

Article 38: Human Development and Lack of Co-living Housing and Middle Housing

A **lack of co-living housing** leaves residents vulnerable to extreme social isolation and financial instability without the cost-sharing benefits of shared spaces. Furthermore, this deficit removes the built-in support networks that typically protect individuals from mental health strain and high costs (Durst & Wegmann, 2017; Reid, 2023; Strully et al., 2025). **Middle housing** helps bridge this gap by offering "affordable-by-design" layouts that naturally integrate communal interaction. Hence, the middle housing model fosters organic peer support and stability that provide a socially connected space through more accessible ways of living (Dong, 2024; Wegmann, 2019; Zeebuyth & Moore, 2024).

Causes and Scope of Lack of Co-living Housing in the United States

The lack of co-living housing in the United States stems from decades of restrictive zoning and outdated building codes that effectively banned shared living models like rooming houses. This shortage is widespread, leaving millions of low-income individuals struggling to find affordable options in high-cost urban centers. Financial hurdles and a lack of standardized lending for communal projects further limit the scale of new developments despite a surging demand for flexible housing. Consequently, many residents are forced into traditional, expensive rentals that swallow a growing portion of their income and offer little social connection (Durst & Wegmann, 2017; Reid, 2023; Strully et al., 2025).

For instance, a study examined how informal and shared housing arrangements operated in U.S. cities, focusing on the regulatory and structural conditions shaping their development. Thus, researchers gathered qualitative data from urban case studies, including cities such as Los Angeles and New York, using field observations, policy analysis, and documented housing practices. Data collection involved reviewing zoning codes, housing regulations, and real-world examples of shared or informal living arrangements. Findings indicated that restrictive land-use policies and occupancy limits constrained the legal development of non-traditional shared housing models. As a result, many co-living-like arrangements persisted informally, often existing under unclear or inconsistently enforced legal conditions rather than through formal housing markets. Evidence suggested that such arrangements were not marginal but relatively widespread across urban neighborhoods and some suburban areas. Affordability pressures further drove individuals towards shared housing when formal options remained limited. Likewise, existing regulatory frameworks failed to adapt to evolving housing needs, creating additional barriers to legal expansion. This mismatch between demand for flexible housing and rigid regulatory structures contributed to limited formal co-living availability in the United States. The continued presence of informal shared housing reflected both unmet demand and constrained supply. Ultimately, the researchers concluded that reforming zoning and regulatory systems was essential to support the development of flexible and affordable residence options, such as co-living housing (Durst & Wegmann, 2017).

Another study examined the structural barriers that limit the development of flexible housing models such as co-living, focusing on inefficiencies in how housing is planned, regulated, and built. Following that lead, researchers compiled a dataset of 3,566 academic publications sourced from databases such as Web of Science and Scopus. Data collection relied on analyzing text-based research outputs to identify recurring challenges across the housing process. Findings revealed 83 supply-side barriers that

constrained the efficiency of housing provision, many of which limited the ability to meet diverse and evolving housing needs. Key barriers included poor land-use planning, bureaucratic processes, inconsistent policy frameworks, and limited technical capacity in construction practices. The analysis showed that housing was often designed in standardized and inflexible ways, reducing adaptability to shared or co-living arrangements. These structural inefficiencies contributed to a persistent gap between housing supply and demand, including in the United States, where affordability pressures remain high. Evidence further indicated that design and construction limitations restricted innovation and slowed the adoption of alternative housing solutions. The study also highlighted that poor coordination among governments, developers, and other stakeholders reduced overall effectiveness. As a result, the way housing was planned, regulated, and built did not meet evolving social needs and preferences for more flexible living arrangements. This imbalance reflected broader constraints that contribute to the limited availability of formal co-living housing. Hence, the researchers concluded that improving efficiency, coordination, and sustainability across the ways housing is planned and delivered was essential to support more adaptable and affordable housing options (Reid, 2023).

On that same note, a study examined how restrictive zoning laws in the United States limit housing diversity, including flexible arrangements such as co-living, by focusing on low-density zoning across metropolitan areas. Researchers used data from 44 large U.S. metro areas, drawing on the National Longitudinal Land Use Survey and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, with a sample of 87,752 individuals. Information was gathered by combining zoning regulations on housing density with survey data on individual health and socioeconomic conditions. Findings showed that low-density zoning laws restricted the number of housing units allowed in many areas, reducing overall supply and limiting affordable housing options. These restrictions also concentrated multi-family and rental housing into fewer locations, reinforcing patterns of income and racial segregation. Evidence indicated that such zoning practices were widespread across U.S. metropolitan regions, pointing to a broad structural constraint on housing availability. The study also found that limiting housing density increased housing costs and reduced access to more flexible living arrangements. This made it harder for developers and housing providers to build shared housing models that require higher density and adaptable space use. As a result, housing options remained centered on single-family and traditional units rather than co-living-type arrangements. The findings further showed that these constraints contributed to broader social and economic inequalities across cities and limited access to shared housing options. This imbalance reflected a system where housing regulations did not align with changing housing needs and demand, as preferences are shifting towards more flexible models. The researchers concluded that restrictive zoning policies played a key role in limiting housing diversity, and reform is needed to support more flexible and affordable housing options, including co-living housing models (Strully et al., 2025).

