RESEARCH REPORT

Community Power Building for Housing Justice
A Case Study from Los Angeles

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Executive Summary

The concept of housing justice—ensuring everyone has affordable housing that promotes health, well-being, and upward mobility by confronting historical and ongoing harms and disparities caused by structural racism and other systems of oppression—has gained momentum in the last decade across advocacy and organizing, policy, direct services, and research spaces. Building on the current housing justice movement in Los Angeles, this research seeks to understand the role of community power building as a strategy to create, implement, and sustain solutions to achieve more equitable and just outcomes in housing systems. Through qualitative interviews with community stakeholders, we sought to answer four key questions:

1. What are the contextual forces currently driving community power building for housing justice in Los Angeles?

2. How has community power building led to shifts in the political environment and to structural changes in support of housing justice goals?

3. What are the opportunities and limitations of coalitions for power building for housing justice?

4. What supports are needed to sustain community power building for housing justice?

We found that the contextual forces driving community power building for housing justice in Los Angeles include broader shifts in the sociopolitical and narrative landscape around homelessness, housing instability, and electoral change, as well as recent catalyzing events that have triggered crisis responses and action. Community power-building activities fall into several categories, such as base building, legal and research support, and policy change, and have resulted in shifts toward housing justice. Specifically, coalitions have played a key role in advancing housing justice while simultaneously providing benefits for member organizations, although this has at times contributed to tensions around different strategies or priorities. Ongoing priorities and challenges include addressing housing-related systems and structures, focusing on tenant and rental protections, and shifting power to directly impacted communities. These findings have implications for organizers, funders, policymakers, and researchers interested in advancing community power building for housing justice.
Community Power Building for Housing Justice: A Case Study from Los Angeles

Growing levels of housing insecurity and homelessness, as well as wide disparities in outcomes across race, income, disability status, and other identities, have led to calls for a structural approach to address housing challenges in the United States. The concept of housing justice—which the Urban Institute defines as “ensuring everyone has affordable housing that promotes health, well-being, and upward mobility by confronting historical and ongoing harms and disparities caused by structural racism and other systems of oppression”—has gained momentum in the last decade across advocacy and organizing, policy, direct services, and research spaces (Pitkin et al. 2023). The housing justice movement seeks to address long-standing impacts of discriminatory policies such as redlining, hostile zoning ordinances (Menendian et al. 2022), and restrictive land covenants (Redford 2016), which have led to disparate outcomes and ongoing harms to communities and individuals, particularly those who are Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous.

At the root of housing injustice is the inequitable distribution of power (HIP and RTTC 2020). Community power building is one approach to shift power in decisionmaking and give agency to the people most affected by housing injustices and inequities by pushing for more inclusive and community-led solutions, greater accountability to affected communities, and equitable outcomes (Pastor et al. 2020).

Power Building as a Framework for Advancing Housing Justice

At the heart of power building is the goal of structural change, or fundamentally addressing inequities at their roots. This entails redirecting resources, making structural changes to decisionmaking processes, shifting societal values and narratives, developing a lasting community power-building infrastructure, and creating strategic opportunities to advance communities’ specific interests.

Through power-building strategies and activities, community members and advocates work to influence decisions and implementation of housing policy and systems change. In the short term,
strategies like community and tenant organizing, litigation, and advocacy can lead to positive outcomes, such as eviction prevention (Michener 2023). Coalition building, civic engagement, and organizing campaigns can lead to increased funding for housing and electing tenant-friendly representatives (Michener and SoRelle 2022). In the long term, these efforts to build power, combined with intentional and strategic leadership training and mentoring, can lead to sustained policy and systems change. Importantly, they can also empower people within their own communities to have more agency over their lives and prevent displacement (Card 2022; Thurber and Fraser 2016).

Building on existing power-building literature, including the Power-Building Ecosystem Framework (USC PERE 2019), and our research team's depth of expertise on power building in Los Angeles, we developed a conceptual model to inform our understanding of power building as a mechanism for housing justice (figure 1). Our framework conceptualizes the key outputs of power-building activities and how these align with housing justice–related outcomes and housing justice overall.
FIGURE 1
Power Building as a Strategy for Housing Justice

*Conceptual framework describing key power-building activities, outputs, and outcomes*

**Power-Building as a Foundation**

- Organizational development, infrastructure, and funders
- Advocacy and policy
- Research and legal
- Comms, cultural, and narrative change
- Alliance and coalitions
- Leadership development

**Example Outputs**
- Rent control and stabilization
- Eviction prevention
- Community land trusts
- Zoning changes
- Affordable housing development

**Example Outcomes**
- Housing as a human right
- Seek and prioritize solutions shaped by people with lived experience
- Create policies that repair harm caused by past racist policies
- Make housing accessible to all people
- Ensure housing creates economic opportunity
- Guarantee residents are empowered to choose where and how they live

**Housing Justice**

*Everyone has affordable housing that promotes health, well-being, and upward mobility by confronting historical and ongoing harms and disparities caused by structural racism and other systems of oppression.*

**Source:** Adapted from USC PERE, “California Health and Justice for All Power-Building Landscape: Defining the Ecosystem” (Los Angeles, CA: USC Equity Research Institute, 2019).
There is a robust literature base outlining how building power within communities achieves housing justice goals. For example, the University of Southern California’s Program for Environmental and Regional Equity developed a Power-Building Ecosystem Framework (USC PERE 2019), which recognizes that while organizing and base-building groups are central to community power-building efforts, there are several other systems and structures that are necessary to address and dismantle inequities, including advocacy and policy, research and legal support, alliances and coalitions, narrative change, and organizational development, infrastructure, and funding (see box 1 for key terms and definitions used throughout this report).

