham 2021). This housing calculation is based on the population and job growth. In the past cycle, Sonoma built 170 units, and 94 of those units are for low income, and the 76 units were built for above moderate-income families (Varian and Graham 2021) Overall, people with low-income wages need affordable rental housing and the poor quality of housing also needs to be improved.

Nonprofits

Burbank Housing is a local Sonoma County nonprofit whose mission is to build affordable and quality housing for the North Bay. The communities that are built for these rentals provide a careful layout design that includes professional management to watch over the rentals along with a very sustainable financial opportunity that caters to those who are low income and special needs of all ages. Burbank housing offers not only property rentals but also homeownership opportunities that are based on your income and family size.

On August 20, 1964, President Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act in the White House Rose Garden. This Act was aimed to direct and coordinate a variety of different programs such as education, employment, and training that would help fight the “War on

Poverty”. Community Action Partnerships all around were funded locally and overseen by a board made up of the very same residents of the neighborhood. By having residents on the board, it allows the people to have a say and make their voices heard on how funds will be spent and what to consider top priority.

Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County (CAPS) has been around since 1967. Its mission has always been to advocate for social and economic justice by building community and by helping those who are low income to achieve stability economically and socially. The parents are not the only ones who the program focuses on, but rather the family and its entirety by putting them all on what is called a “Whole Family Approach”. This Whole Family Approach consists of 5 components which break down into Postsecondary Education along with Employment pathways, Early Childhood Education and Development, Economic Assets, Health and Wellness, and Community Engagement.

Community Housing Sonoma County (CHSC) has been around since 1994. It has gathered funding from various local, state, and federal sources in order to create affordable housing for over 365 people. With every development that is created factors such as uniqueness and creating different styles to accommodate those with disabilities are constantly in mind.

Rent Increase

In Sonoma County, there has been an increase in rent for rental housing as a result of the high demand. In the article “State price gouging restrictions on rents expire for Sonoma County” by Ethan Varian 2022 the author discusses the statewide control law that helps protect tenants by applying a rent cap of 5% a year, a restriction on how much landlords can increase the rent. The law helps tenants by protecting them from having a rent increase more than once over the time duration of 12 months.

Renters are protected by the Tenants Protection Act but this is only a small response of help to the families looking for housing. Multiple articles have mentioned that we need a solution to the problem as a whole. Throughout the years there have been many natural disasters and other circumstances that have led people to seek help from the Emergency Rental Assistance Program and it has been beneficial, but it has been mentioned that this method isn't a complete solution to the greater problem we have.

The tenant law was fundamental to helping tenants keep their homes. Many tenants aren't aware of their rights and often self-evict when they could have remained in the location. Landlords had to follow rules and regulations that offer tenants help on housing such as a notice of rent increases, or eviction, and many tenants aren't aware and often face landlords who want to take advantage of them. Tenants struggle in the housing market with rent increases, while not receiving actual wage boosts.

The article "Wages and Housing: Why Sonoma County Workers Can't Afford the Rent" by Martin J. Bennett 2016 states "In Sonoma County in 2014, 56 percent of renter households spent more than 30 percent of their income on rent, and 30 percent of households were severely cost-burdened, spending more than 50 percent on rent"(Bennett 2016), renters can't afford housing costs with the low and mid-wage jobs created.

The rental housing market has had an increase in cost for housing units with the limited area which used to have a lower value. The article "Can You Afford To Live Here? A look at Sonoma's Hot Housing Market" by Ethan Varian 2021 discusses the difficulty of finding housing through the pandemic with the increase of people moving to Sonoma County. The article states "In May, the monthly cost of a two-bedroom apartment reached \$2,010, a 3% increase since January, according to rental site Apartment List" (Varian 2021), with time passing the demand is

increasing and the opportunity to remain in Sonoma County is difficult for locals. During the pandemic, most people shifted to working remotely, and when this occurred people from metropolitan areas moved to Sonoma County causing vacancy rents of Apartment list rentals to decline from 5.5% to 2%. As a result of the tight market, many people are resorting to the idea of moving to a different location and landlords are applying more requirements. Overall, the articles discussed part of the solution is to create more housing units and funding for affordable housing.

