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# Chicago's older adult population growing, becoming rent burdened: report

It is imperative, one expert said, that lawmakers create more affordable housing for older adults.

By Manny Ramos | Dec 14, 2021, 5:30am CDT

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Accessing affordable and stable housing is becoming a serious concern for older adults as Cook County's senior population continues to grow. | [Ashlee Rezin / Sun-Times](#)

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Providing affordable housing in Cook County is becoming increasingly important with the rise over the past decade of financially vulnerable residents aged 65 and older, a new report concluded.

The report, by the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, said the county gained nearly 80,000 older adult households between 2012 and 2019 — a 19.4% increase. The city accounted for nearly 45,000 of those households, while 35,000 live in suburban Cook County.

There are about 5.2 million people in Cook County, according to the latest U.S. Census figures. More than 776,000 of those residents are 65 or older.

The growth in the county's older population follows a national trend of seniors as the fastest growing age group. The growth is fueled by an aging Baby Boomer demographic, experts said.

“The 2021 Housing Needs and Economic Conditions of Cook County's Older Adults” appears to be the first report to examine the implications of the changes. Its author says the report aims to serve as a baseline resource to inform policy makers of the critical economic and housing issues facing older adults in the years to come.

Households headed by older adults are rapidly increasing among Blacks, Hispanics and Asians, the report found. Between 2012 and 2019 there was an 80% increase in older-adult Hispanic households, nearly 60% growth among Asian households and a 23% rise in Black households. That is significantly higher than the 9.2% increase in the numbers of older adult-headed households that identified as white.

Chicago's older adult households are also largely lower income, with 35.4% of households earning less than 30% of an area's median income, or “very low income,” the report states. That's twice as many as those that live in suburban Cook County.

The wage gap among older adult households is particularly evident along racial and ethnic lines. In Chicago, 43% of Blacks, 41.8% of Hispanics and 40.3% of Asians earn less than 30% of the area's median income, compared to about 23% of whites.

Geoff Smith, executive director of the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, said with so many financially vulnerable seniors, one of the more concerning findings centered around affordable housing for the older adult households.

According to the report, most older adult households own their own properties countywide, but the share that rent is rapidly growing in the city. About 60% of the growing number of older adult households in Chicago is made up of Black and Hispanic renters, and the bulk of those are very low income.

That means nearly 60% of older adult renters in the city are cost-burdened, paying more than 30% of their income on rent alone.

It is imperative, Smith said, that lawmakers find or create affordable housing for older adults.

Groups that work with older adults say they have seen the changes firsthand. For nearly 40 years, Housing Opportunities & Maintenances for the Elderly (HOME) has helped older Chicagoans find affordable housing and helped homeowners with repairs.

Gail Schechter, HOME's executive director, said solutions to help ease the financial burden include increasing the number of housing options available and promoting "intergenerational housing" that mixes older and younger people in the same building.

"That helps solve the supply side of the equation," Schechter said. "Another way is an increase in vouchers like [federal] Housing Choice Vouchers, because right now it is just woefully underfunded. Adding more funding for vouchers will help with the demand side, which boosts the income of the seniors."

Even among homeowners, the situation is not always equitable in Chicago, where Black seniors are more likely to still be paying off a mortgage than any other racial or ethnic group. In 2019, 47.7% of older Black homeowners had a mortgage, compared to 43.3% of Hispanics, 33.8% of whites and 33.5% of Asians.

Mike Laz, who has worked at HOME for 18 years, said the report confirms what he sees every day: many older Black homeowners are struggling.

"This report finally allows us to point to something as tangible evidence for what we've seen," he said.

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