There are several examples of how communities have successfully built power for housing justice over the past several decades and in the present. Power-building efforts specific to housing justice can take the form of community ownership (e.g., community land trusts), coalition building, community organizing, and tenant organizing.1 For example, in the 1950s, community residents of the Los Angeles neighborhood Boyle Heights organized to oppose the Golden State Freeway, which would inevitably have displaced hundreds of households if developed.2 And in the 1980s, Washington, DC, implemented the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, which provides low- and moderate-income tenants with the right to purchase and control their own homes.3

In more recent years, power-building activities have continued to grow across the country. In New York State, Housing Justice for All—a movement to address tenants’ needs and homelessness—has organized several grassroots campaigns to achieve successes around rent control, housing stability, and tenant protections.4 Similarly, the KC Tenants Union, a citywide tenants union in Kansas City, organizes for safe, accessible, and truly affordable homes for poor and working-class tenants.5 Similar power-building activities have occurred elsewhere, including in Virginia and Minneapolis.6
BOX 1  
Defining Key Terms

A shared understanding of power building is critical to effectively support long-term, sustainable empowerment in service of equity and justice. Below, we define several of the terms used throughout this report.

- **Power building** is a strategy to shift power to those most affected by inequities by developing knowledge, community connections, and resources to create more equitable systems and institutions. The outcome is that everyone in the community has what they need to live a full life and act on their self-defined goals.

- **Coalitions** refer to groups of organizations that come together with the goal of influencing outcomes or gaining power related to a specific problem. Coalitions create more power than individual organizations may have on their own.

- **Grassroots organizations or movements** are those that start from the ground up. These organizations or movements begin with individuals or communities—including directly affected people—rather than politicians or other people in positions of power to address specific issues.

Advocacy, activism, and community organizing are three terms that tend to be used interchangeably when referring to power-building strategies. However, they address distinct activities within the power-building continuum.

- **Advocacy** is an effective way to fight for justice on behalf of others, but it does not always directly engage the people affected by specific issues. Therefore, those individuals will not necessarily learn how to take action affecting their communities in the future.

- **Activism** typically refers to actions taken because of a desire for justice around a specific issue. It may include activities such as participating in marches, rallies, or other forms of demonstrating against those in power without these actions being part of a long-term strategy for movement building. In general, activism does not involve leadership development.

- **Organizing** is a practice aimed at helping people create the social movements and political organizations necessary to wage campaigns and win power. Organizing can engage a range of activities, including advocacy, activism, and other tactics, but they are part of a carefully and intentionally built strategy to achieve long-term change. Whether related to labor, community development, or electoral politics, organizing takes time and is often slow and difficult to sustain.

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*Unless otherwise specified, the definitions in this report are adapted from common definitions and draw from our research team’s expertise and experiences.


*“What is Organizing?” Be Freedom, accessed March 12, 2024, [https://befreedom.co/what-is-organizing/](https://befreedom.co/what-is-organizing/).*
The Los Angeles Context: Community Organizing and Power Building for Housing Justice

Los Angeles has deep challenges with housing, resulting in distress for residents. In 2020, nearly half (48 percent) of Los Angeles renters were severely cost burdened, meaning they spent more than half of their incomes on rent. In 2023, more than 71,000 people experienced homelessness on a single night, with 73 percent of them sleeping in unsheltered situations.

As in much of the country, individuals and households of color are disparately affected by these challenges in Los Angeles. For example, Black Angelenos make up 32 percent of people experiencing homelessness but just 8 percent of the overall Los Angeles population, and Black renters have higher rates of cost burden compared with non-Black renters across the county (62.4 percent versus 54.3 percent) (Rennert et al. 2023). Further, the poverty rate among the Black population of Los Angeles County is nearly 7 percent higher than that of the county’s non-Black population (Rennert et al. 2023). Households of color—particularly Black households—continue to be disproportionately affected by exclusionary policies such as single-family zoning (Menendian et al. 2022).

In recent years—particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw more than 700,000 people lose their jobs, a growing number of people experiencing homelessness, and many others facing higher risk of eviction—Los Angeles has seen a growing movement of organizations and coalitions seeking to advance housing justice. For example, newly formed collectives such as Healthy LA, Keep LA Housed, and United to House LA, among others, are engaged in power-building efforts to create, enact, and sustain systemic changes needed to increase equitable access to affordable housing that promotes health, well-being, and stability. Organizational and coalition-based areas of activity include tenant protections, anti-displacement measures, restorative and reparative responses to homelessness, land-use reforms and community planning, and alternative financing options in housing.

Some of these power-building activities, particularly those related to organizing labor and tenants, have resulted in long-lasting resources for tenants with low incomes in Los Angeles, such as House LA—a ballot measure to raise taxes on the sale of all properties valued at more than $5 million. The revenue raised by the real estate transfer tax, expected to be between $600 million and $1.1 billion annually, will be used to address key factors in achieving housing justice, including funding new and rehabilitated affordable housing, housing assistance for vulnerable tenants, legal aid for tenants with low incomes (to implement a right to counsel), and tenant outreach and education.
Methods

Data Collection and Analysis

Our research seeks to understand the role of community power building as a strategy to create, implement, and sustain solutions to achieve more equitable and just outcomes in housing systems. We conducted 21 in-depth interviews with 22 individuals involved in power-building movements across Los Angeles in spring 2023 (one interview included two respondents). Respondents were involved in a wide range of power-building efforts and included community and tenant organizers, government and elected officials, and legal services providers; represented various neighborhoods and communities across Los Angeles, including Skid Row, East LA and Boyle Heights, Inglewood, Historic South Central, Koreatown, and Little Tokyo; and had worked on statewide campaigns and as a part of statewide coalitions. Interviews focused on power-building efforts across Los Angeles, including historical and current contexts, specific activities, coalitions, campaign work, and remaining work within the movement.

The research team transcribed interviews and uploaded them to qualitative coding software for analysis. Using thematic analysis, we identified codes aligned with our research goals and questions, coded transcripts, and then analyzed each code report to generate initial themes. Themes were further refined to align with the project’s research questions (see appendix A for detailed data collection and analysis methods and appendix B for the project’s semistructured interview guide).

