

Sharp Rise in Overcrowded Housing Found

■ **Study:** Soaring costs during 1980s forced more L.A. residents to band together in rentals, USC analysis finds. Officials believe conditions add to crime and health problems.

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Housing conditions in the city of Los Angeles worsened substantially in the 1980s as residents were forced to pay an increasing percentage of their income for rent and the proportion of people living in severely overcrowded conditions doubled, according to a study released Tuesday.

Data compiled by the city's Housing Preservation and Production Department indicates that rental and housing prices nearly doubled between 1980 and 1990 when adjusted for inflation.

One result, the study said, is that nearly one-quarter of the city's renters live in severely overcrowded conditions, up from just 10.5% in 1980. And more than a third of the city's residents in 1990 paid more than 35% of their gross household income for rent and household expenses or mortgages, compared with just 28% a decade before.

Meanwhile, the percentage of baby boomers who own their own home slid by 7.8%, further proof of the degree to which the American dream has become elusive in Los Angeles, the study said.

"We are rolling back the progress made since the Great Depression. This indicates a declining standard of living in America," said Dowell Myers, a USC associate profes-

Please see HOUSING, B8

HOUSING: Decline in L.A. Living Standards Found

Continued from B1

sor in the School of Urban and Regional Planning and author of the study.

"Los Angeles is separating into two cities—one well housed and one not," said the study, which is based on census data. Myers added: "There is no indication that this slide in standards will stop," despite a recent slump in housing prices, because incomes of residents continue to stagnate. Generally, the study noted that the elderly, many of whom purchased homes after World War II aided by government loan programs, low interest rates and cheaper land, fared well while the burgeoning younger and low- or middle-income population of the city suffered.

City officials fear such overcrowding is one factor contributing to the area's mounting crime problems, as people are increasingly forced to hang out on street corners instead of crowded living quarters. "We have studies going back to the 1920s showing what happens to rats when you pack them into one spot," said Barbara Zeidman, assistant general manager of the Housing Preservation and Production Department.

Several factors, the study says, have contributed to the city's housing malaise: While Los Angeles' population jumped 17.5%, to 3.5 million people during the 1980s, the number of its housing units increased by only 9.3%. While inflation totaled 59%, the decade saw median housing prices in Los Angeles soar by 154%. That was more than double the increase in housing prices nationwide. Rent prices in Los Angeles jumped 138%.

Income, meanwhile, did not keep pace, Zeidman said. "We are replacing high-skilled jobs in Los Angeles with lower-paying service jobs," she said. Thus, the percentage of home owners forced to pay at least 35% of their income for housing grew to 23.9% from 16.8%, the study found. Renters fared even worse: about 41.4% in 1990 paid more than 35% of their income for housing, up from 35.8% in 1980.

If in 1980 it took three minimum wage earners to pay for a two-bedroom apartment, in 1990 six minimum wage earners had to contribute for the same space, Zeidman said.

The result is that many more single adults band together to rent apartments and families increasingly double up in rentals—more than doubling the number of households categorized as extremely overcrowded. Nearly one-quarter of the city's renters lived under those conditions during the 1980s. The city considers a two-bedroom unit with a living room and dining room overcrowded if it has five people, and severely overcrowded if it houses more than seven people.

So acute is the housing shortage for the poor that the housing department estimates 30,000 garages are used illegally to house renters. Zeidman said the department found one garage this year in East Los Angeles which had been divided into 10 stalls.

Ironically, the overcrowding has come as rental vacancies steadily rose from 2% in 1978 to 4% in 1984 to more than 7% now—rates that are above the national norm but comparable to cities such as Houston and Chicago, according to the housing department. But those vacancies have come largely in the higher end of the rental market as people with higher-paying aerospace and manufacturing jobs have lost their jobs or moved out of the area.

"You have vast choices if you can pay \$1,200 a month," Zeidman said.

The changes affected potential homeowners as well as renters. Between 1980 and 1990, home ownership rates for the elderly, of which 57.2% now own their home, increased 10.7%. Meanwhile, baby boomers—those between the ages of 35 and 44—saw their ownership rates drop by 7.8% to 37.9%. The city's overall ownership rate fell by less than one percentage point to 39.4%, a steeper decline than in Los Angeles County as a whole, or the United States, where ownership rates ran 64.2% during the decade. Ownership declined for all racial groups in Los Angeles except the white population, which saw its home ownership rate rise 1%.

"We are even more a city of renters now than before," said Zeidman, adding that the median home price in the Los Angeles basin is \$250,000. "What was lost were middle-income people who just can't afford to buy anymore."