

the state of

MISSOURI TENANTS



Listening to Tenants in
America's Heartland

A report by KC Tenants

THE BALLAD *of the* LANDLORD

By Langston Hughes, from Joplin, Missouri

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and
Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on-till you get through.
You ain't gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.

Police! Police!
Come and get this man!
He's trying to ruin the government
And overturn the land!

Copper's whistle!
Patrol bell!
Arrest.
Precinct Station.
Iron cell.
Headlines in press:
Man Threatens landlord
Tenant Held Bail
Judge Gives Negro 90 Days In County Jail!

the **STATE** *of* **MISSOURI** **TENANTS**

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INTRODUCTION

Missouri is one of the worst places in America to be a tenant: The laws are stacked against people who rent their homes and in favor of their landlords, eviction courts are cruel and violent venues that ratify this power imbalance, and rural and urban tenants alike are struggling even more because of the pandemic and corresponding economic crisis.

In truth, Missouri has rarely cared for the least of us. The elected and appointed leadership in Missouri has blocked minimum wage increases, attacked Medicaid expansion and other social services in recent years. They have shown us who they work for, and it is not poor and working class people. It is within this context that the violence of our state's (and our country's) housing system has become even more stark: it's a system designed to build wealth for a few, not shelter for all, and that ain't right.

It is also within this context that KC Tenants, the citywide tenant union in Kansas City, Missouri, began organizing across our state. In the midst of the pandemic and the uprisings following the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, KC Tenants convened a coalition of grassroots, faith, labor, and advocacy organizations to demand that our state's leadership protect Missouri tenants by ending evictions, cancelling rent, and doing everything possible to

keep us in our homes. We organized and escalated for a year, but we did not win our demands.

Never a failure, always a lesson. With the coalition, we interrogated our power: what we had, what we would have needed in order to win, and where to go next. Our coalition had some policy expertise and advocacy chops, but lacked the scale and depth of organized people to force a real reckoning in Missouri. We didn't just need more organized people, but rather we needed more organized people, in more places, across the whole state. It wasn't going to be enough to build powerful local organizations in a political reality where the state can (and will) stymie local progress by passing preemption laws.

Our reflections brought us to a collective analysis about the need to build real people power across our state— not just in cities and suburbs, and not just in St. Louis and Kansas City, but also in rural communities and small towns.

In June 2021, KC Tenants launched an experiment. Our goal? To get to know rural Missouri tenants, their struggles, and their vision for a better Missouri, by listening instead of talking, asking instead of proposing. We began a “deep listening” program in rural and small town Missouri: the MO Tenants Listening Experiment.

In this document, we present the findings from our experiment, including insights from everyday people about how Missouri can become a state where every tenant has a safe, accessible, truly and permanently affordable home.

BACKGROUND

We Are Compelled to Cry Out

“

No one knows our condition as we ourselves know it. We are compelled to cry out.

Owen Whitfield, a preacher and union organizer, wrote these words to the Charleston, Missouri Enterprise-Courier in late 1937, following his return from Washington D.C., where he had demanded the federal government halt planned evictions that would impact as many as 10,000 people in Missouri's Bootheel.¹

During The Great Depression, sharecroppers and tenant farmers had lived in desperate poverty for over a decade due to environmental disaster, falling crop prices, disease, and the mechanization of cotton production.² While President Roosevelt touted The New Deal, sharecroppers recognized that New Deal policies weren't so much designed for them, as for the rich, white landowners that continued to evict tenants while pocketing their stimulus payments.

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) had sprung up from these conditions, "dedicated to the complete abolition of tenantry and wage slavery in all its forms."³ Throughout the 1930's, STFU had successfully organized a union of sharecroppers with 30 local chapters, including one in Mississippi County, in Missouri's Bootheel, founded by five Black women.⁴

In January 1938, despite STFU's best efforts, landlords evicted thousands of tenant farmers in January 1938, during the dead of winter. But the sharecroppers were not deterred.⁵ A year-long campaign began, using the crisis of the day to politicize the public around their bigger demands: healthcare and decent, guaranteed housing. As one tenant, Alonzo Julian, said, "We only want a chance to live for ourselves."⁶



A year later, more than 1,500 Black and white families camped out on the side of the road, piling their belongings along US Highways 60 and 61, in the lowlands of southeast Missouri, as part of a strategic action that is now known as the Missouri Sharecropper Roadside Demonstration of 1939. The roadside protest was their response to a chain of broken promises by the federal government, an act of disciplined fury.⁷

This campaign, led by a multiracial union of poor and working-class tenants in the Jim Crow South, won Missouri's first public housing: the Delmo Security Homes.⁸ In January 1941, two years after the roadside demonstration, the federal government completed the construction of ten publicly-owned settlements, at least one in every Missouri Bootheel county, with over 600 homes for sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and rural wage workers, plus community buildings, wells, utilities, and most importantly, land to farm.



Owen Whitfield's words could just as easily have been spoken by leaders Keith Reece or Shuron Jones at a KC Tenants rally at Missouri's state capitol in April 2020, as tenants across Missouri cried out for the state to cancel rent and mortgage payments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The history of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union is not taught in our schools, but it is felt in our communities. The erasure of this history is not an accident; people like us, organized across race and class, cause problems for people and institutions who profit from the conditions of today. There are more of us than there are of them. We can learn from the vibrant history of our region, and we can use it to sharpen our commitment to multiracial tenant solidarity in a place like Missouri.



COVID-19 and the Coalition to Protect Missouri Tenants

In March 2020, some of our workplaces shut down, and millions of poor and working class people were laid off. Others of us continued as “essential workers,” on the frontlines of a raging public health crisis. Before widespread vaccines, housing was the vaccine. We were told to stay home to keep ourselves and our communities healthy. But how could we pay rent with no income? How could we *just stay home* or *shelter in place* if we didn’t have safe, secure shelter to begin with?

KC Tenants held our first virtual tenant meeting over Zoom on March 21, 2020. Everything was tense, and scary. Our people were angry. By then, we had won a short term eviction moratorium in Kansas City, and our counterparts in St. Louis had won one, too. But even then it was clear that those policies weren’t going to go far enough to protect Missouri tenants. We knew no one was coming to save us. So, in a clunky zoom meeting with about sixty KC Tenants leaders, a group of us brought a proposal to organize around the COVID-19 crisis, statewide – something KC Tenants had never done before. By our early assessment, our most meaningful demands were only winnable at the state level.

We didn’t waste time. Just four days later, on March 25, fifty poor and working class tenants and representatives of organizations across Missouri, from St.



Joseph to St. Louis, Kansas City to Cape Girardeau, Rolla to Springfield, met to discuss a statewide strategy to protect Missouri tenants. We called ourselves the Coalition to Protect MO Tenants and together crafted and released a set of demands based on the needs of the most impacted tenants in our bases and across the state.

On April 1, we held a statewide press conference calling on Missouri Governor Mike Parson to:

- Institute a rent/mortgage suspension;
- Enact an immediate, comprehensive statewide eviction/foreclosure moratorium;
- Ban utility shut-offs and mandate universal service; and,
- Provide homes and expanded services for people experiencing homelessness.

Over the next six months, we fought as hard as we could. We held an action every week in April, escalating from virtual mass actions, to a takeover of Interstate 70 from Kansas City all the way to St. Louis, to a direct action serving an eviction notice to Governor Parson at the Governor's Mansion in Missouri's state capital, Jefferson City.

We collected over 2,771 signatures on a petition supporting our demands, organized state house leaders in support of our struggle, and earned forty news stories from local and national publications. Months later, still nothing from the Governor.

We had to be honest with ourselves: we simply didn't have the power we needed to hold Missouri leaders accountable. We didn't even have the power to get the Governor to respond to our demands, let alone enact them. It was tough to stare down this reality, especially with our people in so much pain, but in doing so, we sharpened our analysis about what we would need to build if tenants were ever to win statewide in Missouri.

Conservative politicians and the profiteers who donate to their campaigns control politics in Missouri. In order to vie for power in this context, we would need a long-term powerbuilding strategy across the entire state, not just the liberal cities of St. Louis and Kansas City. We had to get serious about organizing with tenants in small towns and rural communities, and we must follow their lead, recognizing that most of us had no lived experience in those communities ourselves. We recognized that our organizing had to be consistent and deep, not seasonal and transactional, like many strategies that engage in regional tokenism instead of real investment.

Through the Coalition to Protect MO Tenants, we did not win our policy demands, but we did lay the groundwork for the next phase of our work by:

- Organizing 2,771 tenant and ally signatures on our statewide demands;
- Placing 86 news stories that included perspectives from Missouri tenants in 44 local and national outlets;
- Bringing together 32 people-centered organizations to fight for tenants across Missouri;
- Leading tenant leaders in 5 virtual and in-person direct actions;
- Training 50 tenant leaders on our theory of change and campaign strategy;
- Helping seed two local tenant organizations in Springfield and St. Louis, Missouri.
- Connecting urban and rural struggles and fostering solidarity across race, class, and region;
- Activating thousands of tenants to take action in Missouri and developing dozens of leaders to lead strategic direct action.

MO TENANTS LISTENING EXPERIMENT

The Coalition to Protect Missouri Tenants voted to approve a Missouri Tenants Listening Experiment in January 2021, based on the following assumptions:

- Missouri is one of the worst places in the country to be a tenant and we don't have the power we need to win protections for tenants in Missouri.
- We have the least tenant power in rural parts of Missouri. Those places are also critical to the broader progressive landscape in Missouri.
- In order to win significant, long-term protections for tenants (and poor and working class people more broadly), we must invest time and resources into deep organizing in rural Missouri.

We established the following short-, mid-, and long-term goals:

- **Short-term:** Build a base of poor and working class tenants across the state of Missouri, especially in rural areas, and develop a deeper understanding of their housing needs.
- **Mid-term:** Develop and support MO Tenants chapters in at least 2-3 regions across state, focused on local and statewide campaigns.
- **Long-term:** Build tenant power in Missouri to win systemic change and stepping stone reforms along the way.

To achieve the short-term goal, we designed an experiment, grounded in our need to listen first, before taking action. We wanted to avoid the extractive practice of telling these communities what they needed, or asking them to do something without first asking them what their priorities were. Instead, we

would spend six months having deep conversations with tenants in rural communities, at their doors and on the phones, asking questions about their housing.

Team

We knew we needed a team of canvassers who had personal experiences with the violence of our current housing system.

In Southwest Missouri, Victoria Altic served as the lead canvasser. Victoria, a Filipino and Puerto Rican single mom of two, lost her service industry job during the pandemic and had been a core leader in the Coalition to Protect MO Tenants. She recruited Johnathann Byrd, Correna King, and later, Harrison Taylor. Every canvasser on the Southwest team had experienced housing insecurity at one time or another. Johnathann, a Black man and native of Cincinnati, was homeless for the first three months of the experiment. He was hungry to build power with tenants like himself.

