

# Ypsilanti Renters Focus Group

On Monday, August 7, 2017, participants met at the Ypsilanti Library (Michigan Ave Branch) for a housing and neighborhood focus group. Participants represented a group of renters, residing in the City of Ypsilanti, and showed their care and love of their community as facilitators asked about their housing and living situation. Participants also discussed issues, including racial discrimination and rising rents, as concerns they have for their community. Discussions about housing, affordability, and neighborhood experiences from this focus group informed the Assessment for Fair Housing Plan.

Facilitators: Teresa Gillotti and Karen Otzen (OCED)

Participants: 9

## Ideal Neighborhood Qualities

When asked, "If you could live anywhere and money was no object, what would you look for in a neighborhood?" participants described the following neighborhood qualities:

- Parks
- Farmer's market
- Community Wifi
- Grocery nearby
- Free clinic that serves mental health needs
- Music venue
- Third spaces
- Channels for political engagement
- Young professionals
- Libraries
- Affordability
- Jobs
- Legal aid
- Places that will accept housing vouchers
- Leadership that reflects the population
- Social responsibility
- Public transit
- Upkeep
- Needs are close by
- Diversity
- Restaurants
- Community input/influence/control
- Homeless shelter
- Recreation center
- Landlord diversity/options

When asked about how Ypsilanti/their neighborhood(s) compare to these ideal qualities, participants shared critiques about the following aspects:

- Community Wifi
- Grocery nearby
- Free clinic that serves mental health needs (DHS is terrible, WHP is good)
- Music venue
- Channels for political engagement
- Affordability
- Jobs
- Legal aid
- Places that will accept housing vouchers
- Leadership that reflects the population
- Social responsibility
- Needs are close by
- Diversity
- Community input/influence/control
- Homeless shelter
- Rec-center
- Landlord diversity/options

## Resources Used

Participants had learned about things like schools, programs, child care, bus routes, et cetera through word of mouth, the streets, social media (i.e. Facebook and Instagram), Mlive, social networks, blogs, Off-the-ground Ypsi, and the radio, including the Michigan Radio, WEMU, and WCBN stations).

## Housing

All participants currently rent. Here's the breakdown of their length of stay:

- For less than 2 years: 7
- For 3-5 years: 1
- For 6-10 years: 1

## Cost of Living

The group then spoke a little more about affordability and the cost of living, for example, rent, utilities, transportation costs, child care or education. When asked how (if at all) the cost of living in Ypsilanti has changed over the past 2 to 3 years, participants shared mixed responses, but overall said the cost of living changed some to quite a bit/a lot in recent years.

Car and car insurance, business expenses, health care and food/groceries were among the major expenses, after housing.

## Looking for Housing

Six of the nine participants actively looked for a different place to rent within the last 12 months. When participants were asked if they were to leave Ypsilanti, theoretically, where would they look for housing, participants mentioned the following areas:

- Ann Arbor
- Different Ypsi neighborhood
- Different block
- Detroit
- Northern Michigan

Outside of housing cost, here are some other housing limitations participants said they experienced:

- LGBTQ friendliness
- Political affiliations (rules for signs and speech)
- Political pressures
- Hostility
- Harassment
- Credit report
- Just a negative feeling
- Shown only poor options, mentioned examples of racial discrimination
- Power-differential
- Monopoly by landlords

Participants were asked about the challenges they faced regarding jobs and income. Here's what they had to say:

- There can be job options if you know how to find them or have access to the technology.
- Social capital is necessary to find employment.
- Underemployment - even with advanced degrees, income is low. Searching for a job is a long process.
- Minimum wage has been increasing, but has been underpriced compared to housing cost.
- Dealing with student loans.
- Wages are too low.
- Would want a new employer, but one that hires locally.
- There is a need for skills/training for emerging markets.

## Themes and Strategies

To wrap things up, participants were asked about some themes that came up in discussion. Below lists the themes identified by the group, as well as some strategies they suggested to make improvements.

### Themes

- Rent climb
- Community agency / community voice
- Poor Housing quality
- Monopolies/lack of diversity lead to discrimination
- Political accountability is lacking
- Displacement
- Economic climate
- Education is a prerequisite for a good job (education inflation)
- Economic anxiety contributing mental health issues
- Generational wealth impacts (social mobility)
- Place and race disconnection to opportunity

### Strategies

- Job skills/re-training
- Computer literacy
- Student debt relief
- Social safety-net
- Planned parenthood
- Get rid of capitalism
- Medical options
- More subsidized housing options for low income people
- Longer leases with a rent cap option
- Thinking longer term

Participants then discussed what gentrification means to them, and they responded with terms such as "influx of wealth," "displacement," and "incentives for organizations that bring wealth." Here are some themes they hear regarding gentrification:

- Gentrification seems to be encouraged
- "Grow the Pie" is the focus
- No social protection
- Structural
- Cities trying to grow the tax base

Participants brainstormed strategies to protect against the negative effects of gentrification:

- Housing treated like a human rights issue
- Jobs
- Serving current community members' needs
- Diversity of businesses
- Affordable for residents
- Courting
- Equitable development for existing residents
- Leaders who listen
- Diversity/de-concentrate subsidized housing
- Mixed income neighborhoods

Lastly, participants were asked if there was anything else they thought OCED staff should know that hadn't been covered:

- Feel like they are in between being housed and homeless, but need help. They are struggling, but not enough for social services.
- Would like to see more housing advocacy
- Feel like you can no longer "live in place" because they have to move very frequently
- Really wish to see new employers coming to Ypsi that will hire locals.
- Several stories of being denied housing- some for seemingly illegal reasons.
- Their rental units haven't been passing inspections.
- Feel like landlords take advantage of the "gullibility" of students and the fact that they are not always using their own money.
- Housing challenges can prevent mobility on a social level
- Housing is a necessity, not a luxury
- People will put up with a lot just to keep a roof over their head.
- some of the participants said they had used food stamps for years.
- Some wished they could find housing vouchers, but there were not enough to go around.

Overall, participants expressed concern regarding rising rents, which may force them out, and the lack of services in job training for skills that are currently highly employable. Participants shared that even with higher education and advanced degrees, finding a job that matches income/skill level is difficult in the area. This provides some nuance to the issue of housing affordability: rents are rising and incomes are not comparable.