This project builds on the research team’s knowledge on power building, housing justice, the historical and current landscape of housing in Los Angeles, and qualitative research methods. Across the team, we drew on experiences and education in social work, political science, and community organizing. Over the course of the project, the team included six employees of the Urban Institute who work on the Housing Justice project and a Housing Justice fellow who serves as a consultant on the Housing Justice project and brings extensive experience in community organizing and advocacy in the Los Angeles area. While our findings within this report leverage key learnings from our interviews with participants, we also recognize that our lived experiences affect the way we see the world and may influence the way we view and interpret data.

Findings

Below, we share the main findings related to our four primary research questions:
1. What are the contextual forces currently driving community power building for housing justice in Los Angeles?

2. How has community power building led to shifts in the political environment and to structural changes in support of housing justice goals?

3. What are the opportunities and limitations of coalitions for power building for housing justice?

4. What supports are needed to sustain community power building for housing justice?

The Context of Power Building in Los Angeles

In this section, we consider the context in which community power-building activities have unfolded in Los Angeles, highlighting key economic, political, and social influences on the housing justice movement, as observed by respondents. This context includes forces that are both long-term and incremental—including broader shifts in the sociopolitical and narrative landscape around homelessness, housing instability, and electoral change—and a more recent sequence of catalyzing events that have triggered crisis responses and action across the city’s power-building field.

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONDITIONS

For many respondents, a key driver of current power-building work has been the continued escalation of housing insecurity and financial uncertainty in Los Angeles. Several stakeholders emphasized that the city is grappling with a diminishing housing supply, insufficient affordable housing development, and high rents in a market where living costs are rapidly outpacing wage growth. These economic pressures, while disproportionately affecting the most marginalized communities, have reached growing numbers of people and made the housing crisis more universally felt and urgent in recent years. According to respondents, this trend has helped amplify a narrative shift and policy emphasis on finding scaled solutions to match need.

“Just due to the fact that the rents have escalated to such a degree here locally...now we have a whole new segment of the population that before never used to really think about it and [are] now like, ‘Oh, shoot, can I really afford to live in this neighborhood?’“
Many respondents also commented on emerging opportunities in Los Angeles’s political system to help advance housing justice and movement-led efforts for reform. Several observed a substantial shift in the composition of legislative bodies and political orientation of elected officials, as allies have increasingly gained entry into outlets of political power and brought government into greater alignment with movement goals. One respondent cited how recently elected pro-tenant candidates to the City Council have contributed to the changing makeup of key decisionmaking bodies from primarily homeowners to renters as an example of this emerging “cogovernance” dynamic.

In addition to changes within political institutions, several respondents noted a growing interest in and alignment across all levels of government around homelessness, which has been spearheaded as a key policy issue and funding priority under the new mayoral administration. One respondent described how they had not seen this level of political will to address housing and homelessness until recent years.

Backed by an emerging progressive leadership and electorate—as well as the recent influx of public dollars into housing through ballot measures such as Measure H\(^1\) and Proposition HHH\(^2\)—these so-called political tailwinds were identified as major facilitators to power-building efforts in Los Angeles.

**NARRATIVE CONDITIONS**

The changing material conditions of housing insecurity in Los Angeles have been echoed by a larger narrative shift around the causes of housing instability and homelessness, giving voice and a platform to movement-led demands for change through housing justice initiatives. Respondents noted the key role that the media in particular has played in amplifying messaging around the city’s housing crisis and how it threatens households across class and racial lines.

“It’s [the housing crisis] become a wider societal crisis that has been wider demographically and reached more white people and reached more people up the income scale. And that has led to, I think, headlines, at least, and news articles about it. And they created a pervasive sense...in the public sector imagination around, 'There is a crisis. We need to do something.'”
The increased visibility of homelessness—as well as the ongoing risks and realities of becoming unhoused, especially during the pandemic—further contributed to the shared narrative of a housing crisis, according to respondents. One legal advocate commented on the “very visible and visceral” growth of homelessness on the streets of Los Angeles. She went on to note how this visibility has been a key force for opening wider public dialogue on the realities of the housing crisis, the reasons behind it, and possible avenues for addressing it as a city.

CATALYZING EVENTS

Many respondents also noted a series of catalyzing events in recent years that helped embolden organizing efforts and spurred wider engagement around housing justice, including the onset of the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the 2016 presidential election, and controversy involving City Council members in 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought many long-simmering economic and social inequalities into sharper focus, becoming a major driving force for power building in Los Angeles. During the pandemic, many households faced unprecedented threats to their health and economic security because of industrywide closures and job losses. Several respondents described how lost income intensified the housing crisis in Los Angeles, as threats of eviction fomented the very real possibility of housing instability and homelessness for people across the economic spectrum.

“What COVID showed is [the housing crisis] was indiscriminate. It can happen to anybody...I think that really helped, sadly, the movements, to help put more pressure and create more reality around this issue like this. This is something that is not just about poor people, and this is not just about certain communities. This is everybody.”

One nonprofit leader described this moment as going into "care mode," where organizations' focus shifted to delivering immediate relief through services like connecting people to food and other basic needs. However, several others noted that the pandemic offered a new lens through which to view the full spectrum of power building, as the connections between structural change, policy change, and meeting everyday needs became more apparent. According to one respondent, it created the political will and "an opportunity to try to do things that were a pipe dream a month before—to try to really expand renter protections, to try to decriminalize homelessness, [and] to create new protections for
workers.” Dovetailing with the growing visibility of unsheltered homelessness, political turnover, and the influx of emergency relief dollars, respondents emphasized how the pandemic established a new precedent and policy window for what lasting, permanent housing programs and tenant protections could look like in Los Angeles.