Effectiveness and Impact of Middle Housing

Middle housing effectively mitigates the lack of co-living housing by providing a diverse range of affordable options that naturally encourage social interaction. These multi-unit structures, such as duplexes and courtyard apartments, recreate the communal benefits of shared living within a traditional neighborhood setting. Moreover, such homes offer the shared support and financial relief that residents lose when intentional co-living spaces are unavailable and foster collaboration at a familiar and neighborhood scale, which strengthens human development (Dong, 2024; Wegmann, 2019; Zeebuyth & Moore, 2024).

Following that lead, a study examined the effectiveness of middle housing policies in the United States as a strategy to expand flexible housing options and help mitigate the lack of co-living housing, focusing on zoning reform in single-family neighborhoods. Researchers used data on residential development patterns before and after the implementation of the Residential Infill Project in Portland, Oregon. Information was gathered by analyzing housing permit data and zoning changes to assess shifts in housing types over time. Findings showed a substantial increase in the share of middle housing units after the reform, rising from about 13.4% to 44.7% of new residential developments. The study also found that middle housing units were generally smaller in size than single-family homes, which made them more affordable. Evidence indicated that zoning changes allowed middle housing to be built in more locations, including areas previously restricted to single-family use. This expansion increased housing supply and created more opportunities for flexible living arrangements. The findings further showed that middle housing developments were more likely to be located in accessible and moderately dense neighborhoods. These changes made it easier for developers to build housing types that support shared or co-living-style arrangements. As a result, middle housing served as a practical way to introduce more diverse and adaptable housing options into constrained markets. The study concluded that removing single-family zoning restrictions was an effective first step in increasing housing diversity and affordability. The researchers emphasized that broader zoning reforms were needed to further expand housing supply and support flexible housing models such as co-living (Dong, 2024).

Another study examined the effectiveness of middle housing as a strategy to address housing constraints in the United States, particularly those created by single-family zoning that limit flexible options such as co-living. Researchers relied on policy analysis and documented planning practices across U.S. cities and regions where zoning reforms were being debated or implemented. The data was gathered through a review of planning literature, zoning frameworks, and real-world policy examples such as reforms in Minneapolis and Oregon. Findings showed that single-family zoning had long restricted housing supply by allowing only detached homes on large lots, limiting density and excluding alternative housing types. The study found that these restrictions contributed to higher housing costs, inequality, and reduced access to diverse housing options. Evidence indicated that allowing “missing middle” housing, such as duplexes and triplexes, could increase housing supply and support more compact and efficient land use. These housing types were identified as more adaptable and better suited to meet changing living preferences. The analysis also highlighted that zoning reforms enabling middle housing were gaining traction in several U.S. locations, showing practical feasibility. Therefore, middle housing was presented as an effective way to expand housing diversity and create conditions that support shared living arrangements. This shift made it easier to introduce housing forms that align with co-living concepts. The study emphasized that broader adoption of such reforms could reduce housing shortages and improve affordability. Hence, the researchers concluded that eliminating single-family zoning and allowing middle housing at scale was a necessary step to create more inclusive, flexible, and sustainable housing systems (Wegmann, 2019).

Lastly, a study explored the role of middle housing in reducing housing shortages and expanding flexible living options in the United States. Instead of focusing only on development trends, the authors examined how zoning policies and legal frameworks have historically limited housing variety across many cities. The data was gathered through an extensive review of housing policies, planning documents, and prior research on land use and affordability. Findings showed that single-family

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zoning significantly reduced the availability of moderately dense housing by restricting what could be built in large portions of urban areas. This limitation contributed to rising housing costs and reduced access to alternative housing types. The study found that middle housing, such as duplexes and townhomes, could increase supply while blending more easily into existing neighborhoods. Evidence indicated that these housing types improved affordability and made more efficient use of land. The analysis also highlighted that middle housing reforms were more politically acceptable than large-scale developments, increasing their chances of implementation. These conditions supported the creation of more flexible housing arrangements that align with shared and co-living models. As a result, middle housing was identified as a practical way to expand housing options in constrained markets. The findings further showed that increasing housing units in this category could help reduce broader affordability pressures. The researchers concluded that expanding middle housing was an effective and achievable strategy to improve housing access and support more adaptable living arrangements in the United States (Zeebuyth & Moore, 2024).

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