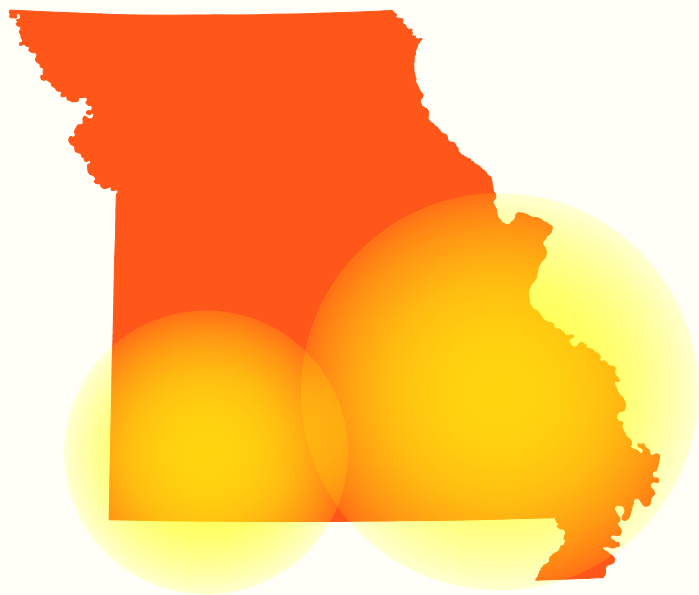
In Southeast Missouri, Aaron Lerma, a musician-turned-organizer from Missouri's Bootheel, led the statewide team as the canvass coordinator. We recruited Heidi Martinez-Lafrentes, a tenant who had experienced homelessness and battled many slumlords, through a Facebook post. Nix Pritchard, from Cape Girardeau, joined the MO Tenants team while they themselves struggled to secure housing. Shay Healy, a school custodian, joined the team in the last half of the experiment with the intention of gaining organizing skills to bring back to their jobsite.

Jack Wrisinger led our operation on the phones. Jack grew up in Lexington, Missouri, a small town between Kansas City and Columbia. He challenged his experience while listening to tenants in over 25 counties, filling the gaps that our in-person canvass left throughout the state.

Regional Focus

We prioritized knocking doors in two key regions: Southwest and Southeast Missouri. Each of these regions has a small city which functions as a regional hub for the surrounding rural communities; Springfield in the Southwest and Cape Girardeau in the Southeast. These regions also have high rates of poverty

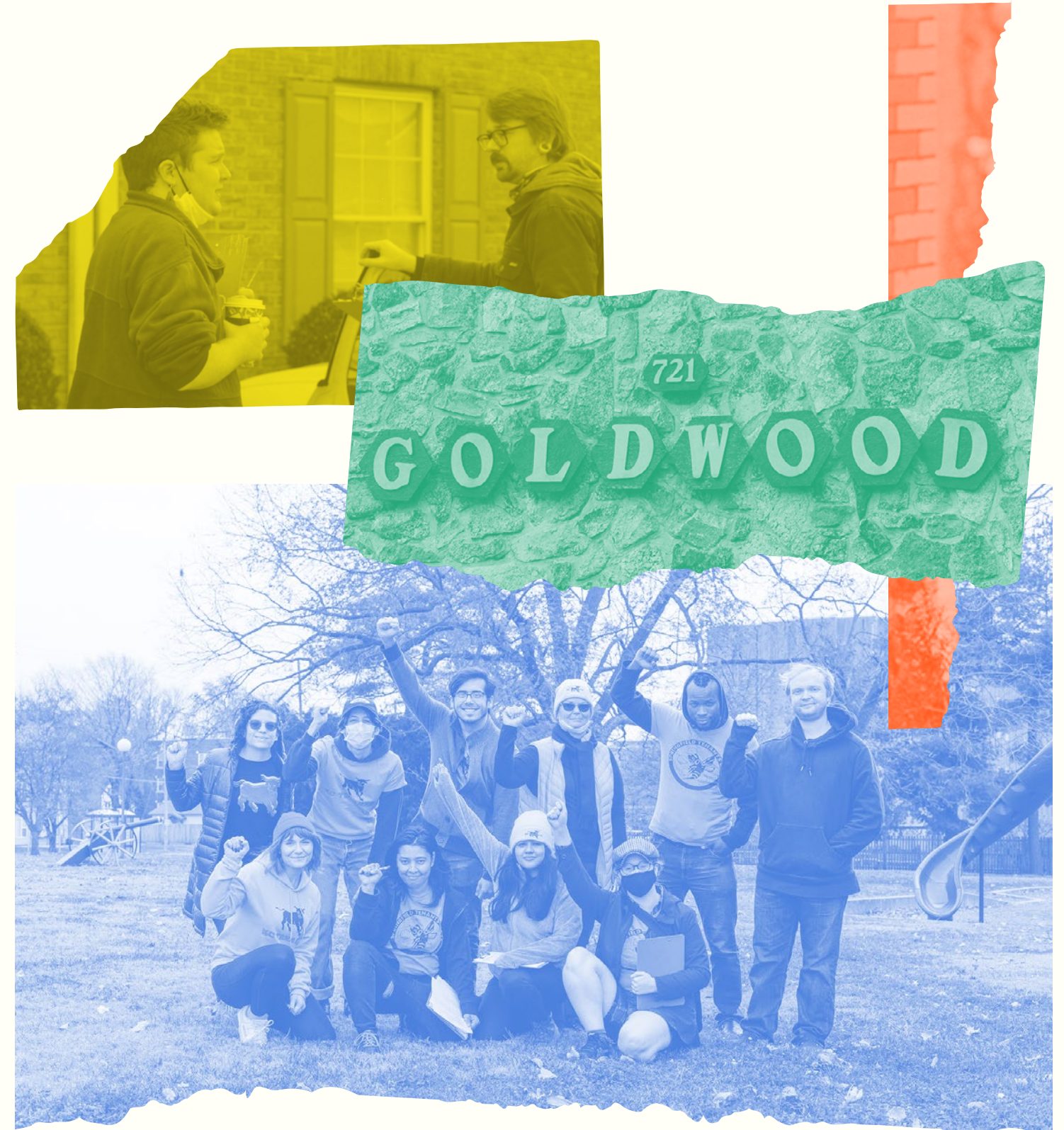
and a high percentage of tenant households relative to the rest of the state. When we studied voter data, we found that there was low voter turnout in these regions, and strong support for conservative politicians from those who do vote, but that there was also significant voter support for issues like raising the minimum wage and expanding Medicaid.



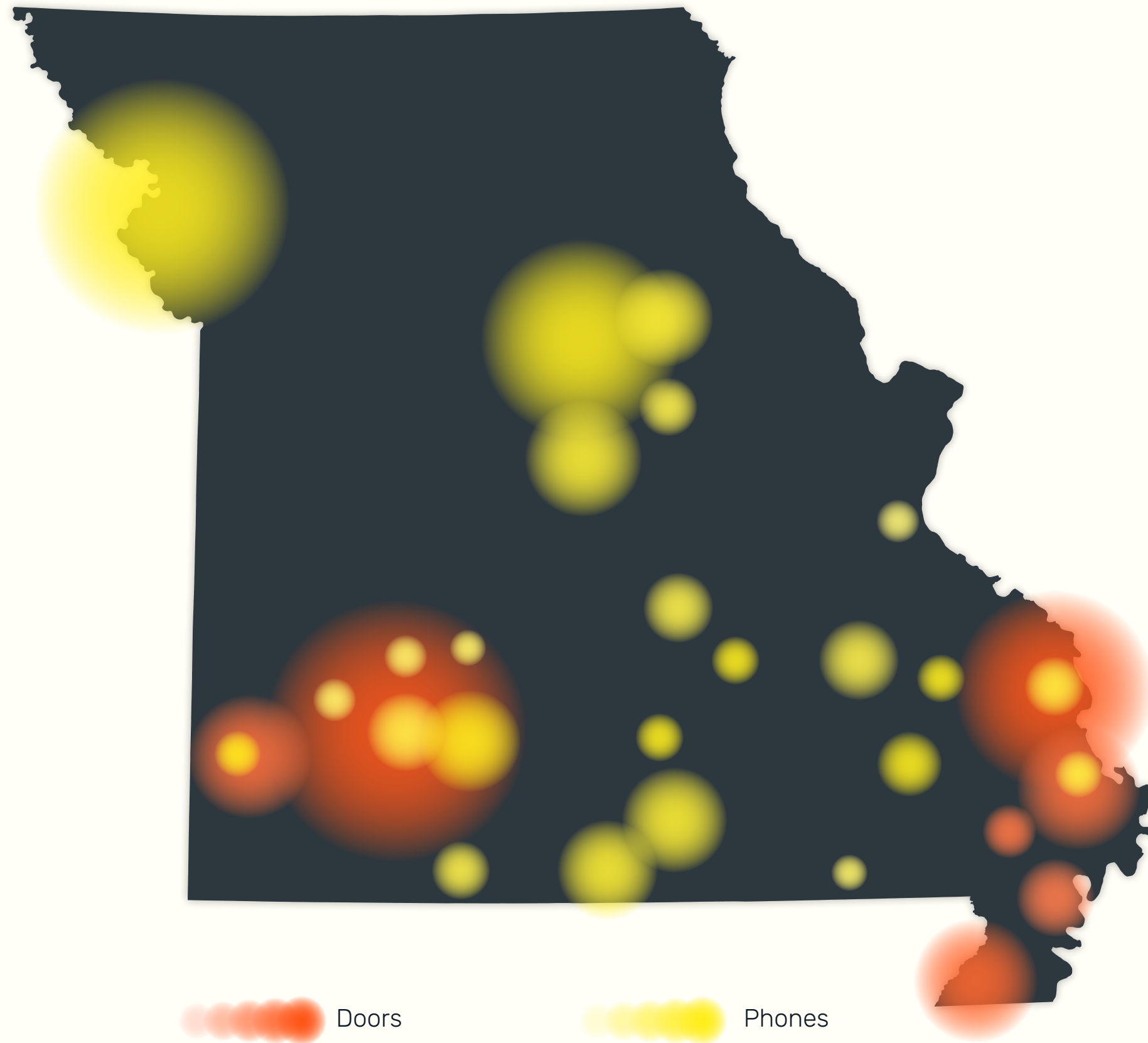
Our canvassers provided localized expertise about where to go to find the tenants we wanted to engage. Informed by their knowledge, we focused most of our time on the doors at trailer parks, bigger apartment complexes, and in public housing projects.

In addition to the door conversations, we engaged tenants in text and phone conversations about their experiences. This effort was primarily led by volunteers around the state. The text conversations allowed us to hear from tenants in rural areas where we weren't knocking doors, especially in Mid- and

North Missouri. If tenants engaged with us by text, we followed up with a phone call, where we followed a similar line of questioning to that which we used on the doors.



