

Difficult Conversations: Addressing Biases about Affordable Housing Development



In 2021, the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) reported that one in four renter households in the U.S. cannot afford market-rate rents. This statistic shouldn't come as a surprise: It's common knowledge that the U.S. faces an affordable housing crisis. Many people express support for solutions ... except when the solutions are built in their neighborhood. Yes, NIMBYism is alive and well.

That's not surprising either. NIMBYism stems from biases strengthened by misinformation about what affordable housing brings to a community. Because the biases are so deeply rooted, it's difficult to change NIMBYist mindsets. But not impossible. Below we offer tips on 1) identifying common biases, 2) recognizing how the biases manifest themselves in discussions about affordable housing, and 3) influencing the tenor and productivity of the discussions.



Affordable Housing Versus NIMBYism – Recent Findings

Findings of a survey we conducted in 2021 shed light on popular attitudes toward affordable housing. What we discovered:

- We asked if respondents understood the benefits that affordable housing can bring to their community. Most respondents (59%) said yes.
- Respondents were most welcoming of affordable housing for veterans (71%) and senior citizens (70%). In fact, affordable housing for veterans, affordable apartments for seniors, people with disabilities, and workforce housing all garnered stronger support than “single-family housing for middle-class families.”
- Yet only 52% of respondents agreed that they would welcome “low-income housing” in their neighborhood.

Less enthusiastic attitudes toward low-income housing have an outsized effect on underserved minorities. According to NLIHC: “Racial and ethnic income inequality contributes to disparities in housing affordability. While the median white worker earns enough to afford a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent, the median Black worker and the median Latino worker do not.”

In other words, underserved minorities are in greater need of affordable housing than whites. And this means that NIMBYists – whether they realize it or not – are, in effect, supporting de facto segregation. As a recent article in Planetizen states, “NIMBYism is often driven, more or less openly, by racism and classism. But the concerns more commonly voiced are about increased crime, traffic congestion, strain on sewers, overcrowded schools, and lowered property values and ‘quality of life.’”

How do you address such concerns? The first step is to identify the different types of unconscious biases behind them.

Five Unconscious Biases that Surface in Conversations about Housing

1 IMPLICIT BIAS

When we have an implicit bias, we aren't aware of our own attitudes or stereotypes about people. People with implicit biases might say things like:

"Low-income housing will increase the crime rate"

"Having apartments nearby will change the character of our neighborhood" or

"People who live in affordable housing don't take pride in their community"

"This type of housing is going to bring down our property values."

You could accept such statements at face value, but a more skeptical – and realistic – interpretation pinpoints the underlying “racism and classism” suggested by Planetizen.

2 CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms or supports our prior beliefs or values. People with confirmation bias might say things like:

"I've talked to our neighbors, and everyone is in agreement that we don't want this here."

"Look at what happened in the town next to us -- they added all those apartments, and homeowners are now moving because of the traffic."

or

People who make these kinds of statements are conveniently forgetting any contrary information they've come across. For instance, the commenter might have spoken to other neighbors who have a different perspective. Or the commenter neglects to consider the new, much-needed grocery store that came with the new apartments.

3 ANCHORING BIAS

Anchoring biases prompt us to rely too heavily on the first piece of information we receive about a topic. These biases manifest themselves in comments like these:

"The developer has said from the very beginning that they want 300 units here - not 100. They'll find a loophole to make that happen, mark my words."

"We all remember when Section 8 housing first launched in this town -- Do you really want that to happen again?"

or

As these comments suggest, people with anchoring biases ignore the potential for change or improvement. Their initial opinions stick.

4 PROGRESS BIAS

People with progress biases overstate their positive actions while downplaying negative actions (or non-actions).

Here's what you might hear from people with progress biases:

"We already have three low-income apartment buildings here -- why do we need another?"

"We supported a 10% incentive for affordable unit production. That's more than enough."

These commenters rest on their laurels, ignoring the reality that progress requires ongoing commitment.

5 CONFORMITY BIAS

People with conformity biases are swayed by the views of others. You may have heard the term "groupthink." That applies here. Another driver of conformity is fear of conflict with neighbors. Some residents might think to themselves:

"Well, no one else wants it. I'm not going to be the one to stick my neck out in favor of it."



Tips for Productive Conversations

If you recognize common biases, you can anticipate the kinds of comments they'll inspire. Facilitators of meetings and online forums can head off and/or challenge such comments effectively by 1) educating participants, and 2) demonstrating points and countering arguments with data, and 3) expanding the audience.

EDUCATION

Many people fear affordable housing because they don't recognize the benefits it brings communities. The fix: Provide an overview of these benefits and offer specific examples of successful housing projects in nearby communities or in communities with similar demographics. This kind of information deflects negativity from people with implicit biases, confirmation biases, and anchoring biases. It may also inspire those with progress biases and shift attitudes of local "influencers" who shape groupthink mentality.

DATA

Make sure you've done your homework on the local community. Know what the hot buttons are and be ready to address them. When the participant with implicit bias says that low-income housing will increase the crime rate, show data that reveals the opposite. When the participant with confirmation bias says that neighbors don't want affordable housing, counter with more sophisticated data from surveys of a larger pool of residents.

AUDIENCE

Make concerted efforts to reach a wider group of stakeholders. People who attend one public meeting may not express the views of the majority. To promote wider participation in the planning process, hold multiple meetings, both online and offline, at varied times and days, and at different locations. It's also essential to offer communications and enable discussions in multiple languages based on community demographics. These efforts enable you to reach more people and obtain more representative feedback.

For more ideas, please see our [white paper](#) on hosting productive community meetings.

Overcoming biases is a long-term challenge. You can't change attitudes and mindsets overnight. That's why development teams, municipalities, and housing organizations should strive to address the manifestations of biases. Effective deflections of these manifestations chip away at NIMBYism and speed up development of affordable housing, which is so urgently needed.