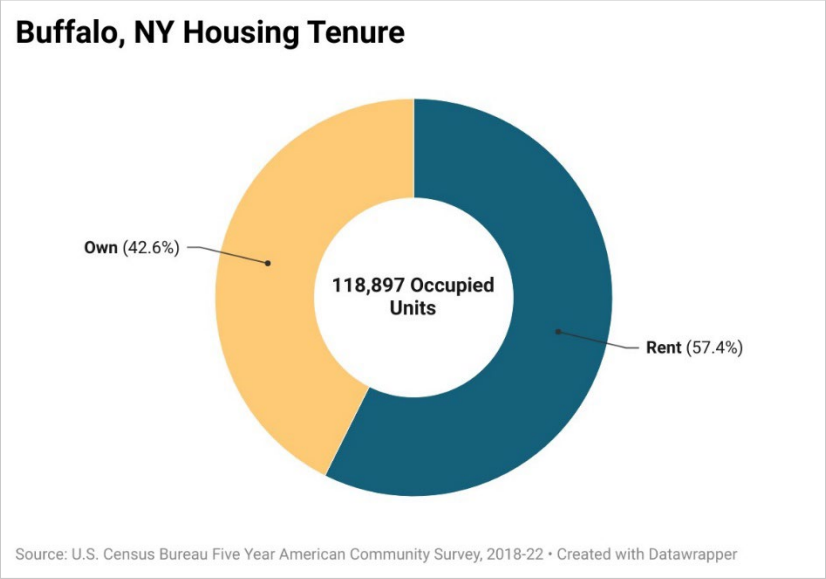
WHO OWNS BUFFALO?

A Brief Summary of Rental Property Ownership in Buffalo, NY

Housing Tenure in Buffalo, NY

According to the current (2018-22) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS), there are approximately 136,421 housing units[1] in the City of Buffalo, NY. Of these units, 118,897 are estimated to be occupied. As shown in the graph to the right, the ACS reveals that **Buffalo is a majority renter City**: 57.4% of households are occupied by renters, with the remaining 42.6% of households being owner-occupied.[2]



In addition to the 58.6% of Buffalo's households (68,204 units) that are renter-occupied, the ACS reports that 3,068 of the City's housing units are "For Rent", and 638 units are "Rented, Not Occupied".[3] Thus, in total, the Census Bureau estimates that **71,910 housing units in Buffalo – or the majority (roughly 52.7%) of the City's total 136,421-housing stock – are actively used as rental properties**.

What the ACS data cannot reveal, however, is (1) the landscape of who owns this vast stock of rental properties and (2) how rental unit quality varies by who owns the unit. This brief memo draws on the 2023 Erie County real property tax parcel dataset, as well as open data on City of Buffalo housing code violations, to begin generating answers to these questions.

Estimating Tenure With Real Property Data

To begin evaluating the questions posed above, 2023 tax assessment and real property parcel data for Erie County were obtained, in spatial data format, from the New York State (NYS)

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Clearinghouse.[4] The tax parcel file contains detailed records on the location, geometry, land use, assessed value, structure type, year built, and owner identity for every real property parcel in the County. While the tax file does not include information on whether residential parcels contain owner- or renter-occupied units, there is a popular convention in social science research for estimating parcel-level tenure from tax records. That convention, while necessarily imperfect, involves coding parcels for which an owner's mailing address matches the parcel address as "owner-occupied."[5] Residential properties for which mailing and parcel addresses do not match are therefore estimated to be "non-owner-occupied," or rental units.[6]