Conversations by County



County	Doors	Phones
BOONE		45
BUCHANAN		38
HOWELL		19
COLE		15
GREENE	381	11
OZARK		8
IRON		8
AUDRAIN		6
WEBSTER		5
TEXAS		5
CAPE GIRARDEAU	249	5
MADISON		4
SCOTT	71	3
DUNKLIN	47	
STODDARD	17	
POLK		3
PHELPS		3
WAYNE		2
TANEY		2
CALLAWAY		2
RIPLEY		1
DENT		1
LAFAYETTE		1
JEFFERSON		1
JASPER	67	1
JACKSON		1
DALLAS		1
DADE		1
NEW MADRID	24	

Deep Listening

Our canvass was organized around “deep listening.” For too long, in a politics driven by transactionalism, political elites of both major parties have treated rural communities like “turf” and our people like lines in a spreadsheet. We aimed to learn from these mistakes and not repeat them.

Deep Listening: Sometimes known as Deep Canvassing. This is the process rooted in humility and dedicated to the practice of active and deep listening. We engaged in conversation to understand, not to respond. Successful deep listening conversations gave us (and the tenant) clarity on the issues in their home/neighborhood, what made them angry, what gave them hope, and what they might be willing to do to change the conditions of the world around them.

To practice deep listening, we asked questions like:

- What are the issues you face in your home?
- Who is responsible for those issues? Who has power in this situation?
- Who should have power over your home?
- What is your vision for housing in your community? What stands in the way of that vision?

A successful conversation was often 20-40 minute long, and mostly not tethered to a predetermined structure. We often found tenants required some time to feel enough trust to get real with us, so sometimes the conversations were longer and canvassers shared some of their own story to invite vulnerability from the tenant.

Deep listening is not a sales pitch, it’s not a needs assessment, and it’s not an organizing one-on-one (which is typically even deeper!). We were not there to solve anyone’s problems, cast judgment, or offer legal advice. If someone did not want to speak with us, we respected that decision.

We invested in ongoing training throughout the experiment, sharpening our skills and giving each other feedback on how to have more and more effective conversations.



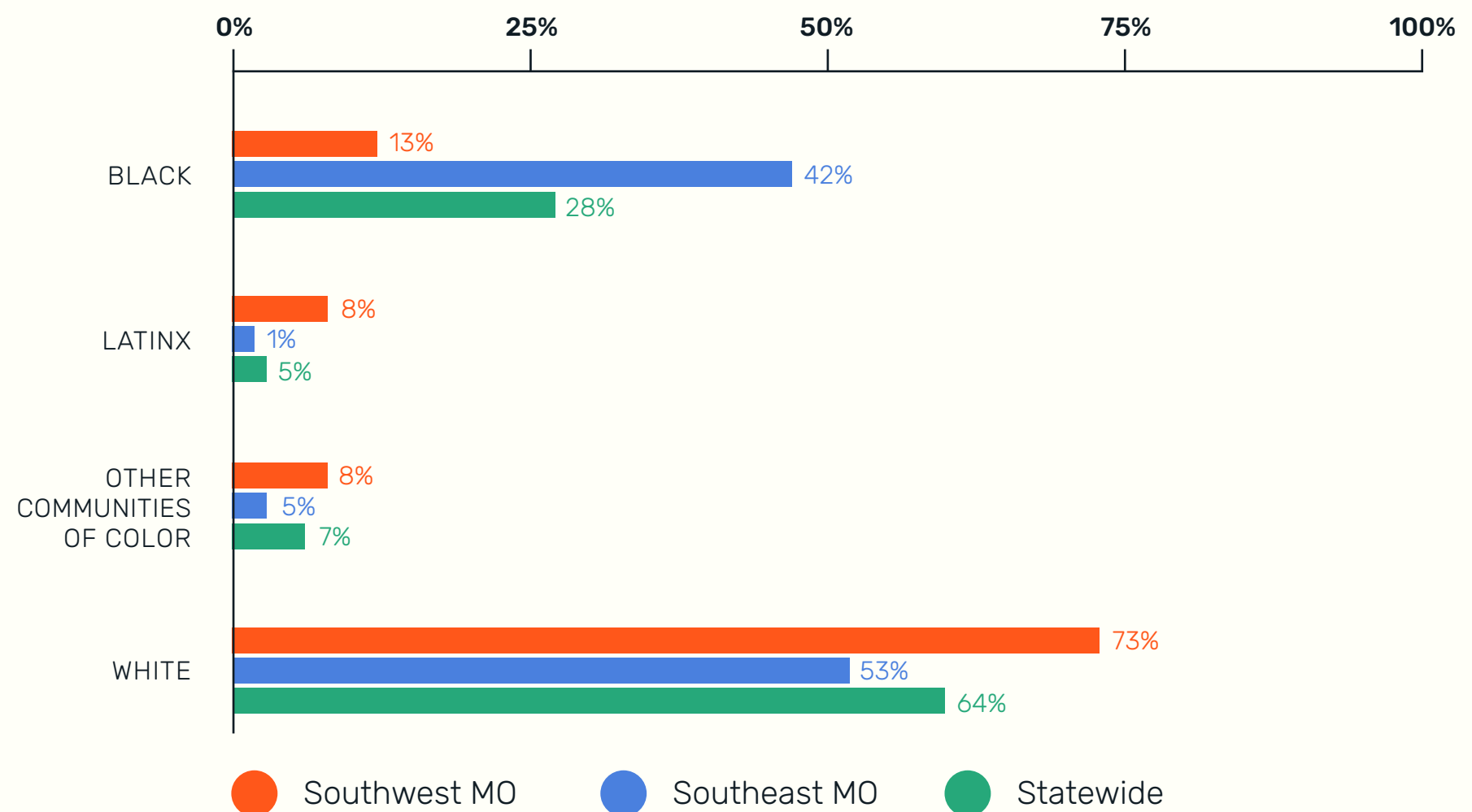
DEMOGRAPHICS

We collected demographic data during our deep listening conversations. About 85% of our demographic data came from canvassers asking tenants to self-identify, and the remaining demographic information came from canvassers coding the conversations.

Our racial groupings included: Black, Latinx, white, and other communities of color. We met tenants on the doors who were of Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Native American, Thai, Jamaican, Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander heritage, and we wanted to understand any distinct housing experiences non-Black and non-Latinx communities of color might face.

The majority of tenants we canvassed were white, across the regions, accounting for 64% of our total conversations. By our analysis, about 80% of those tenants were poor or working class, but we did not ask explicitly if tenants identified this way.

Door Conversations by Race and Region



*We measured Latinx ethnicity across race. This means that tenants often identified as Black AND Latinx, or white AND Latinx. Because of this, we counted people in both categories, meaning that some of these totals on race may exceed 100% if you were to add them together

We asked questions that allowed canvassers to understand whether tenants identified as poor or working class, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes by asking about their jobs, history of housing insecurity, and generational wealth or lack thereof. We talked to tenants about their relationship to the economy, and about the communities where they lived and their level of investment or disinvestment. Across race, we estimate that about 90% of tenants we spoke with were poor or working class.

We found tenants ready to identify their class status. Oliver, a trans teenager living in Republic Apartments:



We have been poor all our lives. We've always struggled to get by... I learned how to make ramen taste really good because that's the only thing we can afford. At the end of the month my parents don't eat just so I can. That's not good.

Oliver, Republic Apartments (Republic)

Key Issues

When we talked to tenants, we coded their responses based on which issues they identified as the most pressing. These are the categories we used:

- **Conditions**
- **Property Management**
- **Rent Cost**
- **Safety**
- **Location**
- **Landlord Abuse**
- **Eviction**

Conditions and **rent cost** were the biggest issues named across region, race, and housing type.

In Missouri, rent hikes are often seen as an urban problem, but we found tenants struggling in rural parts of our state. This struggle is reflected in available data about rent affordability; a tenant living around Cape Girardeau would have to earn \$16-\$17 per hour in order to afford a two bedroom apartment or home.¹² Meanwhile, Missouri's minimum wage is \$11.15. Tenants told us about paying well over half their paychecks to rent.



Tenants shared that they felt stuck in their housing situation because rent elsewhere was unaffordable or on the rise. Bailey, a mother living in Dexter, MO:

“

I feel stuck living here because there is no way for me to find another affordable place. I can't even tell them [landlord] I got a job recently without them raising my rent. So how am I supposed to move on to anything better? Especially as a mom?

Bailey, Dexter Apartments (Dexter)

In rural areas, the lack of truly affordable housing supply felt like a fixed reality for tenants like Harvey from Sikeston, MO:

“

You cannot find a decent one-bedroom house in this town for under \$600.

Harvey, Public Housing (Sikeston)

In our two focus regions, southeast and southwest Missouri, conditions, rent cost, and landlord abuse were consistently the top three issues named. We observed particular pain points related to rent cost in the areas surrounding Springfield, Missouri, on the southwest side of the state. Springfield is the fastest growing metropolitan area in the state, which may contribute to this squeeze.¹³ Richard, a tenant at Meheli Pines Apartments in Springfield, had lived in his unit for 13 years until his landlord hiked the rent, just before our conversation with him. He could not afford the new rate, and he was resigned to living in an AirBnb for a month after moving. After that: “I don’t know yet.”