Sonoma County Services

With the rise of rental housing and demand, it has become more difficult for tenants. There have been some assistance programs of aid to help tenants with protection from eviction and with payments. The Housing Choice Voucher Program helps tenants of low-income households with rental assistance. The voucher provides a place for rental housing by helping tenants to cover a portion of their rent. The Housing Choice Voucher Program helps the tenant with the expense and the tenant pays according to their income.

A program that also provides help is Home Program, which helps low-income tenants to ensure they have their rights protected such as a habitable place, Section 8, eviction defense, and ensure tenants can preserve their housing. It is a resourceful program that provides sources and negotiation to prevent individuals from homelessness.

There is a high demand from tenants leading to there being many tenants on the waiting lists. The Emergency Rental Assistance Program is a relief program that uses funds to help tenants pay for utilities and rent. The article “County’s Emergency Rental Assistance Program to receive \$13.8 million in additional state funding” published by the County of Sonoma 2021 states “More than 1,000 families have been provided assistance while another 2,052 applications

are still being reviewed for approval.”, people must see if they are eligible and will receive assistance, but it is limited because of the great number of applicants.

SonomaWorks is a program that provides temporary help with essential needs to families with children. Families with children who aren't doing well financially receive help to find and prepare for a job that could help them take care of their families. Families receive an EBT card to help them make purchases. The eligibility is anyone who has a child they have to care for and SonomaWorks wants to ensure people can obtain a job so training is offered to increase job skills. The program provides individuals with childcare for now they are in the process of obtaining a job and providing other services.

Work and Salaries

When it comes to analyzing individual jobs and their wages in Sonoma County, there are a variety of employment categories to consider. According to the website (*Payscale*), many earnings are around the same level, with salaries ranging from \$14 to \$34 per hour. According to the website, sales associates are the lowest-paid at \$14 per hour, while nurses are the highest-paid at \$55 per hour on average. In Sonoma County, the average hourly pay is \$22. The website (*Data USA*) for Sonoma County also has a lot of information about how much money Sonoma County residents make in comparison to how much housing costs. The average household worth is approximately \$87,828, while the average family income is around \$65, 712 per year, according to the data. There is a significant disparity between what people earn and what housing costs. According to (*Payscale*), the majority of employment in Sonoma County pays less than \$21 per hour or roughly \$40,000 per year. It's nowhere near the typical household value.

Race and Gender

Not only are the housing prices unfair, but it was discovered that housing discrimination is also a factor into why Sonoma County is on top for homelessness. Housing discrimination happens mostly when landlords deny potential renters because of their gender (primarily women) or because of their race this problem happens primarily in predominately white areas such as Sonoma County.

According to the article *Segregation in the San Francisco Bay Area PT. 1* by Stephen Menendian and Samir Gambhir (Menendian and Gambhir 2018) they state in many respects, Sonoma is a counterpart to Marin in that it is a place where white families are exceptionally segregated from people of color. Three of the six whitest segregated neighborhoods in the Bay Area are found in Sonoma, neighborhoods in or around Santa Rosa. Although Sonoma is 62 percent white, 2 of the 9 incorporated cities in Sonoma have more than an 80 percent white population: Sebastopol and Sonoma City, are the most segregated cities for whites. What also is prone to happen is, the big demand for houses in Sonoma County often have many candidates, regardless of credit scores, incomes, jobs, and many other various factors, race can always be a determining factor regardless if an individual is more suitable for the home. This type of discrimination is rarely noticed in generically white populated places like Sonoma County.

Racial bias discriminations is not the only aspect of unfair discrimination. The same occurs with gender discrimination, it is no surprise that gender inequality still exists the salary of individuals proves that for itself, or the amount of housing where a woman vs. a man is the signer of a lease or of a mortgage, women are less likely to be the signer of homes in any case.