In addition to not reporting housing tenure, the parcel file does not report the number of housing units present in a given residential structure. To estimate this value, the researchers obtained a comprehensive list of mailing addresses in NYS from the state's GIS Clearinghouse.[7] The address file was created and is regularly updated and maintained for emergency services purposes (i.e., so that first responders know precisely where to report when a request for assistance is made at a specific mailing address). Next, the researchers overlaid point mailing addresses onto the Erie County parcel file and summed the number of addresses that mapped onto each parcel. From there, NYS property class codes[8] (from the parcel file) were used to identify all parcels that contain residential structures. Finally, for each parcel containing a residential structure, the authors used the number of mailing addresses that mapped onto that parcel as a proxy measure of the number of housing units situated on that parcel. Via this method, the researchers estimated that the City is home to 136,727 housing units spread over 71,593 residential parcels. This value matches almost perfectly with the current (2018-22) U.S. Census ACS estimate of 136,421 housing units in Buffalo – a difference of just 0.2%.

Based on a comparison of owner mailing addresses to a residential structure's physical address, the authors identified 70,103 addresses (i.e., likely housing units) that are seemingly used for rental housing purposes. This number, again, matches reasonably well with the current U.S. Census ACS estimate of 71,910 rental property units in the City (a difference of just 2.5%). Thus, one can be confident that analyses of [estimated] ownership of rental property using the Erie County parcel file will produce reliable results.

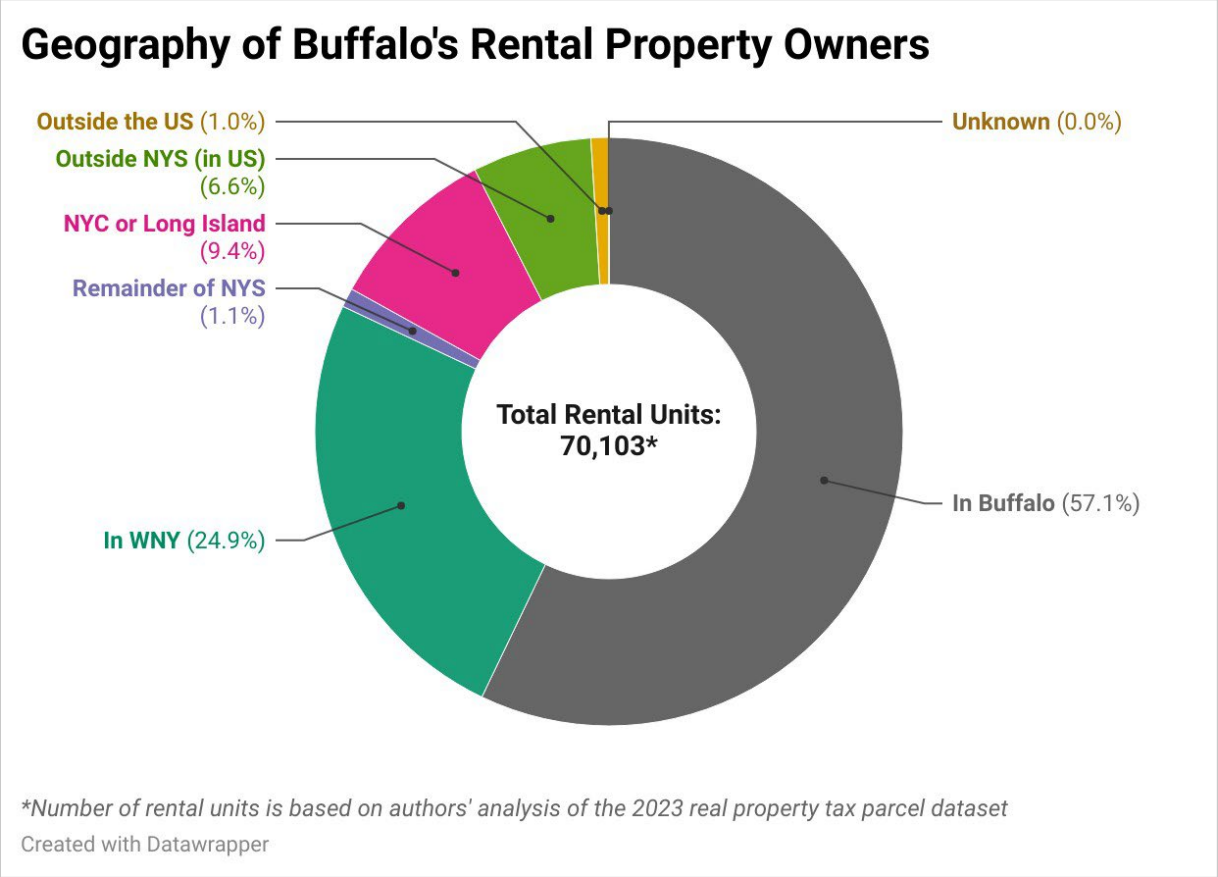
So, Who Owns Buffalo's Rental Housing Stock?