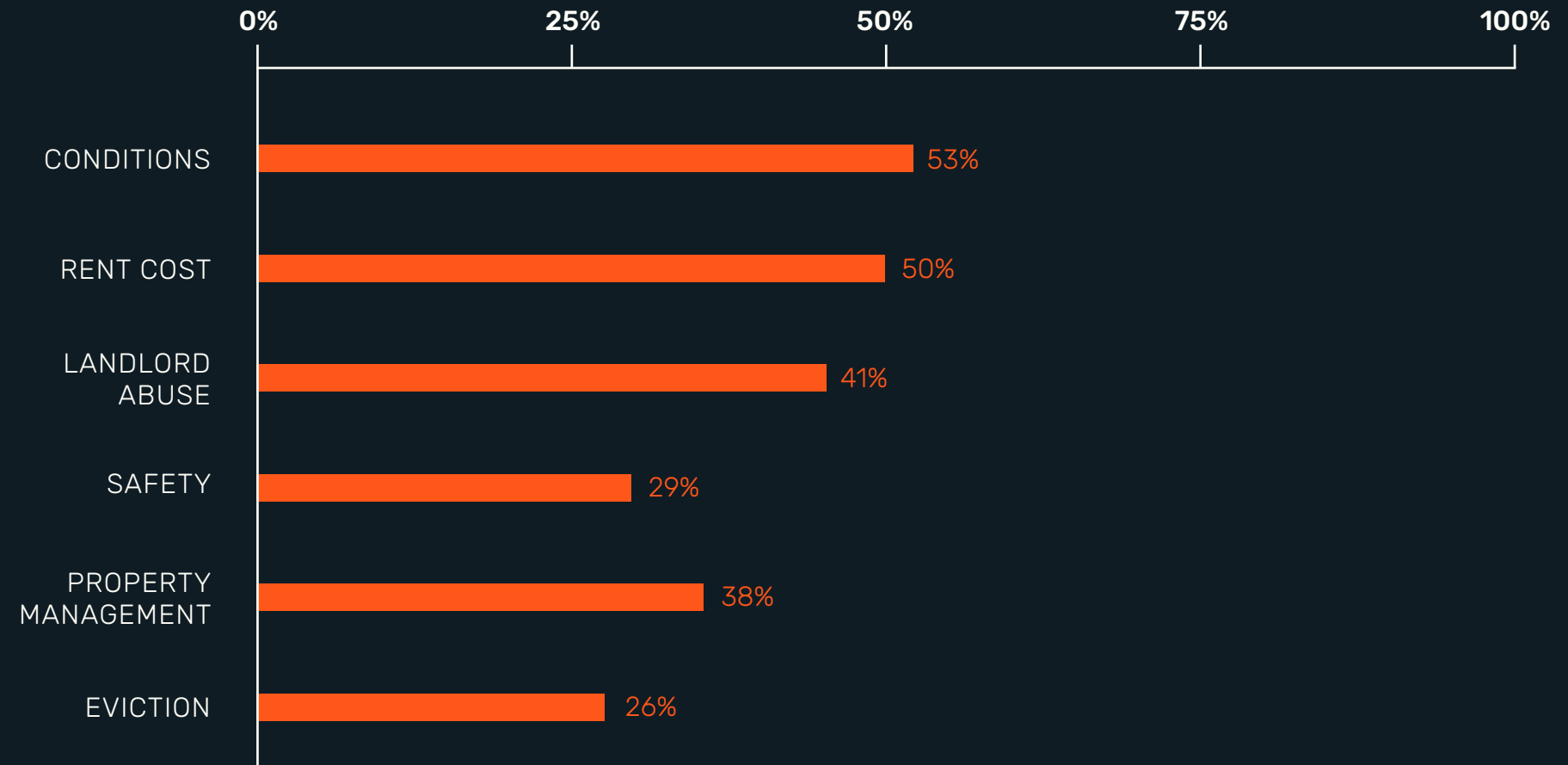
Tenants who had experienced formal evictions, told us about the swift and brutal court process in rural communities, almost always resulting in a judgment in favor of the landlord:



I was evicted last year and given 10 days to move all of my stuff out. I have 3 kids. Do you know how hard it is to move with kids?

Laura, Mulberry Trailer Park (Jackson)

Top Issues Across Region, Race, and Housing Type

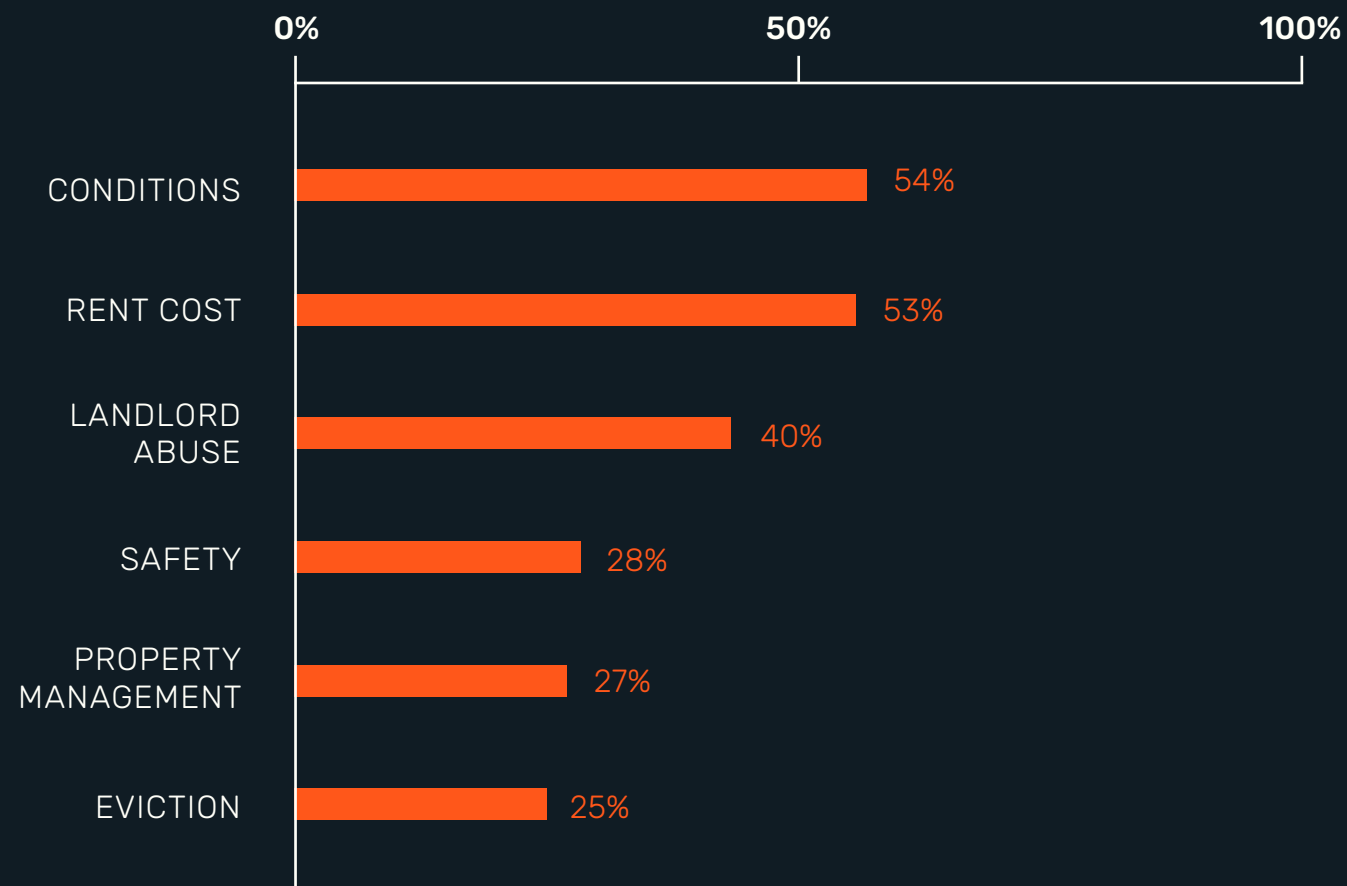


Overall, eviction came up less than we expected, with only about 17% of the tenants reporting an eviction in their rental history. We hypothesize that this could be related to tenants’ conception of eviction as limited to the formal court process. When we think about eviction, we also consider the informal evictions, outside of the courts, that occur because of uninhabitable conditions, rent increases, and harassment. Alyssa, a tenant living in the Bootheel, said she is currently living with a friend because her apartment had caught fire when she wasn’t home. She did not think of this event as an eviction, even though it resulted in her forced displacement.

Top Issues by Housing Type

Across different housing types, the top issues varied significantly. In apartment complexes and trailer parks, rent was the biggest tenant concern. In public housing, housing conditions came up in most of our conversations. Among tenants renting from corporate landlords, rent prices and evictions caused the most stress, while many tenants with local landlords named landlord harassment as their main issue.

Top Issues: Apartment Complexes



Ray, a tenant at Belcrest Apartments, a complex in Springfield, shared a sentiment echoed by 15 of the 22 tenants we spoke with at the same complex:

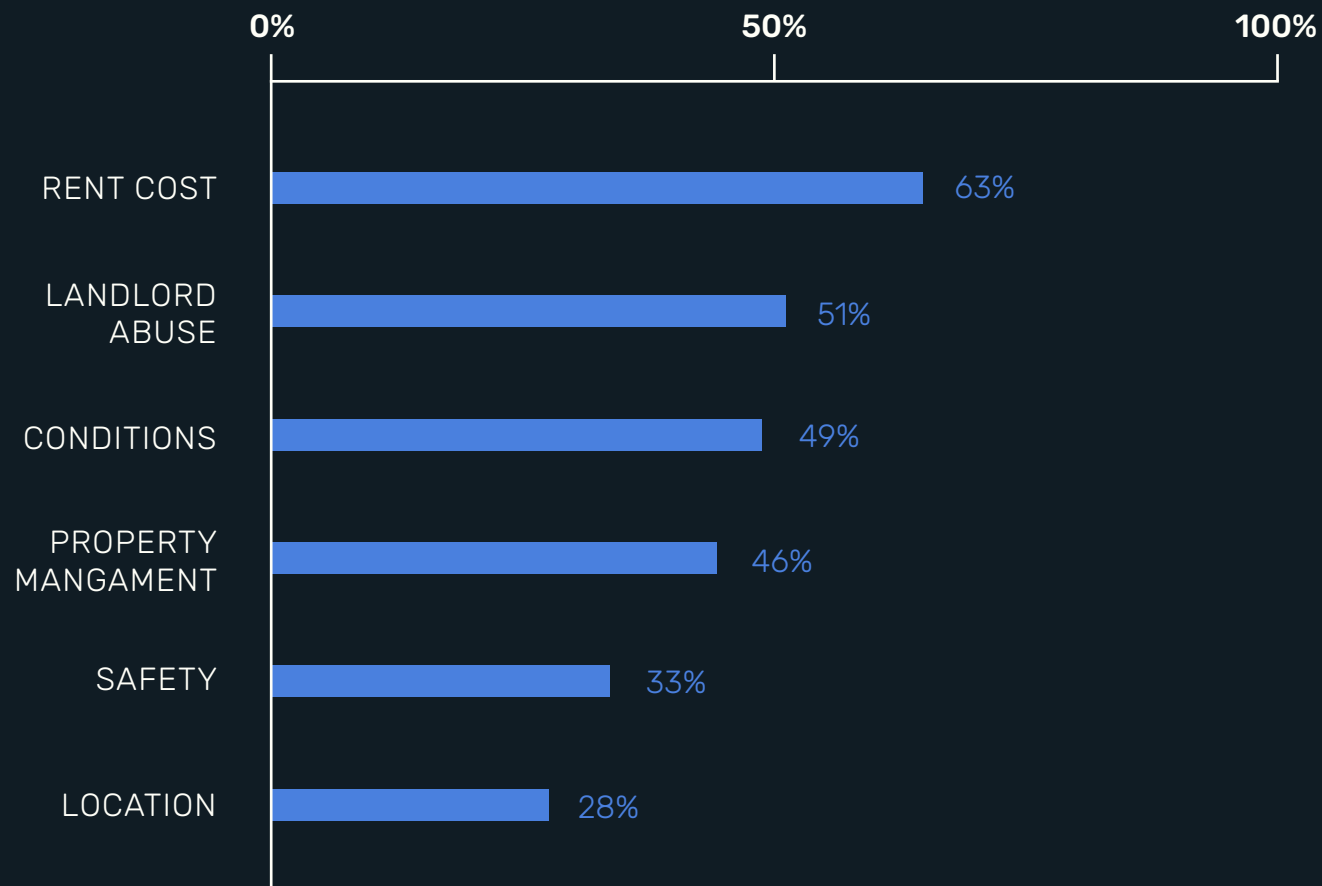


None of this is right, none of this is ok. I shouldn't have to struggle to have clean clothes because all of this [rent] money is going to them - capitalism at its finest.