According to *The 2020 Voices of Sonoma County Women Report* by the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women 2020, a small proportion of women from our survey are

incarcerated, living in a shelter, or homeless. A slightly larger percentage of participants are living with family or friends, though it is not clear from our data whether women that selected this category are living in this way by choice or by necessity. In other words, it is possible that a portion of women selecting this option might also be experiencing homelessness but have a support network in place to help shelter them. Additionally, several personal issues tied for our top three among women living with family or friends, living in a shelter, homeless, or incarcerated which is also mentioned in the 2020 Voices of Sonoma County Women's Report 2020. This suggests that there are more issues than we see for women in these types of living arrangements, relative to women who own or rent in Sonoma County. Women we interviewed brought up the issue of housing as one of their biggest concerns. Women in Sonoma County face many barriers like having a place to live, with shelters filling up due to various homeless individuals, women are mostly that population that is in shelters around Sonoma County. The majority of shelters are for women and children that get accepted in most occasions. Gender inequality in housing proposes these challenges for women on an everyday basis, to where shelters are not even accessible anymore because it is from a first come first serve basis and there are thousands of homeless individuals in Sonoma County.

Methodology:

The method we chose to best gather information was by creating two sets of interviewee guides. One group that we interviewed was the experts in housing and the other group being interviewed are the people renting in Sonoma County who are battling against the high rental costs in Sonoma County. We wanted to receive the responses of people renting in Sonoma County to be able to view in what ways has the rise of rental housing impacted them. We chose

to keep the renter's identity anonymous. For the experts, it would also be anonymous unless we received permission to use their names.

For renters, our interview questions consisted of seventeen questions regarding information such as income, percentage of income that contributes to housing, and the strategies and difficulties of living in Sonoma County. We based our interview questions on how living in Sonoma County is expensive with the rise of rental housing costs. Renters have to follow through with using most of their income on housing. To better interpret the lives of renters we have to understand what they have gone through and what they are doing and why they have chosen to live in the county. As for our experts, interview questions consisted of eleven interview questions. We decided for the experts to have questions that allow the expert to give insight on the reasons that have caused rent prices to rise in Sonoma County, rent control law, and what possible solutions we have.

Our group interviewed twenty persons in total which consisted of thirteen renter nonexperts and seven housing experts. To be able to conduct the interviewees during this time of the pandemic we chose to interview by phone. The interviews were 15 to 20 minutes long and the interviews were done one on one between one individual in our group with the person they were interviewing. Since we each individually interviewed we recorded most of our interviews to have a recording to which we could go back for information we missed and some of us took notes while in the interview. After we finished all of our interviews we shared the responses of the interviewees in a shared folder for all team members to be able to observe the results.

Results: Non Experts data collected -

We spoke with a total of 13 residents who are currently renting housing in Sonoma county. Due to Covid-19, each of these interviews was performed via zoom and phone

conversations. Our inquiries are centered on how each person manages to survive in Sonoma County on such a low salary from low-wage occupations. The majority of their responses were along the lines of not being paid enough, having too many rent increases, and not having enough co-residents to assist pay for housing.

Much of Sonoma County is a high-priced area to live. As a result of these reasons, many people who have been renting have witnessed significant price rises. Each non-expert renter has their own work history, and the majority of them have jobs that are comparable to each other, such as low-wage part-time positions. There is a diverse group of people with educational backgrounds and those who simply have a high school diploma. The folks we spoke with all came from low-income families that tended to rely on numerous people in the same household for assistance. These folks are forced to give up their privacy in order to make payments to their households. They are all living paycheck to paycheck, especially as the rates of these homes and leases continue to rise.

All of the non-experts we spoke with agreed that the rental payments were far too high and impractical, especially given how little individuals earn working part-time. One of the people we spoke with, has lived in Sonoma County for the past five years as a Sonoma State student. This interviewee shares a three-bedroom apartment with five other people, for a total of six individuals in a \$2,450 apartment. They say that while the payments are doable with six individuals, they are all devoting more than half of their total income to housing. This person has stated that they want to move out of the neighborhood with three other members of the household in order to obtain a better job and a less expensive rental. This person, as well as everyone else in the home, is facing a recent rental increase, which means each of them will have to pay an additional \$50 to \$100 monthly.

