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Most Rent-Burdened New Yorkers Are Single Seniors, Single Parents

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More than four in 10 New York City tenants spend at least 30 percent of their income on rent, according to a key finding in a report released by the nonpartisan Citizens Budget Commission on Thursday.

The study found 42 percent of New York City's renter households are what is commonly known as "rent-burdened," and half of those households are "severely rent-burdened" — meaning they pay more than half their income in rent.

While New York City is a notoriously expensive place to live, tenants who fall in these thresholds are almost entirely low earners, rather than middle- or high-income people who opt to spend a lot of their money on housing costs. CBC found that 94 percent of the "severely rent-burdened" households are, in fact, comprised of people earning very little money.

"These findings show the affordability problem is severe among some portions of the population, even though the city as a whole fares well in comparison to other cities," the report said.

The groups of New Yorkers who have the most difficulty paying their rent are single people older than 60 and single parents between 30 and 59 years old.

Couples with children tend to fare the best, but have more trouble paying rent when they reach age 60, according to a chart included in the report.

By borough, the most rent-burdened households are located in Queens, where only 52 percent are not rent-burdened.

CBC also concluded that the use of gross rent — the sum of actual rent and utility costs — in housing reports "overstates the affordability problem because it does not account for subsidies and other support received by renters that reduce the actual amount of rent paid."

Because New York City offers a variety of subsidies to help renters — one for seniors, another for those who are disabled, for instance — the difference between gross rent and actual rent "can be substantial," according to the report's findings.

Yet housing studies typically account for gross rent, thereby skewing the results, CBC said in its report.



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"Thus a proper accounting of the rental affordability burden requires a more accurate measurement of the problem," the report continued.

The Census conducts a routine housing survey using out-of-pocket rent costs, after subsidies are accounted for.

CBC's report looked at it both ways: When accounting only for gross rent, the percentage of rent-burdened New Yorkers jumps from 42 percent, or 891,037 households, to 54 percent, or more than 1.1 million. And the rate of severely rent-burdened climbs from 22 percent, or 456,487 households, to 31 percent, or 660,497.

The report was released as Mayor Bill de Blasio seeks to build 80,000 new apartments and preserve another 120,000 for what he calls affordable housing. The levels of affordability, based on area median incomes of targeted tenants, have yet to reach some of the poorest populations in the city — a much more expensive proposition for developers and the city agencies subsidizing them.

The report ended on this note regarding the mayor's plan: "Attention should be paid in particular to single seniors and single parents in targeting programs to address affordability."