Ray, Belcrest Apartments (Springfield)



Top Issues: Trailer Parks



Trailer park residents, even those who own their trailer outright, were also concerned with the cost of rent, specifically the lot rent that they pay to the property owner for the land on which their trailer sits, with 64% of those canvassed naming this as their top issue. We spoke with 20 residents at the Briarwood Mobile Home Park in Springfield, and all of them said that their lot rent and associated fees for utilities were becoming prohibitively expensive:



I'm pissed that we are now having to pay for water and trash when before that wasn't the case. I don't know why they would be increasing the lot rent costs when they haven't really done anything to fix up the park.

Andy, Briarwood Trailer Park (Brookline)

This Briarwood resident's anger about the rising costs in the context of little to no improvements on the property was echoed in other trailer parks. We spoke with 20 tenants from Country Acres Mobile Home Park in Joplin, Missouri and followed up with Ramona, a tenant who owns her trailer and has lived at County Acres for 19 years, and shared her frustration with the current practice of neglect while her rent keeps increasing.

RAMONA



If someone is a landlord and owns a property that they can't take care of, I'm sorry but they shouldn't be a landlord. I don't care if you pay \$50 or \$1,000 in rent, we all deserve to be treated fairly. I've lived here for 19 years. We've changed owners several times. The new owners took out the office manager and there's no one here to call about problems. I shouldn't have to call someone in Branson and wait three days to hear back when something needs fixed. We had a water leak that I had to call to have fixed even though it's not my fault. I can show you right where it is because it's where the grass is all green. They wanted to charge me \$360 for a water leak that's on their property. When all was said and done I still had to owe them money. Right now, I have a tree in my yard that's hanging really low over my trailer and I called them about it to have it trimmed. You know what they told me? They told me if I want it trimmed I'd have to pay for it. Then what am I paying lot rent for?

We spoke with over 160 tenants living in public housing units, and 63% of them said that housing conditions were a major issue. In Kennett, Missouri, public housing residents spoke with us about outdated appliances, mold, and rodents. Tessie, a public housing resident in Kennett:

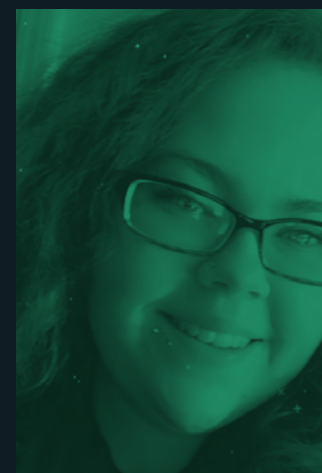


My daughter has liver failure. Her immune system attacked her liver and shut it down. So, I am overly clean. But this place is nasty. I have a pan of water for my dog, and it's covered in roaches. I found mold in my son's room. For two weeks we couldn't even stay here. My breaker box caught fire. We almost died up in here! They don't care. My stove caught fire, and I went 4 months without a stove before they finally brought me a new one. They told me to go the office and write up a report, and I told her no because every time I write something on paper they charge me for it. I'm getting charged for the breaker box when that's their fault! I have to pay almost \$40 a month every time they come in.

Tessie, Public Housing (Kennett)

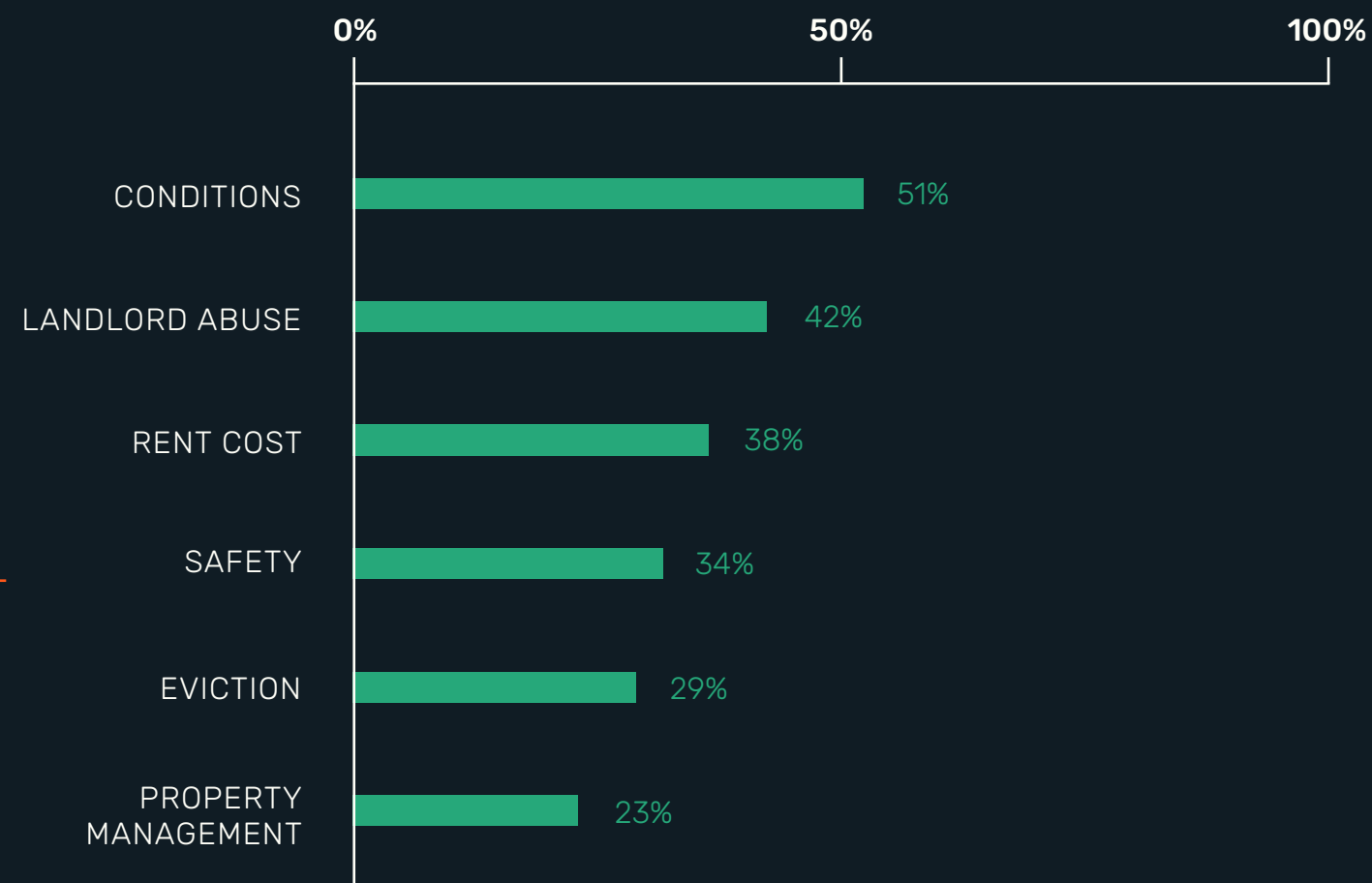
Public housing residents like Alyssa in Parma Public Housing in the Bootheel also reported extreme and punitive repercussions for structural failures in crumbling public housing properties.

ALYSSA, PARMA PUBLIC HOUSING (BOOTHEEL)



I lived in public housing and our apartment caught fire. After the fire I was immediately evicted. They blamed it on me, even though I wasn't there when it happened. They told me that since my name is on the lease it's an automatic eviction if something happens. I had to stay with friends and try to find another place to stay. I was told to try New Madrid, Malden, or Marston but renting again in Parma would have been an automatic 'no'.

Top Issues: Public Housing



Corporate landlords have emerged as major players in rural Missouri. We spoke with over 30 tenants living in Northpark Apartments in Joplin, a corporately-owned and managed property. Dorothy, a tenant at Northpark, described the landlord as unaccountable, adding extra stress as she deals with a Stage 3 cancer diagnosis:

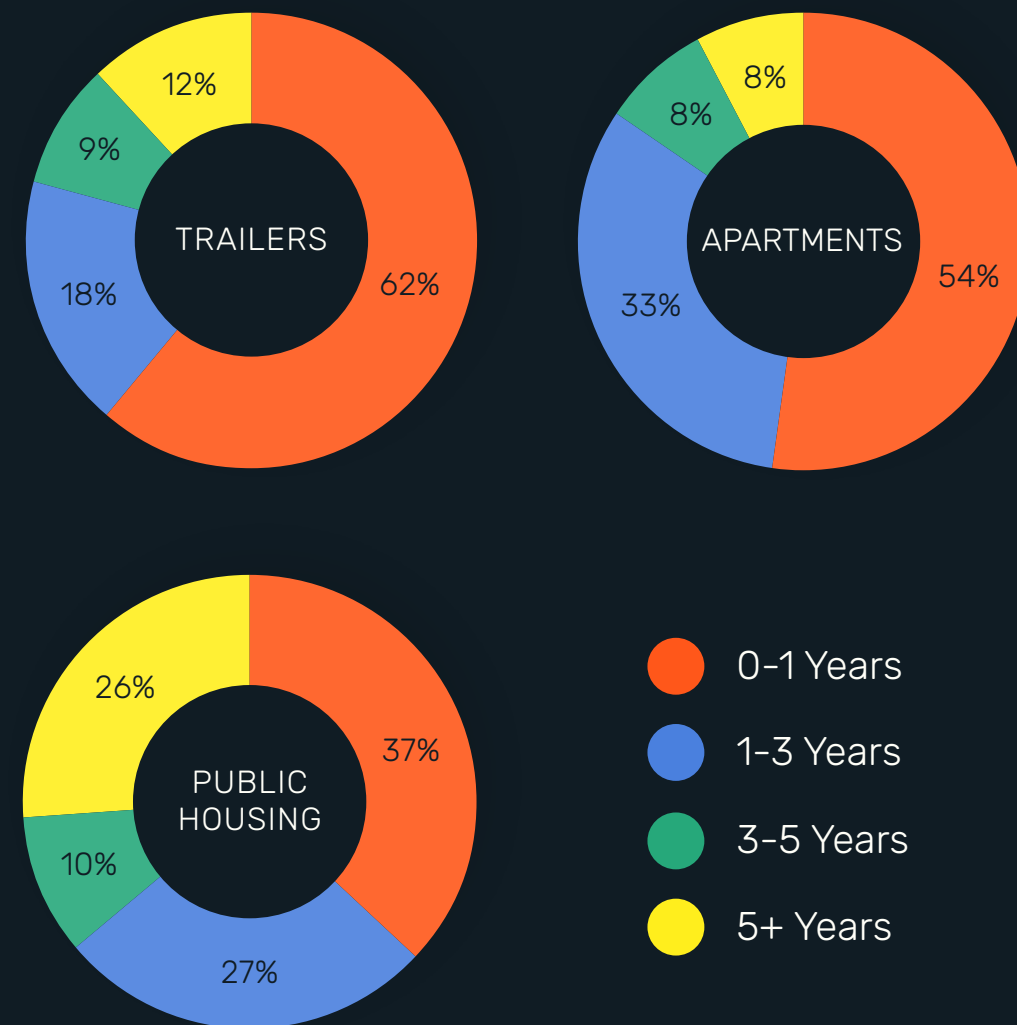


They don't fix shit here. I have problems with roaches, mice and rats. Things are broken and the landlord won't fix them. They increased my rent and didn't improve anything. I have stage 3 cancer, and this is not a clean or safe living environment. I'm going through some shit, and don't need this extra stress. They are screwing everyone living here, while charging us rent.