**The Black Lives Matter movement.** The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement also intensified and accelerated the shift toward power building for housing justice, as anti-racism and demands for equity-led change came to the foreground. Respondents noted how the Black Lives Matter protests created a new galvanizing window and convening opportunity to bring in younger, more progressive movement allies and leaders. As one respondent commented, the broadening mobilization of movement participants opened new dialogues around personal and institutional accountability and racial justice: “Things that we’re able to hold people accountable to is different now. We can talk openly about the system of white supremacy in ways that we were never able to do before.”

Several respondents reflected on how Black Lives Matter also compelled many organizations to interrogate their own strategic priorities and actions and to reckon with larger institutional failures in the fight for racial equity in policing, housing, and other sectors.

“And then [the murder of] George Floyd happened...that happening created an opportunity for the organization to sort of catch up [to where] everybody else was and to start to be real about its own contradictions and use its power in a different way...I think we kind of got to a point where we were like...we have the resources, so why aren’t we supporting really grassroots organizations that are doing awesome work? Both through our grantmaking and materially with our campaign team, like, ‘Let’s get in there with them [and] build coalitions.’”

**Political events.** Respondents noted that the 2016 presidential election was a major driver of broadened political action and mobilization within the power-building movement for housing justice. For one respondent, the election of Donald Trump spurred a “massive wave of involvement from people who hadn’t been involved previously [and] who had initially been not politicized but were pushed into doing something by the shock of Trump’s election.” Several observed how this moment
helped tap into whiter and more affluent pockets of the progressive left, contributing to a "shift in consciousness" that incited people to action and engagement around social change beyond the voting rolls.

According to respondents, this shift was also compounded locally when tapes leaked of a Los Angeles City Council member making racist comments—a similar “moment of crisis” that sparked public outrage and commitment to change. One respondent framed the incident as a key juncture that influenced election outcomes and brought in new political representation to advance successes in the housing justice movement, stating, "This is an opportunity to win. And will that vacuum be filled with the status quo of power, or will it be seen as an opportunity to build? That happened, I think, three or four weeks before the 2022 elections and...had a huge impact on that, right?"

Together, these political upsets—both federally and locally in Los Angeles—added to the growing impetus to engage in organizing and advocacy efforts and elect leaders who align with movement values.

**Political Shifts and Structural Changes through Power Building**

Throughout interviews, respondents described activities directly related to community power building for housing justice and how they ultimately led to successes toward housing justice goals. Activities typically fell into several categories that broadly aligned with the activities and organizations within the power-building ecosystem, such as base building, legal and research support, and policy change.

**POWER-BUILDING ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES FOR HOUSING JUSTICE**

*Base-building and direct-action organizing activities.* Several respondents—particularly those in organizing or advocacy roles—described how base-building activities and direct-action organizing activities contributed to community power building. In particular, they identified organizing in communities at both the apartment/building and neighborhood levels as a key way to push for housing justice. For example, door-to-door canvassing efforts in buildings cultivated power to pressure landlords for repairs, and building-level direct actions such as rent strikes and eviction blockades led to repairs, affordable rent increases, and support for people remaining in their homes. Respondents also shared several examples of larger community-led direct actions and organizing activities for housing justice, such as protests, rallies, and car caravans, which were used to call attention to and build power for things like rent control and building repairs on a broader scale.
Educating communities through activities such as organized tenant education, community “teach-ins,” and participatory research was a key strategy to strengthen capacity for base building and provide a foundation for communities to create change. One respondent saw their organization as a “vessel for community members to be able to tap into that civic engagement part of who they are to use their own agency to change each other’s lives” through their training and participatory research activities. Similarly, another respondent described their role as educating tenants about specific issues (e.g., land use) with the goal of demystifying processes and topics to help “residents understand why [the issues are] important, why they should care, [and] how it impacts their lives.”

**Legal support.** Legal advocacy and support—which we define as support provided by lawyers or legal groups to advance organizing goals and activities—are a core piece of the power-building ecosystem, and respondents regularly reflected on the role of legal aid and other legal organizations within the community power-building movement for housing justice. In general, respondents saw lawyers as actors who could use their positionality and skills within the legal system to advance power-building activities.

Respondents described how legal groups and lawyers can provide legal knowledge and guidance to support coalitions and movements, such as providing procedural assistance to formalize coalitions and decisionmaking processes, supplying draft language for legislation, and providing information that organizers can use. One lawyer described their goal as changing unjust systems through actions ranging from direct campaigning to litigation.

Although legal support was described as a valuable component of community power building, multiple respondents also noted that there are certain activities that are outside of the scope of lawyers or other legal professionals. For example, one legal services provider highlighted that mobilizing communities—a key part of base building and community power building—is not necessarily the goal of their work. Another recognized that the limiting structure and role of being a lawyer or working for a legal organization can sometimes make it difficult to participate in or lead social movements.

Similarly, community organizers also felt that legal organizers were not always necessary for community power building for housing justice. For example, some local-level goals and successes do not have to involve legal action or legislative wins. One organizer stated, “Once you start relying on the attorneys, you’re giving over a lot of your power as tenants to hoping that they save the day.”

**Legislation, policy change, and civic engagement.** One goal of power building is ensuring that communities have equitable access to their government (e.g., elected officials) and opportunities for
civic engagement. Aligned with this goal, respondents reflected on the relationships between local elected officials and the people and communities who do direct power-building work to advance housing justice. Respondents shared several examples of how organizers and other actors within the power-building ecosystem support legislation, policy changes, and civic engagement.

One example is when communities lead bills or legislation and bring them to local lawmakers. In these instances, respondents noted that elected officials are typically more optimistic and invested in bills that have community input. Respondents in government roles viewed different types of organizations as different pieces of the larger organizing ecosystem. They shared that organizers bring power, including power from people with lived experiences, to places like the City Council through public testimonies. They also shared that some organizations help craft talking points or provide data to help back up public testimonies.

“Community power building is ultimately just about making sure that everybody who lives in a place has equitable access to government.”