To begin, after geocoding the mailing address of each parcel's owner, the authors devised a seven-category framework for describing the geography of Buffalo rental property ownership:

- **In Buffalo:** Owners whose mailing address differs from the property's physical address, but who live in the City of Buffalo;

- **In Western New York (WNY):** Owners who reside in the five-county WNY region (Erie, Niagara, Allegany, Chautauqua, and Cattaraugus Counties);
- **In NYC or Long Island:** Owners who reside in New York City (NYC) or Long Island;
- **In the Remainder of NYS:** Owners who reside in NYS, outside of WNY, *and* outside of NYC or Long Island;
- **Outside NYS (In U.S.):** Owners who reside in a U.S. state other than New York;
- **Outside U.S.**: Owners who live abroad; and
- **Unknown:** Owners whose mailing addresses were incomplete and therefore not able to be geocoded.

The following figure shows how the 70,103 likely rental units identified in this memo's analysis of the Erie County tax parcel file break down with respect to the preceding framework.



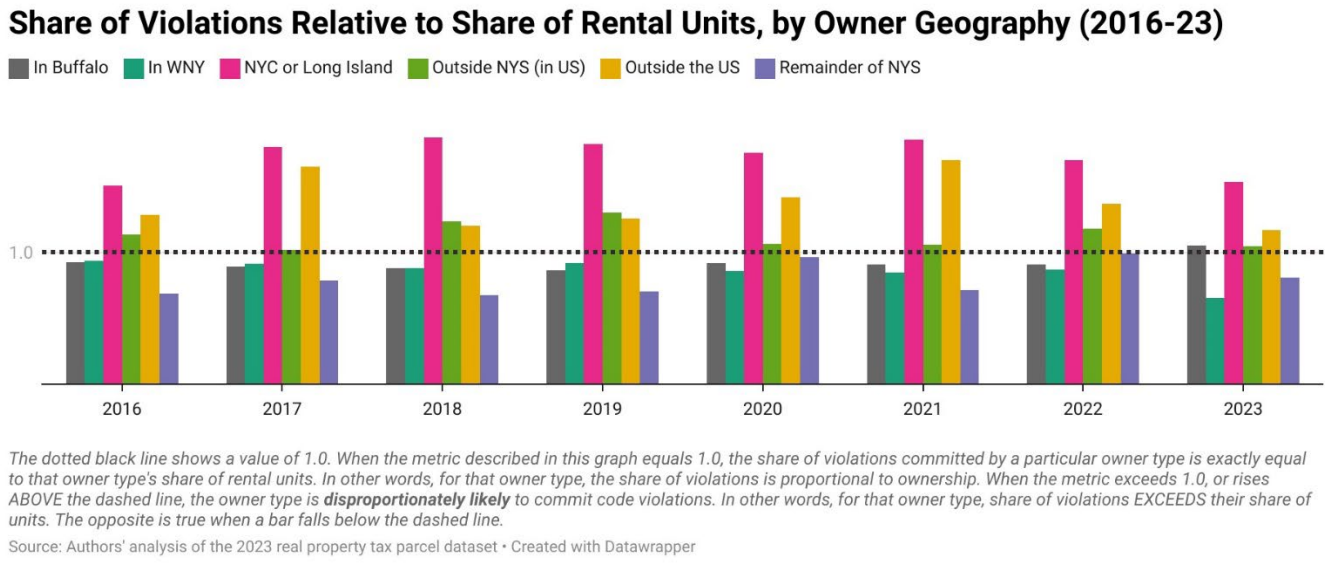
As the figure indicates, the vast majority of rental units in Buffalo appear to be owned locally. More than half (57.1%) of owners were linked to mailing addresses in the City of Buffalo, while another quarter (24.9%) were associated with addresses in the WNY region. Among the remaining categories of owner geographies, the largest region of ownership (9.4%) is NYC or