Dorothy, Northpark Apartments (Joplin)

Non-corporate, local landlords were also described as neglectful and harassing. Some of those landlords hold positions of power and influence in rural communities and small towns, giving them even more leverage over tenants. Overall, we did not hear enough specifics from tenants about the role that local landlords, versus corporate and/or out-of-state landlords, played in their lives in order to come to specific conclusions.

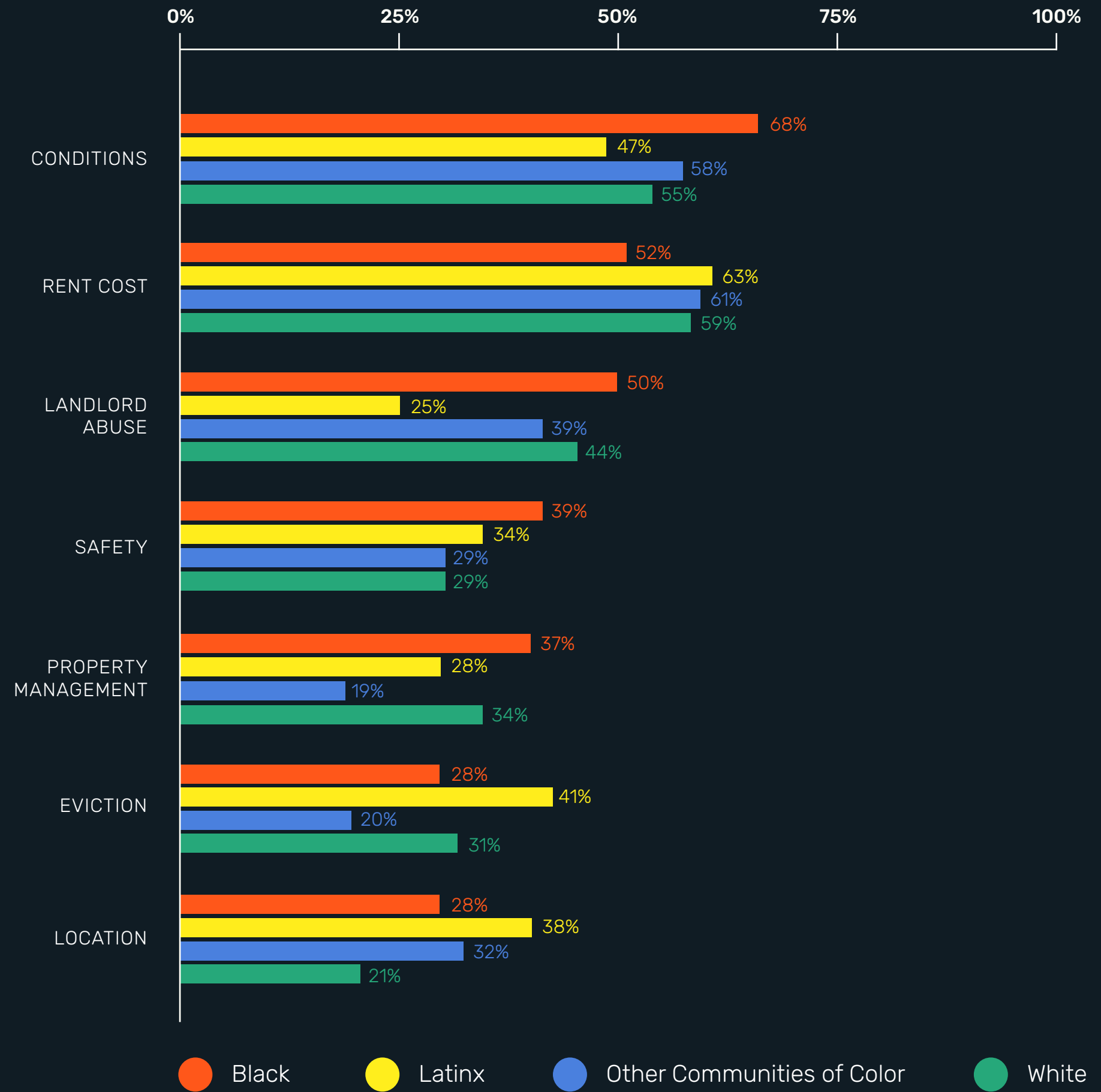
Retention Rate by Housing Type



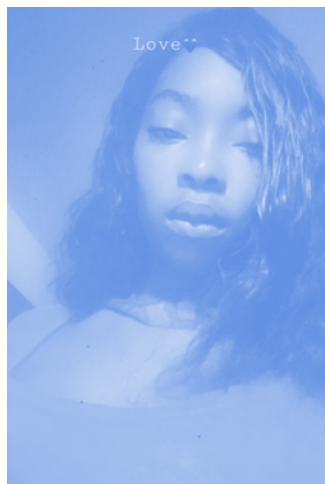
We asked tenants across housing type to tell us how long they had lived in their current home. We found that public housing residents had the most housing stability, and tenants of private apartment complexes had the least. The majority of tenants we encountered in trailers and apartments had lived in their units for less than a year, and that low retention rate was surprisingly significant in trailer parks.

Issues by Race

Black tenants were disproportionately impacted by poor housing conditions, with over 68% of the Black tenants we canvassed naming this as their top issue. Black tenants also named landlord harassment and neglect more than any other group of tenants. DeQuisha, a tenant in Sikeston at the Scott Manor Apartments, told us about the ways her landlords collaborated with the police to intimidate and control tenants in her complex, on the west side of town, where most of the Black community lives.



DEQUISHA, SCOTT MANOR APARTMENTS (SIKESTON)



We can never keep a landlord. My door has been broke since 2019. They still haven't come to fix my door. My child literally can't even stay here because of my door. I want to leave, honestly.

My son loves to play outside. Growing up, my brothers and sisters loved to play outside, but now we can't do that.

There's boys that fight outside, and they put up cameras but it didn't stop it. If I was outside, even if I wasn't involved in the fight, I would lose my apartment. If you know somebody and they do something wrong and you're outside talking to them, you can get in trouble too.

We heard from Black tenants about their perception of the power dynamics in small towns: the power brokers are white, wealthy landowners, and they work to protect their interests. Sedaleya, a tenant in Howardsville Public Housing:



If you hold a name, you make the biggest decisions in these little towns. Money makes everything move. It makes everything talk. If you weren't born or blessed with it, it's a struggle. It seems like [white people] know a type of information they don't divulge... If you don't dig for it and search for it yourself, they'll never tell you. But [white people in our towns] already know that there's funds over here for this or that, but they won't scream it out to anybody else. It's a lack of information and sharing.

Sedaleya, Public Housing (Howardville)

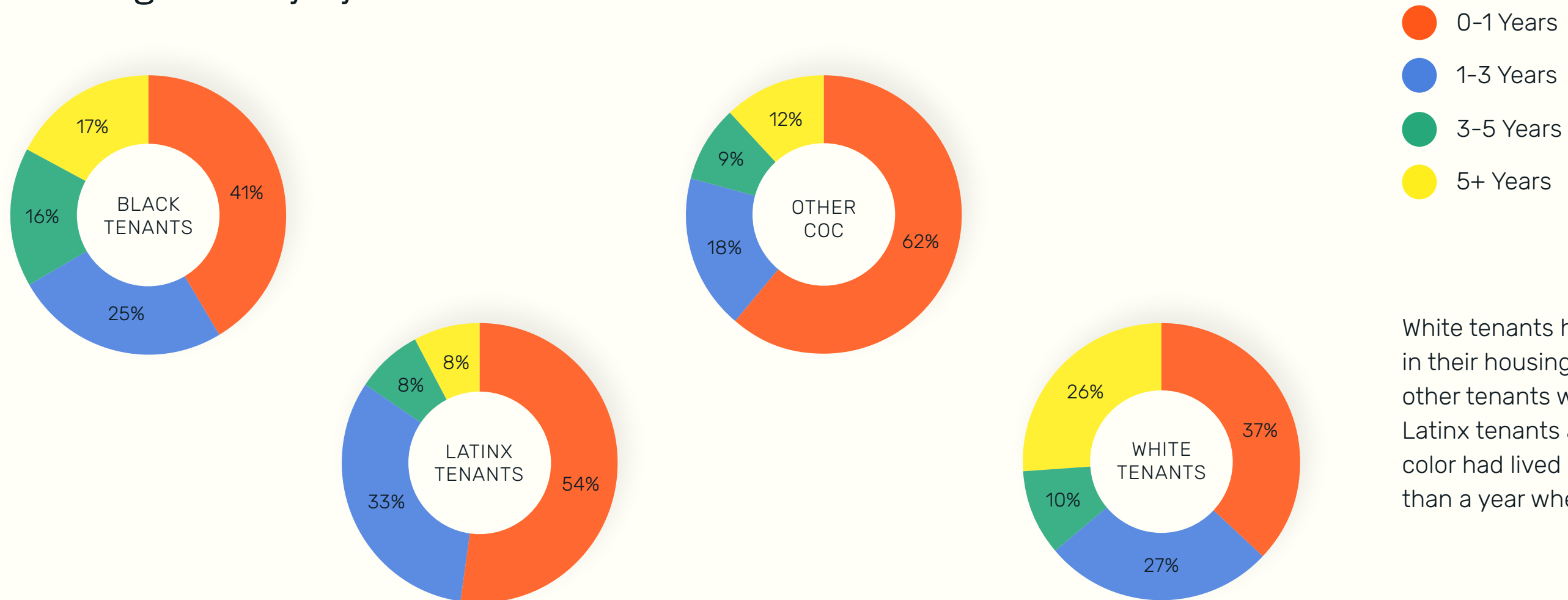
Latinx tenants also shared issues related to discrimination. Mario, a Latinx tenant living at Briarwood Mobile Home Park on the outskirts of Springfield, told us that his landlord nitpicks with him and with the other Latinx residents, but that he is afraid to push back because the landlord does not ask questions about his immigration status:



My landlord is very picky. Don't do this. Don't do that. Our park got a new owner, and they hired a new manager and the rent went up, the sewer went up, and the trash went up. The new guy they hired tells me to cut my grass. I cut my grass, but they tell me my grass is high when other people's grass is higher than mine.

Mario, Briarwood Trailer Park (Brookline)

Housing Stability by Race



White tenants had been able to stay in their housing longer than any other tenants we canvassed. Most Latinx tenants and other tenants of color had lived in their units for less than a year when we spoke to them.