While several respondents shared that voting as a form of civic engagement is one way that organizers can change policies through legislative actions, voting should not always be the end goal. They shared that, although voting can lead to policy changes, there are many community members who are directly affected by issues in their community but cannot vote due to systemic, institutional, and administrative barriers, highlighting the need for alternative ways to build power and engender change in communities.

HOUSING JUSTICE SUCCESSES AND WINS THROUGH COMMUNITY POWER BUILDING

According to interviewees, the wide range of power-building activities targeted toward housing justice have led to several successes, including narrative, political, and community wins (table 1).
TABLE 1
Power-Building Activities and Wins for Housing Justice
Examples from respondent interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing justice tenet</th>
<th>Power-building activities</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Wins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing as a human right</td>
<td>Eviction blockades</td>
<td>Decommodification of housing, eviction</td>
<td>Eviction protections; increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>prevention</td>
<td>resources for housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primacy of lived experience</td>
<td>Tenant organizing</td>
<td>Engaging directly impacted people</td>
<td>Narrative change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and economic justice</td>
<td>Tenant and community organizing; rent strikes</td>
<td>Rent stabilization</td>
<td>Rent control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and well-being</td>
<td>Tenant organizing</td>
<td>Building repairs</td>
<td>Community power and increased capacity and relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-racism and racial equity</td>
<td>Community organizing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Research bill for community banking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ analysis.

Narrative wins. Respondents reflected on how their power-building efforts contributed to narrative shifts related to housing justice. Beyond the growing awareness of homelessness in the public sphere, several respondents also observed an increased effort by movement actors to link housing instability, evictions, and homelessness as parts of the same housing crisis—and suggest that these challenges may have potentially complementary and integrated policy solutions. These shifts were described as a win, in that respondents felt there is a clearer recognition that we cannot solve one crisis without addressing the others.

Another nonprofit leader emphasized how their service delivery work in their neighborhood has increasingly been paired with a deliberate messaging campaign to build consensus and “a compassionate approach to homelessness” among small businesses in the area. He noted that this effort to reframe and educate community members about the link between housing insecurity and homelessness is critical to promoting future affordable housing and permanent supportive housing development. Respondents also described the way tenant experiences and stories have been used in power-building movements as an important narrative win. They shared that firsthand accounts have shifted the narrative on who experiences and what it means to experience housing injustice, which in turn can lead to the creation of additional resources, programs, and protections. For example, respondents noted that contemporary discussions of affordable housing tend to show more of an understanding of what the households and communities affected by these policies actually look like.
“Without tenant voices, it’s hard to make a case that you need tenant protections. You need those voices up front to be able to really shift that cultural narrative.”

Lastly, several respondents shared that the visibility of housing and homelessness crises—through both firsthand experiences and media coverage—has created new urgency around addressing these issues. As one respondent said, “[Homelessness] is so visible everywhere, and I think it does finally make people wonder like what is happening, like why do we have so many folks on the street? And it's creating those dialogues.” Others shared that media coverage also created pressure for council members to address the goals of organizing activities. For example, one respondent shared, “Council members who had never met with us all of a sudden were like, ‘We support rent control. Of course, we support the community.’ But it’s obviously because we put them on blast. We put you on TV, we put ourselves on TV, and the stories that we were telling to you directly, we told it to a reporter.”

Political wins. Shifts in Los Angeles’s political and legal landscape were considered political wins for the broader housing justice movement across our interviews. In particular, respondents described how community power-building efforts contributed to these outcomes.

Rent-related legislation—including protections around evictions and rent control—were repeatedly identified as political wins directly advanced by power building. For example, respondents saw organizing and labor movements as integral to the successful passage of renter protections. One legal services provider shared that they viewed the organizing and power building that came out of the tenants’ rights movement as pivotal to passing eviction prevention laws. Another respondent reflected on how the energy and power built around tenant protections led to the passage of bills as well as increased funding and interest in novel ways to address the housing crisis.

Several participants also mentioned how coalition building served as a form of power building within the housing justice movement and contributed to wins. Through the efforts of an organized coalition, Los Angeles passed a state bill to create the Los Angeles County Affordable Housing Solutions Agency, potentially promising new resources to develop affordable housing. Another respondent attributed organizing efforts as central to passing legislation for a research bill on community banking, which could ultimately lead to added capacity and resources to develop community banks to support local financial and housing stability. Specific opportunities and limitations
of working within coalitions are discussed later in this report ("Opportunities and Limitations of Coalitions").

**Other wins.** Participants described several other wins for the housing justice movement that they attributed to community power-building activities, namely, building relationships that led to increased capacity, partnerships, and trust between people within the organizing ecosystem, such as organizers and lawyers. One respondent shared that these strengthened relationships provided additional support for tenant-related direct actions, such as rent strikes. Another reflected that this increased capacity, including through additional funding, provided further resources to build affordable housing.

Respondents also directly credited their organizing and power-building activities to corrective shifts in the power imbalance between landlords and tenants. And respondents saw success reflected in who was involved in policy conversations and therefore exercised influence. One respondent stated, "There used to be a token kind of outreach to those groups [grassroots organizations] to kind of check a box, right? Now they are actively engaged in policy decisionmaking. They are actively engaged in going to the board [of supervisors] and advocating for certain positions, and I believe this board is listening to those groups."

**Opportunities and Limitations of Coalitions**

Coalitions play a key role in advancing housing justice through power building in Los Angeles. Throughout interviews, respondents described the makeup, structure, and goals of coalitions, which vary in size, membership, and scope. Respondents further articulated that coalitions often form around specific policy and legislative campaigns and build power and capacity through their collective efforts.

Within coalitions, organizations play different roles and leverage their strengths to advance housing justice. For example, organizers play a key role in convening community members and building knowledge toward coalition efforts; legal and advocacy groups provide technical knowledge to support coalitions and the individual organizations themselves; philanthropy organizations fund housing justice opportunities and leverage their political and funding power; and government agencies and elected officials craft and pass policies to advance the coalition’s goals.

