

POLICY MEMORANDUM

TO: University of Pittsburgh Community Outreach Partnership Center

FROM: Judith Derenzo

DATE: September 25, 2003

SUBJECT: South and Central Oakland Rental Property and Community Rehabilitation

South and Central Oakland Housing Environment and Supporting Data

Due to its proximity of the University of Pittsburgh, South and Central Oakland has experienced drastic changes in community composition and character over the years. Originally, many neighborhood residents were immigrants who privately owned and maintained homes in the area and passed their property on to their children. However, because of the area's high student concentration, absentee landlords began buying and converting single family homes to apartment units. This large influx of students continues to create neighborhood conflict and disorder and encourages many residents to sell their homes, further increasing rental conversion rates. Given the high level of rental housing, it is not unexpected that most of the community's problems can be traced to either student or landlord behavior.

2000 Census data illustrates the extent of rental housing in South and Central Oakland. Out of the 3,753 housing units in this area, 75% are renter occupied and 25% are owner occupied.¹ When broken down between neighborhoods, 88% of occupied housing in Central Oakland is renter occupied while 54% of occupied housing in South

¹ U.S. Census. "Tenure By Occupants Per Room." 2000 Census. Summary File 3, Table H20. <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTTable?_ts=82595280407>

Oakland is renter occupied.² In addition to this high number of rental units, over occupancy of rental units is a considerable threat since it provides financial benefits to both landlords and students. Leasing apartment units above occupancy limits allows landlords to receive more rent while potentially decreasing individual tenants' share of rent. The U.S. Census Bureau defines overcrowding as 1.01 or more people per habitable room and severe overcrowding as 1.51 or more people per habitable room. 2000 Census data on residential occupancy indicates that 3.2% of rental units in South and Central Oakland are overcrowded and 1.6% are severely overcrowded.³ In comparison, 1.6% of owner occupied units are overcrowded and none are severely overcrowded.⁴ It must also be noted that overcrowding statistics may be underestimated if residents are hesitant to report such information.

Community Environment

South and Central Oakland's population is mostly comprised of undergraduate students residing in close proximity to residents who have lived in the community for many years. Over time, a considerable amount of tension has developed between these two groups. Community residents often complain that students are disrespectful of their desire for a quiet and clean environment. Student parties create noise late into the night and provoke drunken violence and crime. Large amounts of trash are regularly produced and the high volume of cars makes finding a parking space difficult. In addition, community members complain about absentee landlords that allow houses to fall into disrepair. Lawns aren't mowed, trash accumulates, and rodents infest the neighborhood

² U.S. Census. "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000. 2000 Census. Summary File 1, Table DP-1. <www.census.gov>

³ U.S. Census. "Tenure by Occupants per Room".

⁴ Ibid.

and surrounding properties. Overall, community residents feel as if they are fighting a two front battle against student and landlord misconduct.

Landlords and students often feel as if they are fighting each other as well. Student grievances develop when absentee landlords fail to make necessary repairs or maintain the property's exterior. Often times students choose not to file complaints out of fear of having their security deposit withheld at the end of their lease or because they want to hide the apartment's over occupancy from City officials. Landlords are also upset with how students mistreat apartment units, making them less likely to invest money in the property. Negative expectations about how the property will be maintained both on the part of students and landlords reduce the chance that either party will take action to remedy the situation. Thus, community members are forced to watch in dismay as their neighborhood declines.

Action Recommendations

In order to improve rental property and neighborhood conditions in South and Central Oakland, recommendations will be made to alter problematic behavior on the part of students and absentee landlords.

1. In order to reduce disruptive student behavior, it is recommended that a University of Pittsburgh Campus Police mini station be established in Central Oakland. This would help curb underage drinking as well as the noise, violence and crime it creates. Although Campus Police already focus much attention on this area, officials feel that a neighborhood station would improve their service and are interested in discussing this option further with community members.

2. In order to reduce rental over occupancy, it is highly recommended that community members file a search warrant when probable cause of over occupancy exists. This is a valid recourse that will permit the Bureau of Building Inspection to enter the interior of a rental unit. Such an option is particularly feasible given the large amount of research Oakland community activists have already conducted on this issue while providing a tangible way of combating the variety of problems overcrowding inflicts.

3. The remaining recommendations reduce both student and landlord misconduct by educating students on their rights and responsibilities as tenants. Efforts to educate student should take a variety of forms such as providing information on campus, sponsoring community events in the Oakland area, and mailing informational pamphlets to rental addresses. This should be promoted through a joint effort between University and community actors and should be consistently sustained throughout the year.

3a. In order to reduce student abuse of apartment units, students living off-campus should be educated on their responsibilities and obligations to keep their apartment, the common areas and the building's exterior in good condition. Improvements in student behavior are important in preventing further deterioration of housing stock, while reducing landlords' excuse of not improving the building due to student abuse.

3b. It is also essential that more students file complaints when confronted with unabated property problems since inspectors are not allowed inside a building without a complaint or a search warrant. This would primarily include continuing to educate students about the Community Resource Center which can provide information on

identifying problems, contacting the correct department, and tips for successfully carrying out a complaint.

3c. Since many students are hesitant to file complaints out of fear that their security deposit will be withheld, students must be educated on the legal period they have to document preexisting problems in writing after moving into the apartment. This would provide some protection if a landlord later tries to blame students for damages they didn't cause. Although this is a commonly conducted practice, it seems largely absent in student rentals. Such information is not currently applicable since most students have already signed their leases; however, it would be worthwhile to promote the idea next semester before students sign a lease for the following year.