COVID-19 and Rural Tenants

During the pandemic, while states and cities across the country established programs to halt evictions and keep tenants in their homes, Missouri tenants have never been protected by a statewide eviction moratorium, and no counties outside of the major metropolitan areas pursued any tenant-focused COVID-19 protections.¹⁴

In June 2021, when our team began canvassing, we found eviction notices papered across apartment complexes in both Springfield and Cape Girardeau. We learned that landlords who weren't already evicting had preemptively planned to restart court proceedings ahead of the then-expiration date of the federal moratorium in July 2021. Though Missouri received nearly \$324 million in Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) funding,¹⁵ we did not hear much from tenants about the impact of those funds in keeping them secure. In fact, Missouri's State Assistance for Housing Relief program had only spent about 18% of its ERAP funding by October 2021.¹⁶

About 37% of tenants we canvassed said they were worse off because of the COVID-19 pandemic, mostly because of unemployment. About 15% said that pandemic-related unemployment caused them to fall behind on rent.



I had COVID, and I was in the [intensive care unit]. My job is not trying to help me get back into the computer system so I can work, but they're not saying I'm fired. They're just hoping I quit. Right now, we've got someone helping pay our rent. Otherwise we'd be homeless right now. They're helping through December. I'm nervous because if I don't find a job by the end of December, I don't know what we're going to do.

Emma, Greystone Apartments (Springfield)



One notable difference between rural and non-rural communities in Missouri during the pandemic, which was reflected in our conversations, was that most rural economies never truly shut down. According to a study by the University of Missouri, non-urban unemployment rates during COVID-19 were initially similar to metro areas like St. Louis and Kansas City; later on, major metro areas maintained higher unemployment rates while non-urban unemployment rates declined.¹⁷ While some tenants told us about the negative impact of the pandemic and pandemic-related unemployment on their housing situations, COVID came up notably less in conversations than we had initially expected.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

We've Found the Enemy, and It's Not Each Other.¹⁸

We spoke to different kinds of tenants, across Missouri, about their housing, their power in their homes and in their communities, and their assessment of the conditions of today. One throughline was tenants' clarity on who was to blame for the violence of the status quo.

“

We have all these people making decisions for us who have no idea about what it's like to keep a house warm when your kids are freezing... Slumlords, and the city even, are supposed to be providing homes but they don't care about the people living in these homes, just the money that we bring - and they will lie to get it.

Holley (Mexico)



Holley plainly stated something we heard time and time again: the people in power are out of touch, they're not fighting for tenants, and they're putting profit before people's lives. Tenants of all races were clear about the relationship between whiteness and wealth, and between wealth and power.



We need a candidate who is someone like us, poor or working class, a renter... no one who is a landlord or someone who profits off of housing.

Diana (Cole County)



Who stands in the way? Rich, white people. I see them driving up and down our road with their fancy cars and big-ass trucks.

Mark (Cape Girardeau)



I just think the government needs to be reworked. To be honest, I don't think they really care. We need somebody who actually cares - to put it in nice terms. If all of these problems were taken care of I think we'd be happier, a lot more secure with a better quality of life.

Libby (Joplin)

Other tenants got even more specific, detailing the individual, structural, and systemic violence they endured in their homes, and their ideas for what could solve the problems. Norm, a tenant in Marshfield, a small town outside of Springfield:



There should be a cap on the number of home properties that a slumlord is able to own. It should be illegal to buy up properties just to sell them to lower income people who just need a place to live. Banks should look at your financial history more comprehensively when applying for a mortgage. We've paid our rent on time for over seven years, but since they don't have a high enough Income, the banks are able to decide not to give us a mortgage. Even though a mortgage would be cheaper than our rent. If your rent is higher than a mortgage, then you should be able to get the mortgage. **Housing ought to be a right but it ain't, and that ain't right.** Slumlords should face legal repercussions for fixing housing markets and bad properties.

Norm (Marshfield)

Tenants rarely blamed themselves or each other. This is one of the most interesting insights coming out of our conversations, unique because of the dominant narratives that socialize us to believe that it is our own fault if we fall behind, can't pay rent, or get evicted. It is also interesting because of the ways that media and politicians use differences (race and otherwise) to divide people, especially in rural communities. While we heard derisive or self-blaming comments here or there, by and large tenants knew that the status quo persists because some people— landlords, developers, politicians— are profiting from it.

The hopelessness is profound, but organizing could offer an antidote.

Tenants in rural Missouri expressed feelings of hopelessness and futility, for a range of reasons, some based on unsuccessful attempts to come together with neighbors, some rooted in anticipated rejection, some coming from a valid analysis of how the scales are tilted in favor of the property owners.



It will take all of us coming together. I don't know that anybody around here has the nerve to do that, and the power or the money. There's just not a lot of money. I don't know how we could put something together.

Pam, Northpark Apartments (Springfield)

The hopelessness we encountered was widely and deeply felt, and we couldn't ignore it. Rural tenants shared their feelings about how people like them have been patronized, neglected, dismissed, demonized and disposed of by the rest of the country. Many seemed to internalize that they weren't worth more than the crumbs they had been offered, or that they should be thankful to have what little they did.

Despite the resounding hopelessness, we heard tenants recognize the latent power among their neighbors. The simple idea, that there are more of us than there are of them, resonated with tenants in our conversations. Even people who had never heard of a tenant union before seemed to intuitively understand that we are stronger together than we are as individuals, and that a different type of world could exist— one where our homes were guaranteed, collectively owned, and not just someone's investment.



I think that [getting more say in housing] would require a lot of people getting together. You'd either have to pass a law or run a campaign, because just one person isn't going to make a lot of change on their own.

Madison, Trails End Apartments (Springfield)

In fact, some tenants we met had already engaged in organizing, whether or not they used the same language to describe what they had done. Tenants at Briarwood, a trailer park in southwest Missouri, told us that they had come together to demand property management provide salt to residents during a recent ice storm, and tenants living at Country Acres in Joplin had organized meetings to discuss issues in the past.

In rural communities and small towns, we found that people were already in relationship with their neighbors, maybe more than tenants in urban areas, out of necessity. We observed a kind of loose, natural organization among neighbors who knew each other and looked out for one another:



You know, neighbors, we all talk. We don't have what they call a neighborhood group, or anything like that, where we get together and put our minds together and go complain about it - we don't do that. But we do talk house-to-house and with each other across the street.

Harvey, Public Housing (Sikeston)

THE FUTURE FOR MISSOURI TENANTS

We set out on this experiment with a dedication to humility: we didn't know what we didn't know. We asked questions, listened deeply, and sat with our findings for several months before attempting any analysis. We believe we came out of the experiment with a deeper, more nuanced perspective on Missouri tenants— their struggles and their visions for the future.

What we found informs our next steps. We learned about which issues matter most to rural tenants, and we learned how those issues impact different types of tenants, across race and housing type. We heard tenants name the enemies with clarity and conviction: the profiteers and those who enable them to perpetuate violence through our housing system today. And, finally, we wrestled with the understandable hopelessness in rural Missouri, while studying the organic organization among rural tenants and the latent power that could be activated.

Again, from a place of humility, we have emerged with the following thoughts on what comes next:

- While we might have initially thought of this as the first phase towards building a statewide organization, we learned that there is still more we need to learn about how to organize in rural Missouri, and that supporting local organization is the most fruitful next step. KC Tenants has been successful in the western side of the state because we organized deep: built a deep base, invested in our leaders, and ran local campaigns that won. We can't

sacrifice this kind of depth in rural Missouri for the sake of rushing to a statewide structure. This would come at a cost, and it's a cost we're not willing to pay.

- We doubled down on our analysis that the people closest to the problems are closest to the solutions, and that rural Missourians are the experts of their own experience, and the holders of their own vision for what they need. As such, it shouldn't be organizers from Kansas City who are leading the powerbuilding needed in rural communities, but rather rural organizers who are themselves from those communities, especially to relate to and organize beyond the futility we heard on the doors.
- KC Tenants has a role to play. Our knowledge of and experience in organizing impacted tenants toward their own liberation is valuable. Missouri needs more tenant unions, organizers to build them, and tenants to lead them. We can and should invest in the leadership of our rural neighbors through training, skill-sharing, and coaching. Along the way, we know our own organizing practice will sharpen from the lessons our rural comrades will share with us.
- Our next step is to invest in a second experiment that is focused on southeast Missouri. Southeast Missouri is one the regions in Missouri that has received the least organizing investment. KC Tenants will support Aaron Lerma, the canvass coordinator from the MO Tenants experiment described in this report, to build a base of tenants in Cape Girardeau. Aaron aims to build a base, run a campaign led by impacted tenants, and to build a power organization. Our goal is to give Aaron the tools they need to organize people and money in a way that hasn't been done in southeast Missouri since The Sharecroppers' Strike of 1939.

This is a long game, but we believe it's our best bet. We aren't betting on flipping house seats or winning a statewide ballot initiative any time soon. The bet is building the bench of organizers and the base of tenants across the state who, in time, will assemble and wield the kind of power we need to win a better Missouri for all of us.

We believe that a Missouri where working-class and poor people make decisions about where and how we live is possible. We also believe that the path to this reality goes hand in hand with the bigger goal of defeating racial capitalism, in our country, our state, our cities, our neighborhoods, and ourselves. Like the tenants lining Highway 60 forced from their homes in the 1930s, and the tenants lining Interstate 70 fighting to stay in our homes during a pandemic in 2020, we know our vision for Missouri will not be won without a fight.

**FROM THE NEW
MADRID FAULT TO
THE ST. JOSEPH
STOCKYARDS,
WE ARE
COMPELLED TO
CRY OUT, AND WE ARE
COMPELLED TO WIN.**



AARON'S VISION *for* RURAL MISSOURI

I saw a glimpse of liberation as a child growing up in Missouri's Bootheel.



On sunny days, my dad would take my sister and me fishing along the Mississippi River. We would pack up our fishing gear and ride down the levee to find a spot that wasn't crowded, or to squeeze into a spot that was crowded, because that was a sign that people were catching fish. My dad had a way of making conversation with strangers at the Twin Borrow Pits or The Loop. We got to know some of the regulars, like the two older Black men who'd fish for catfish in one of the deeper waterways while we fished for

crappie. Everyone knew to watch for the game warden, and to make a plan to hand off your pole if you didn't have a fishing license. People knew to keep an eye out. We had each others' backs.

In the most remote areas along the river, we lived carefree days in the sun with fish on our line. I cherish those memories— of community, freedom, joy— the best of the Bootheel.

Of course, growing up in Missouri's Bootheel wasn't all sunny days at the river. There was another side of where I grew up, based on scarcity and fear and repression. Our people were poor, neglected by policy and politicians. Rural Missourians were stereotyped and dismissed. And sometimes our community wasn't much of a community at all. My family's pastor spread hate from the pulpit, preaching that gay people were going to hell. My school took us on a trip to visit the New Madrid County Jail, and teachers told us that's where the "bad kids" would end up. I was enrolled in conversion therapy, and I was punished for questioning, for exploring, for expressing myself.