**BENEFITS OF AND TENSIONS WITHIN COALITIONS**

Throughout interviews, respondents identified how coalitions present key opportunities for collaboration between nonprofits, philanthropy organizations, and direct organizers and provide
several benefits. However, power imbalances and differences in strategies can also create certain challenges.

**Benefits for advancing housing justice.** Working in larger coalitions comprising organizations from different sectors gives members the opportunity to develop new ideas for campaigns around housing justice, build the needed scale and skillsets of relationships to implement campaigns, and secure more concrete wins.

Respondents described how, in larger coalitions, groups could support organizations working toward different but related goals—such as economic protections and renters’ protections—all in one space, which provides an opportunity to develop larger and more innovative proposals and campaigns. One respondent shared the excitement they and others felt working through Healthy LA, a broad coalition made up of hundreds of organizations advocating for tenant protections, saying, "People saw that this was an opportunity to try to do things that were a pipe dream a month before; to try to really expand renter protections, to try to decriminalize homelessness, to create new protections for workers."

Coalitions can also help move policies forward by convening groups toward a larger goal, where individual groups can leverage their unique strengths to push for housing justice. For example, some specialized advocacy groups and legal rights organizations can provide knowledge and capacity to advance coalition goals, with one respondent sharing that they were able to access unique legal supports such as “having attorneys review language, having attorneys advocate for the ordinance strategies or even escalation plans.”

Coalitions also provided support toward several housing justice–related wins. For example, Our Future Los Angeles—a coalition that included community-based organizing groups and philanthropy organizations—helped maintain momentum to create the Los Angeles County Affordable Housing Solutions Agency, which aims to expand affordable housing access for rent-burdened tenants throughout Los Angeles. Likewise, one organizer shared the importance of “active, tight-knit, coordinated coalition building” for Measure ULA, which would implement a new tax on transfers or sales of certain properties and whose revenue would be allocated to projects that address housing availability and homelessness prevention programs.

**Benefits for member organizations.** Respondents described how working within coalitions and partnerships helped their individual organizations bolster their capacity and achieve success. For example, one rent control campaign in Bell Gardens was supported by coalition partners throughout the county. When organizers had to switch their online petition campaign to in-person efforts, their
partners helped organize car caravans and bring more protestors outside city hall to put pressure on council members. One respondent shared that this coalition work was “a huge, huge key in how we were able to progress in the campaign,” noting that “people came from outside of Bell Gardens into Bell Gardens to support us.” Coalition partners can also help support an organization’s long-term capacity. In the case of Bell Gardens, the organizers continue to have a presence in the community, with encouragement from coalition partners throughout the county, to hold elected officials accountable throughout implementation of the ordinance.

**Tensions within coalitions.** Although coalitions are a key part of much of the organizing and power-building work in Los Angeles, interviewees shared that there are inherent tensions and limitations to this approach. The primary source of these tensions is that organizations may differ in their goals, visions, or strategies. For example, groups might disagree on which income levels should be targeted for affordable housing: some organizations may focus on developing housing for extremely low-income and very low-income communities, whereas others might advocate for the development of affordable housing for middle-income households.

“I think one phenomenon you’re seeing recently as the housing crisis has gotten more acute is you’re seeing more and more all-volunteer groups come up. And then there’s sometimes a little bit of friction, where I think they feel the nonprofit sector isn’t radical enough.”

Even though coalitions often bring together diverse groups working toward housing justice, different priorities and constituents can create divisions. For example, respondents identified that collaborating and partnering with politicians and philanthropic organizations often served as a point of tension, with tenant collectives and other organizations sometimes feeling as though these actors are not “radical” enough for their stated goals. Some respondents felt that philanthropy organizations “guide us [organizers and advocates] to where they go, and the money starts to go away when it’s too radical.” Another respondent saw funders as dictating the goals of the movement without community involvement and felt that they should instead “get out of the way and listen to the groups on the ground and get out of the business of deciding what they think is the right strategy without consulting [us] first.”
Others felt that although working in coalitions has been a successful strategy, some organizations that have joined and led these coalitions may have become entrenched in the formalization of coalitions and lost the community-led power-building approach. As one interviewee shared about housing work in Los Angeles, “It’s a lot of the same players over and over again.” Similarly, interviewees expressed that the leadership in some coalitions may not be as close to community demands as an individual member organization might be. One interviewee felt that many of the organizations participating in coalitions were the leaders or staff of organizations, rather than representatives from the community.

Sustaining Community Power Building for Housing Justice

CURRENT PRIORITIES AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

In addition to describing their numerous housing justice-related achievements, respondents recognized the need for ongoing efforts to sustain these wins and continue addressing enduring issues and challenges within the broader housing justice field.

Addressing systems and structures. Structural changes and shifts in the political environment require additional supports and considerations to achieve current movement goals—and that includes reframing the housing justice ecosystem.

As one respondent said, “I think that really what we should be concentrating on is, let’s build a fully functional housing ecosystem that really has a lot of integration.” Several people highlighted the siloed nature of systems that all affect the housing justice ecosystem, such as housing, homelessness, health, and the legal system. Los Angeles itself also presents unique challenges, such as the number of different cities and systems operating within one county. One respondent noted, “I think it’s really hard to think about like how to create regional coalition because of all of the different government structures that we’re trying to face.”

Aligning with the need to desegregate systems and structures, respondents also recognized the intersectionality of different movements, such as criminal justice reform and gender and climate justice. They felt that these systems need to be thought about more holistically, including organizations that historically focused on a single area or issue branching into addressing the housing crisis.

Tenant and rental protections. Ensuring the preservation of pandemic-era tenant and rental protections, as well as pushing for additional protections for renters—such as rent rollbacks, eviction
prevention services, and preservation of affordable housing—were priorities for respondents. This included continuing to address the living conditions of community members by organizing at the community level and working with formalized campaigns and coalitions.

