

# The intersection of housing instability and crime

We know that housing instability and public safety intersect, but their interplay is complex.



Content warning: the following article explores the intersection of housing instability, mental health, and crime and includes mention of violence that resulted in death.

by *Melissa Frangos, staff attorney*

Jordan Neely was a street performer and Michael Jackson impersonator who faced trauma, chronic homelessness, and mental health challenges in his life. In an interview, his aunt called him sweet, “a diamond,” and loved. In May of this year, he was strangled to death by a fellow passenger on the subway in New York City. Witnesses stated he was having “outbursts” or “yelling,”- which could have been due to his chronic hunger and homelessness or symptoms of a mental illness. Witnesses recalled Mr. Neely saying “I don’t care if I get locked up and go to jail. I’m ready to die,” after pleading for food and water. The person who killed him, Daniel Penny, is scheduled to appear in court next month and as his criminal case unfolds, we will gain insight into the tragic events of that afternoon on the F train. While this senseless crime horrified the country and sparked widespread protests, it would be disingenuous to say it came as a surprise.

Mr. Neely’s story - and stories like his – expose a society that is far too comfortable with poverty, homelessness, and desperation.

And the problems are only poised to become worse.

The lack of affordable housing and rising rent costs are increasing rates of homelessness across our country. These trends are fueling a renewed interest among researchers on the impact of housing instability on public safety. We know the two intersect, but their interplay is not always a simple one.

Studies show housing insecurity is responsible for numerous negative impacts on individuals. Housing is one of the social determinants of health. [Without stable housing](#), the physical, mental, and behavioral wellbeing of individuals and families can fail. The same individuals and families often are losing their homes through a chronic cycle of eviction. Their hopeless situations may lead to crimes of desperation such as theft, burglary, and trespassing.

This is the familiar homelessness = crime narrative.

And it's what shapes our collective dehumanization of young, Black men like Jordan Neely who struggle with poverty, mental health and homelessness.

But this narrative is oversimplified. Research suggests that housing instability can cause communities to become destabilized, eventually giving rise to public safety concerns.

Disadvantaged residential neighborhoods experience high housing turnover rates. These are often home to the least expensive but poorest quality housing stock. The lowest-income and most disenfranchised Americans - often people of color, immigrants, and refugees - are moving in and out of the neighborhoods as they face myriad life challenges. Exacerbating this, these neighborhoods are often home to clusters of so-called [“extractive” landlords](#) who routinely exploit their low-income tenants by perpetuating poor living conditions and being quick to evict.

Together, these patterns repeatedly move groups of Americans who are shouldering the toxic stress of long-term housing instability in and out of destabilized neighborhoods. When these practices take place over time in neighborhoods, social ties are weakened. Crime may become rampant, as communities are prevented from working together to solve issues that could prevent it. These communities are prevented from developing ways to care for and protect their own. How might things have been different for Mr. Neely had he lived in a stable community who knew and understood his needs?

These realities highlight the need for new strategies to address crime. The same old approach isn't working, and the same facile narrative isn't the whole story. Increased police presence and cameras help respond to crime, but they don't prevent it. Prevention work must happen from the highest and most holistic level. Communities need housing stability so they can weave a healthy social fabric and look out for themselves.

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

[Sign up](#) to get Big Ideas in your inbox

Last updated on September 21, 2023.

Print

Table of Contents

## NEWS

### News & publications

The news about recent activities for needed peoples.

[More News](#)

5 Mar 2024

Deadline looms to claim missing pandemic relief benefits

Tax advocates encourage Ohioans to speak with an IRS certified tax preparer ...

[Continue Reading](#)

20 Feb 2024



Credit reports: Another barrier to affordable housing

by Andrew Neuhauser, managing attorney Most of us are familiar...

[Continue Reading](#)