Another interviewee was also attempting to leave the region after living here for more than four years. This individual works a full-time job plus a part-time job on their off days in order to make enough money to pay for housing and other necessities. This person went into great detail about how their part-time work is underpaying them. This individual is also sharing a home with four other people and paying for the most costly master bedroom. The individual describes the housing condition in their own words. "I live in a three-bedroom with four people. And we live in a very tiny small three-bedroom apartment." When compared to the other housemates, this is a significant price difference. When compared to the others, they are paying over half of the whole rent for the apartment, which is roughly \$1,000, despite working 52 to 55 hours a week in two jobs. On top of the apartment costs, this person has college debts, therapy appointments, and credit card payments to make each month. Overall, the people we spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with Sonoma County's rental pricing and expressed a desire to leave. In order for local renter residents to continue to stay in the county, costs must alter.

Results of Experts data collected:

We interviewed a total of seven housing experts that work in Sonoma County. All our experts work in the field related to rental housing and most of them have years of experience. They all have different levels of education, for example, associate degree, bachelor's degree, or real estate license. Due to Covid-19, we conducted our interviews through phone calls and zoom meetings. Our questions gather information about what caused the rent increase in Sonoma County and why is Sonoma County one of the most expensive counties in California. Their answers in general included lack of housing, lack of management, and lack of protection. Location is also an important factor in why Sonoma is expensive. Also, the weather and the wine industry make Sonoma a tourist-oriented expensive place.

After the wildfires and Covid, rent increased, and inflation happened to cause residents the loss of homes and jobs. The pandemic also made a big impact on the increase of rental housing, many people got evicted for not being able to pay their rent due to their loss of jobs. As we are moving out of the pandemic, rent is increasing, and people are doubling up. For example, we found 5-7 people living together in a 2-bedroom apartment.

All the experts agreed that rental housing is overpriced. Beatrice Camacho, who works for the North Bay Organization Project mentioned that the issue with housing is that it is viewed as a commodity which makes it harder for low-income families to afford a house, especially with low wages.

In addition, locals are moving out of Sonoma County because they cannot afford to live there anymore. People are moving to different states such as Texas and Idaho, they are leaving family and friends behind, but they need to do what is in their best interest. We asked experts about their opinion on rent control and what local governments should do better to help low-income families in rental housing. All of them gave similar answers and agreed that rent control should be strengthened and enforced.

Camacho said that housing needs to be “de-commodified” and one way to make this happen is by working collectively through campaigns. Another expert, who decided to stay anonymous, said that the housing market is only targeting people of the upper class, and this excludes many low-income families.

Sarah Vetter, who works at COTS, as the manager of Senior Housing Services, advised that the county should be building units for low-income families. Another expert expressed that people’s wages should rise because 15 dollars an hour is not enough. In addition, Beatrice suggested that managers and landlords lack the laws, and they should be trained on them.

Overall, the experts we interviewed strongly believed that the city and the state need to listen to the community and help them and there should be more housing available for the less fortunate.

All together the experts agreed that Sonoma County should make rental housing affordable and improve housing conditions for low-income families. In addition, location influences why Sonoma County is overpriced and unaffordable. Climate change and the wine industry. Influenced higher costs.

Residents are often living paycheck to paycheck and are not making enough to pay rent and that is causing people to move out of Sonoma while others become homeless. There are non-profit organizations such as the Sonoma County Tenants Union, who are working to assist families with housing problems, but there needs to be more help and support from the city. The and the state should reinforce protection laws against rent increases and rent control.

Conclusion

The housing situation in Sonoma County is going to continue to decline if there is no change soon. By change Sonoma County needs to take many steps in the right direction. Rental prices in Sonoma County are clearly placed at outrageous rates starting at no less than \$1200 for about a 1 bedroom apartment, and then only go up from this price depending on the type of housing and what it offers.