“[It’s] really been a lot more about our success in terms of changing conditions and changing the balance of power...between landlord and tenant, and shifting that on its head completely.”

**Shifting power to communities.** Respondents stated that a central goal and current priority of their power-building efforts is to increase cogovernance and engage with and shift power back to directly impacted communities. This includes organizing and advocating for social housing models (such as community land trusts) and the decommodification of housing, as well as increasing civic and voter engagement. One respondent noted the importance of considering alternatives to private ownership of land in solving the current housing crisis.

While respondents across interviews described the importance of shifting power back to communities, they named several challenges to achieving this goal. One respondent explained that due to the current lack of social services and support systems and increased costs of living, community members are focused on meeting their basic needs, such as housing and child care, and cannot devote as much time to power-building or organizing efforts. Another highlighted that shifting power to communities can be “a much more complicated thing than it may sound at first blush,” as perspectives within a community can vary.

**Defining Success**

Respondents envisioned and defined success as a mix of accomplishing the stated priorities of their power-building work as well as achieving structural changes broadly aligned with the tenets of housing justice. Many described success in terms of both measurable changes (e.g., outputs) and long-term effects and shifts in the housing landscape (e.g., outcomes). Legislative change through policy, elections, and support from elected officials and other policymakers was named as one way to define and measure success in power-building movements. Respondents described specific long-term
markers of success as achieving decommodification of housing, tenant protections, and housing affordability.

“I think for us, ultimately, what success looks like is when everybody has a right to safe, secure, healthy, and affordable housing—when everybody has access to open green space and solid public transportation options that will let them work and play in a way that’s enjoyable and makes sense for them.”

Resources for Achieving and Sustaining Power-Building Movements

Respondents identified the important roles of funding (including through philanthropic sources) and governmental, civic, and legal systems in meeting their goals.

**Funding.** Respondents consistently highlighted the importance of being able to fund their power-building activities—whether through flexible funding for continued on-the-ground base building or funding for formal coalition building and activities. For example, funding for general operating support gives organizations the capacity to be flexible and respond to crises or opportunities in the moment. It also gives organizations and groups the ability to expand their direct organizing activities. As one respondent shared, philanthropies and funders have “been great in providing seed money for planning...the work that they do in this space is helpful because they’re also conveners. They also do a lot to try to convene folks around the issue, and quite frankly, political officials pay attention to those philanthropic organizations.”

“So, I think the worry is if we don’t see visible results on the streets in two years, the funders are going to pull back and move on to things that are trendy. And it’s like, you know how long it took to build this infrastructure?”

However, although funding is important for organizing capacity, several respondents noted that there are sometimes trade-offs or tensions with accepting it. For example, some felt that accepting
philanthropic funding meant they would have to align their work with the specific goals of funding organizations. Similarly, several respondents noted that one specific challenge of philanthropic or foundation funding is the traditional outcomes-oriented models of these opportunities; organizing efforts often do not result in short-term, measurable change or immediate wins but rather require long-term, sustained work. Some respondents also felt that when specific organizations brought philanthropic dollars to larger coalition or campaign work, it caused power imbalances in these spaces.

In addition to flexibility, participants also reflected on the importance of thoughtful and equitable distribution of philanthropic dollars. This includes creating transparent and open opportunities for funding, rather than relying on invitation-only applications.

**Government and legislation.** Across interviews, respondents reflected on the role of government and passing legislation in achieving their power-building goals. They recognized that while government is one piece of the puzzle, government interventions (e.g., policies, laws, and legislation) are not always the end goal of power building and community organizing.

“But you know, when you’re spending your time trying to figure out how to make the court system better or...how to get that specific law, well, then, you’re ignoring that whole base of power on the ground that can be organized and developed and are coming up with their own solutions short term, which will turn into longer ones to really change their economic and their social conditions where they live.”

Respondents saw bringing knowledge and community priorities to elected officials and other systems as another important aspect of power-building activities. They viewed themselves as experts who can show elected officials how programs should be designed; use their expertise, knowledge, and power to build coalitions; bring in support and raise money to get bills and legislation passed; and support implementation.
Conclusion

Community power building plays a key role in advancing housing justice at the individual, community, and policy levels in the United States. Los Angeles serves as a helpful case study for understanding what power building looks like in practice across various spaces and provides important lessons for a range of stakeholders.

Our research finds that there are multiple contextual forces—sociopolitical, narrative, and catalyzing—that have shaped community power building for housing justice in Los Angeles, and each domain has facilitated opportunities to advance housing justice in different ways by amplifying engagement strategies, opening up political power, and bringing heightened attention to demands for equity-focused, structural change in housing. Power building in Los Angeles has encompassed activities such as base building and organizing, legal and research support, and legislation and policy changes, resulting in numerous wins for housing justice. For example, working with partners and within coalitions has been a key strategy for many organizations that has led to significant victories, though questions around coalition composition and structure can create points of tension for some organizers and advocacy groups. Actors within the housing justice ecosystem must consider how to sustain and progress this work, as well as continue to identify and address ongoing priorities and challenges. Organizers, funders, policymakers, and researchers, as well as others within power-building ecosystems, can all play a role in advancing housing justice in Los Angeles and beyond.
Appendix A. Detailed Methods

Data Collection

Between March and May 2023, we interviewed 22 people across 21 organizations and agencies involved in power-building movements across Los Angeles. Potential participants were identified through the research team’s extensive knowledge of local power-building activities for housing justice. Respondents were involved in a wide range of power-building efforts and included community and tenant organizers, government and elected officials, and legal services providers.