My rural Missouri contains all of this complexity and more: bad, ugly, good, and downright gorgeous. Sometimes I've thought of leaving, but I keep deciding not to. In all of its complexity, rural Missouri is my home, and I want to fight for it.

My neighbors and I are tired. Tired of being blamed for our own misfortune, tired of being patronized with campaign promises. We're tired of low wages, crumbling housing. But a reckoning is coming.

When I knocked on doors and made phone calls, I saw myself in the tenants we engaged. I heard stories of desperation, I listened to folks like me wonder aloud about what could be possible if they just moved someplace else. But I also heard my neighbors share a commitment to their communities. Tenants told me: rural Missourians are not disposable, and we will fight for what we're owed.

I believe in a future where we can reclaim our labor, our homes, and our communities from the profiteers. I believe in a future for rural Missouri that looks like those sunny days on the river, channeling the best of us, where we keep an eye out, where we share the riverbank and the abundance of fish, and where we relish in the deliciousness of one another, strangers and friends. I'm under no illusions about how much it will take to get to that future, but I'm committed to fight for it.

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ACLU of Missouri	National Resources Defense Council
Action St. Louis	Our Revolution - Kansas City and St. Joseph
Arch City Defenders	Renew Missouri
BikeWalk KC	Rolla for Progress
KC Democratic Socialists of America	SEIU Healthcare IL/MO/KS/IN
Empower MO	SEIU Local 1
Heartland Center for Jobs and Freedom	STL Close the Workhouse
Homes for All St. Louis	STL Not For Sale
KC Tenants	Sierra Club
Kansas-Missouri Dream Alliance	Southeast Ferguson Community Association
Metropolitan Equal Housing and Opportunity Council	Springfield Tenants Unite
Migrant and Immigrant Community Action Project	St. Francis Catholic Worker House
Missouri Jobs with Justice	Sunrise Movement KC
Missouri NAACP	Team TIF
National Housing Trust	Washington University Undergraduate & Graduate Workers Union
National Low Income Housing Coalition	

APPENDIX I: GLOSSARY

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT (HUD)

U.S. government agency that supports community development and homeownership, enforces the Fair Housing Act, gives grants to local communities, like the Community Development Block Grant, and oversees programs like the Housing Choice Voucher program (commonly known as Section 8).

GENTRIFICATION

The process whereby the character and demographic population of a neighborhood or area is changed by wealthier (often white) people moving in, new/rehabilitated housing development, higher rent and living costs, and the presence of new businesses, typically displacing current residents in the process.

EVICTION

A civil/court process, in which a landlord may legally remove a tenant from their property.

LANDLORD

Sometimes referred to as the property owner. The owner of real property, such as a house, building, or land, that is leased or rented to another person, the tenant.

ORGANIZING

The process of people who share a common goal or struggle coming together to achieve it through collective action. At KC Tenants, we understand organizing to be relational: we are only as strong as the depth of our relationships. We believe that the most powerful organizing occurs by following the leadership of those who are the most impacted by the systemic violence of today: the people closest to the problem are closest to the solution. We believe that social change necessarily involves conflict: we take direct action to force our demands to be met, creating crises for those who create crisis in our lives.

POWER

The ability to act; the ability to create change. We believe that power has two sources: organized people and organized money.

RACIAL CAPITALISM

The system that we live under, built around race and class. In this system, wealthy people, who are overwhelmingly white, gain wealth, profit and power from the exploitation and oppression of the working class and poor people of all colors. Racial inequality is built into the structure of the economy, and race and class work together to shape government policies and cultural norms. Our understanding of this concept comes from the Black political theorist Cedric Robinson.

RETALIATION

Action taken by a landlord against a tenant, often after tenants unionize or otherwise take action to assert their rights. Retaliatory actions can include harassment, rent increases and fines, threats, eviction.

SOLIDARITY

Unity among a group with common interests. The practice of standing together, both literally and figuratively, acknowledging that we are stronger together than we are as individuals.

TENANT UNION

A building-, neighborhood-, or city-based organization made up of, and led by, tenants. Tenant unions organize to improve conditions, protect tenants' rights, and more. Building-based tenants unions are generally made up of tenants who live in the same building and/or have the same landlord. Neighborhood- and city-based tenant unions are networks of tenants who often have similar issues, but may live in different buildings and/or have different landlords. (KC Tenants is a citywide tenant union.) A well-organized tenant union can win demands that no individual tenant could win.

APPENDIX II: MO TENANTS DEEP LISTENING TOOLKIT

We wanted to provide tools to other organizers who are seeking to build a similar listening experiment. In this toolkit we share our overview of deep listening and what it is, the script that guided our conversations with rural tenants, and good practices our team followed during the process.

OVERVIEW OF DEEP LISTENING

Deep listening is a process of listening to learn. It requires a willingness to listen without judgment while also asking pointed questions to understand someone's analysis about their own issues, their life, and the systems that influence the world around them.

A successful conversation was often 20-40 minute long, and mostly not tethered to a predetermined structure. We often found tenants required some time to feel enough trust to get real with us, so sometimes the conversations were longer and canvassers shared some of their own story to invite vulnerability from the tenant. Ideally, a deep listening conversation would look like the canvasser speaking for 20% of the conversation and the tenant speaking for 80%.

Deep listening is not a sales pitch, it's not a needs assessment, and it's not an organizing one-on-one (which is typically even deeper!). We were not there to solve anyone's problems, cast judgment, or offer legal

advice. If someone did not want to speak with us, we respected that decision.

MO TENANTS DEEP LISTENING SCRIPT

Below is the "script" that we used to train our team on how to have conversations on the doors with other tenants. This script was meant to help structure conversations, but it was not meant to be read word-for-word or to limit the natural flow of the conversation.

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

EXAMPLE 1:

Hi. My name is ____ and I'm a leader with Missouri Tenants. We're a grassroots organization of people who rent their homes. So, like you, I am a renter too! I've been talking to my neighbors about housing injustice - what is it that we NEED in our housing - and asking folks what we're going to do to get what we need! [insert your stake here - a few sentences]

EXAMPLE 2:

Hi. My name is ____, I'm a leader with Missouri Tenants. We're an organization of people who rent their homes and who fight for tenant rights here in Missouri. We're trying to build up a picture of what housing looks like across rural Missouri. [insert your stake here - a few sentences]

Example: "To give you some background about me, I'm a tenant and have rented for 14 years. I really enjoy living here and renting, but I've seen how landlords abuse their power. I've been forced out of my apartment and even lost my rental deposit for no reason. I know how it feels for no one to have your back, and I don't want anyone else to feel that way. What has your experience renting been like?"

[following your introduction, go right into the conversation! Be willing to go anywhere the conversation goes and use the following section to guide it back to tenant issues]

PART 2: AGITATION

QUESTIONS TO ASK ON EVERY CONVERSATION

- How do you feel about living here? Do you like living here?
- How long have you stayed/lived here?
- Are there things you'd want to change? What issues have you come across while renting? What should change about the rental process?
- Has covid impacted your housing?
- Do you like living here? What's your vision for your housing? What stands in the way of your vision?
- Who is the decision maker around here? (or) Who owns these apartments/this property?
- [Follow up if they are unhappy with their housing] Do you think you have the power to make things better around here?

AGITATION TOOLBOX - OTHER POTENTIALLY HELPFUL QUESTIONS TO ASK

Look at these questions like a toolbox full of tools. You won't need every question in every conversation. Use these questions to help get yourself curious about the person you're talking to:

- Is there anything you'd change about this place?
- Have you always rented?
- What was your favorite place you ever lived? What's the worst place you ever lived?
- What's your relationship like with your landlord now?
- Do you think that the people in power represent landlords or tenants? Why?
- Do you think some people have a harder time finding and keeping quality housing than others?
- What is your vision for housing in your community?

- Do you think others around here feel the same way you do?
- Do you identify as [race]? Do you feel like that's impacted your housing experience?
- What would it take for you to feel secure in your housing, your community, this block?
- How has this community changed over the years?
- Who mostly lives here? In this area?

ON POWER

- Who do you think has the most power? Who makes decisions about housing here?
 - Do you think it's you? Why not?
 - Who should be making decisions about - ?
 - Do you think the people making decisions have you in mind? If there was a decision made about ____ do you think you'd get a say?
- It's clear that the landlords ultimately have the power in this situation. What do you think it would take to build the kind of power that we need - as renters - to win what we need?
 - What would have to happen to get us there?
 - Why hasn't this happened yet? What's stopping us/What stands in our way?
 - What will happen if we don't build power for ourselves?

PART 3: CLOSE

[Collect their name, ask if you can follow up with them, and don't forget to record their unit/apartment #]

1. Ask for their name
 - *"I'm sorry I forgot to ask what your name was?"*
2. Ask if you can follow up with them and get a phone # (do NOT lead with email).

- *"Can we follow up with you? Do you have a phone number we can reach you at?"*
3. Verify their race (DO NOT ASSUME!)
 - *"Can I ask what your race is? I identify as _____. How do you identify?"*
 4. End conversation
 - *"Thanks for your time today."*
 5. Rate their general attitude about their housing on a scale of 1-10
 - *[Make your own assessment as the canvasser, unless you feel you can fit the question in casually into the conversation.]*

TIPS FOR BUILDING CONNECTION

ON THE DOORS

- Be mindful of how you present yourself on the doors. Most folks will not know who we are, so if it comes off too much like a sales-pitch they may instantly be turned off.
- Take mental notes about the property and neighborhood, then bring it up during your conversation. Some examples:
 - Are there nice amenities (like a well-maintained laundry room)? or are there no amenities?
 - Is it freshly painted? or is the wall peeling off?
 - Are there structural issues?

ON THE PHONES

Having a deep conversation on the phone will vary slightly from the doors. Here are some suggestions that may help with building trust over the phone:

- Speak slower than you normally would and speak as clearly as possible to help eliminate any confusion.
- Be direct in your introduction about why you're calling. In other words, get to the point.

FOR BOTH

Weave your story into the conversation.

- Start with your 2-3 sentence stake, then ask something like - how do you feel about living here? Do you like it?

Be ready for a wild ride!

- What do they want to talk about?
- Talk about it with them and ask questions to help them draw connections between it and their housing situation.
- Get comfortable asking questions and using them to guide the conversation to what you're looking to find.

Some folks may have a harder time opening up than others.

Look for opportunities to share your own experiences when they share something that is similar to yours - then ask a follow up question.

- Share what you felt when sharing your experiences. Examples:
 - *"I felt really shitty about myself when my landlord blamed me for the condition of my apartment. Have you ever felt that way?"*
 - *"I was scared when I had my lease terminated. I didn't know where I was going to go, and I still had to go to work that day."*
 - *"I was ashamed to talk about the way my kitchen looked because everything was run down and I thought it was my fault - but it wasn't. It was that way when I moved in."*

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