In the last decade prices have skyrocketed for renters in Sonoma County and our team conducted research that took into account many factors that renters faced. Our interviews showed that mostly all of the renters we interviewed have or are facing challenges with the rental prices increasing, and that their rent prices have increased in the last few years. Our team also concluded that housing market experts agree that Sonoma County housing prices are rising, which is the reason why the county is in the top for having such a big homeless population. Our

group achieved an in-depth understanding of how renters and housing experts in Sonoma County experience first hand the rising costs of homes, the understanding of others was a huge help to our group in understanding the impact of rising rents, why exactly they are rising, and what Sonoma County needs to change in order to keep a population of renters here.

Mericia Cano, Janet Garcia, Kelly Gil, Chabeli Huinac, and Josh Leifker are Sonoma State University students enrolled in Investigative Sociology Soc 336 under professor Peter Phillips.

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Appendix

Interview Guide for Experts:

Introduction paragraph: Goodmorning/Evening/Afternoon, first off thank you for participating in this interview. My name is _____ and this is my classmate _____. We are conducting a research study on behalf of our sociology class under the auspices of Dr. Peter Phillips at Sonoma State University. Our research topic is addressing the issues of the ongoing costs of housing rentals in Sonoma County . According to California's new rent control laws rent increases are limited to 5% to existing tenants and it expires in the year 2030. In addition, the Development of Housing and Urban Development, informs a fair market value two bedroom rental in Sonoma County County has gone up 29.6% since 2017. In 2017 a two bedroom rental would have cost about \$1,572 a month whereas the median two bedroom rental is now going for \$2,038. Your responses to our interview will help us support our research study and we are conducting about 10 interviews with experts in your area. This interview will take about 15 to 20 minutes and your name will not be used and your interview is completely anonymous unless you give us permission to use your name.

Demographic Questions

1. What is your level of education?
2. How long have you been working in your current job field?
3. What company do you currently work for? And what is your occupation in the company?

Interview Questions

4. What do you think caused the increase in the rent prices in Sonoma County?
5. Why do you think Sonoma County is one of the most expensive in California?
6. How do you think Covid impacted the prices of Sonoma County housing?

7. Based on your knowledge of Sonoma County do you think housing prices are reasonable or overpriced and why?
8. Do you think some locals are likely to be moving out of Sonoma County due to the unaffordable housing?
9. What should local governments be doing to allow for better housing access for low-income families?
10. What is your opinion on the rent control law and do you think it's reasonable to end it in the year 2030?
11. How do you think Sonoma County can improve affordable housing conditions?

Interview Guide for residents of Sonoma County

Good morning/afternoon/evening _____.

My name is _____ and this is my classmate _____. We are students conducting a research study under the auspices of Dr. Peter Phillips at Sonoma State University to address the issues of the ongoing costs of rental housing in Sonoma County. Your participation will help provide important information regarding the cost of living in Sonoma County along with the unexpected factors that contribute to the rise in the rental market. According to the Development of Housing and Urban Development, a fair market value two bedroom rental in Sonoma County County has gone up 29.6% since 2017. In 2017 a two bedroom rental would have cost about \$1,572 a month whereas the median two bedroom rental is now going for \$2,038. We will be asking you questions about how your experience in renting and how income, Covid-19 and/or the fires have impacted your housing experiences. The interview will only take about 15 to 20 minutes. Your name will not be used and your interview will remain completely anonymous. The collected data will be published in a research study at the end of the semester. Are you willing to proceed with the interview?

Interview Questions:

1. Could you tell us about what your occupation?
2. What is your family monthly income?
3. How much is your current rent?
4. Could you tell us who is in your family?
5. How has your family been impacted by the rental prices in the county?
6. With the change in rental prices, what kind of changes have you had to make in your life within your family and job/location?
7. During the pandemic were you able to receive help from a rental assistance program?
8. Were there any other expenses that made it more difficult to afford renting a home in Sonoma County?
9. What percentage of the family income goes to housing?
10. Why is it you chose to live in Sonoma County?

11. How are time and distance important housing considerations?
12. Are you concerned you won't be able to meet housing costs?
13. Are you concerned your rent is going to increase?
14. Is your family in danger of losing housing or at risk of having to move out?
15. Do you have family strategies for keeping your housing affordable?
16. Has your rental costs increased in the last 2 years?
17. In what ways has your rental costs increased?