Interview domains included respondent and organizational background, perspectives and understanding of the history and context related to power-building activities, the role of the respondent's work in power building for housing justice, current needs and demands as they relate to housing justice, and identification of the goals and impact of their work. Interviewees provided perspectives on power-building efforts from their experiences in direct organizing, involvement in advocacy coalitions, and their perceptions of the role of power building for housing justice in Los Angeles. All interviews were conducted by at least two members of the research team via Zoom and recorded with consent. Interviews ranged in duration from 60 to 75 minutes.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo for analysis. Using sensitizing concepts of housing justice and power building, the research team first conducted inductive coding of three transcripts to develop a preliminary codebook and then identified additional relevant codes based on the interview protocol and research questions. Two researchers recoded the three transcripts using the full codebook to ensure consistency across coding. The remaining transcripts were independently coded by three members of the research team, who met regularly to discuss questions and refine codebook definitions.

After all transcripts were coded, the research team met to discuss initial reflections and emerging themes related to the research questions. The research team identified specific codes that they felt related to each research question, which were then reviewed to generate initial themes based on coded excerpts. The team then discussed themes and refined them to align with the proposed research questions.
Appendix B. Semistructured Interview Guide

The project's interview guide is reproduced below. Aligned with the method of semistructured interviewing, these questions were used as a starting point. Based on participants’ responses, we did not ask all participants every question.

COMMUNITY POWER-BUILDING ORGANIZATION

1. Background and local role.
   a. Please introduce yourself.
   b. What organization do you currently work/volunteer for?
   c. What is your role? How long have you been in this role?
   d. What led you to this position and work?

2. Tell me about the history of your organization/work.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

3. To start with some shared understanding, how would you define community power building and organizing?
   a. What does it entail?
   b. Who is involved?
   c. When do you know when power is built?
   d. How have your experiences informed your thinking on power building?

4. From your understanding, what have been the top housing issues faced by Los Angeles residents in the past five years?
   a. Potential prompts: cost, lack of housing, quality, location, inability to own, tenant protections and rights, displacement and gentrification, criminalization of homelessness, property acquisition, land trusts, land use and planning, funding campaigns
   b. How have the issues at the top of people’s minds and experiences changed in recent years?
   c. What are the primary factors that have contributed to creating these housing challenges?
   d. Are there particular events or changes in recent years that had an outsize impact?
   e. What has been the impact of these issues on residents and communities?
5. What has been the response to these issues across Los Angeles?
   b. How well have these responses helped or worsened issues in LA?
   c. How have these issues influenced the priorities and decisions of different stakeholders?

6. How have the housing issues in Los Angeles influenced/motivated community power-building efforts for housing justice in recent years?
   a. How has it influenced new ideas and thinking for housing justice?
   b. What are the top priorities among leaders of power-building efforts?
   c. What have been the primary actions that have taken place?

COMMUNITY POWER-BUILDING ECOSYSTEM

7. What have been the primary organizations and coalitions organizing and building power for housing justice in the Los Angeles area in recent years?
   a. How did these organizations come to focus on housing issues?
   b. What is the relationship between these organizations?
   c. What does partnership look like?
   d. How has this changed over time?
   e. How have the priorities of those leading power-building efforts changed over time?

8. What do you see as your organization’s role in ongoing power-building efforts for housing justice?
   a. How did your organization come into this role?
   b. How has this role changed, if at all, over time?
   c. What are the valuable contributions to power building from this role?
   d. What do you see as your organization’s strengths in this role?
   e. Do you see other roles the organization could take in the near future or later on?

9. What are the strategies and approaches to power building that organizations engage in?
   a. How do they differ across organizations and groups?
   b. How have they changed over time?
   c. What has made them more or less effective in reaching goals?
   d. How do you engage residents and those most impacted in your approaches?
   e. What has been the response of different stakeholders—residents, policymakers, developers, etc.—to these approaches?
10. More broadly, what role would you say government officials/policymakers (elected, administrators, etc.) have in power-building efforts?
   a. How have policymakers reacted or responded to community power building in Los Angeles?
   b. What strategies do you share? Which strategies are unique?
   c. How do these interactions influence policy agendas?
   d. How do these interactions influence how government makes decisions?
   e. How do these interactions influence the relationships communities have with government?
   f. Where can there be more productive engagement with power building and policymaking?
   g. What do people often misunderstand about the relationship between power building and policymaking?

GOALS AND IMPACT

11. How would you define success in community power building?
   a. How do you track progress?
   b. What would you say are the major wins in your work?
   c. Are there tangible milestones, outcomes, or data points that you point to?
   d. What are barriers you face to measuring progress? What measures of progress would you like to track?
   e. Can you talk about a time when the organization had to shift strategy or approach when something wasn't working?
   f. What makes something effective versus ineffective in this work? Examples?
   g. What do people often get wrong about defining success or progress with community power building?

12. What have been roadblocks or challenges in your work?
   a. What threats or pitfalls can lead to efforts stalling or being disrupted?
   b. What challenges would you say are universal across efforts?
   c. What can get in the way of building community power and its impacts being sustained?

NEEDS AND DEMANDS

13. What are the foundational needs to do community power building effectively?
   a. Tell me about the structure of your organization/work. Do you work with volunteers, paid staff, etc.?
b. How do partnerships meet various needs to make the work more effective/sustainable?

c. Is there a need to be a formalized organization under a 501(c)(3) or other structure for the work?

d. What needs often go unmet? When unmet, what impact does that have on the work?

e. What do you need from formal institutions and organizations?
   i. Government and policymakers?
   ii. Funders and philanthropy?
   iii. Community-based organizations and businesses?

14. How do you and/or your organization sustain this work?
   a. What is most essential for sustainability?
   b. How does money and funding influence the work?
   c. Do you have funding sources you rely on? If so, what kind are they?
      i. If through philanthropy/grant channels, how did you come to work with those organizations?
      ii. If through grassroots fundraising/other sources, what is your fundraising process? (Prompts: What platform do you use to fundraise? How do you reach funders?)
      iii. Any use of collectivist forms of fundraising and fund management?
   d. How would they like this work to be funded?

15. Is there anything else about power building for housing justice that you would like to share?
Notes


References


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