Long Island. Roughly 6.6% of units are owned by American-based investors outside of NYS, and 1% of owners are based abroad.

Does Rental Unit Quality Vary by Owner Geography?

A working geography of rental property ownership in Buffalo gives rise to numerous possibilities, including analyses of the relationship(s) between owner location, rent prices, unit quality, and various other phenomena of interest. While many of these questions will be explored in subsequent interventions, the final section of this memo kicks off such a research program by taking a brief, surface-level look at the potential association between owner geography and housing code violations. Data on housing code violations were obtained from the City of Buffalo's Open Data Portal as an Esri shapefile.[9] Because the data were already available in a spatial data format, the authors of this memo did not need to perform any geocoding functions. Rather, each violation already exists in the open dataset as an x-y coordinate pair situated in the City of Buffalo. In that way, each violation could quickly be assigned to the City of Buffalo parcel in which it lied. The code violation dataset was downloaded on 1 January 2024 and contained consistent violation records for the years 2016 through 2023.

The figure below summarizes data on the distribution of violations, by year, across owner geographies.[10]



*The dotted black line shows a value of 1.0. When the metric described in this graph equals 1.0, the share of violations committed by a particular owner type is exactly equal to that owner type's share of rental units. In other words, for that owner type, the share of violations is proportional to ownership. When the metric exceeds 1.0, or rises ABOVE the dashed line, the owner type is **disproportionately likely** to commit code violations. In other words, for that owner type, share of violations EXCEEDS their share of units. The opposite is true when a bar falls below the dashed line.*

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2023 real property tax parcel dataset • Created with Datawrapper

As described in the note on the preceding figure, the dashed line is a line of proportionality. In a given year, if a specific owner type (e.g., owners "In Buffalo") is linked to 50% of violations and that same owner type accounts for 50% of all rental units, then the bar for that unit will

coincide with the dotted line. If, however, the bar for a specific owner type rises *above* the dashed line, then that owner type's share of code violations (for that year) is disproportionately high given the share of units owned by that type of owner. There is a clear pattern in the data: **properties currently owned by investors based in NYC or Long Island, or investors outside of the U.S., are disproportionately likely to be cited for housing code violations relative to units that are locally, regionally, or otherwise domestically owned**.

The data to support the preceding figure are summarized in the table below.

	Share of Violations								Share of Units
Owner Geography	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	
In Buffalo	52.8%	51.0%	50.4%	49.3%	52.6%	52.0%	51.9%	60.3%	57.1%
In WNY	23.4%	22.8%	21.9%	22.9%	21.4%	21.1%	21.8%	16.2%	24.9%
NYC or Long Island	14.2%	17.0%	17.6%	17.1%	16.5%	17.4%	16.0%	14.4%	9.4%
Outside NYS (in US)	7.5%	6.7%	8.2%	8.6%	7.0%	7.0%	7.8%	6.9%	6.6%
Outside the US	1.3%	1.7%	1.2%	1.3%	1.4%	1.7%	1.4%	1.2%	1.0%
Remainder of NYS	0.8%	0.9%	0.7%	0.8%	1.1%	0.8%	1.1%	0.9%	1.1%
Unknown	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%

Insofar as the presence of housing code violations is a popular indicator of housing unit quality,[11] the observation that violation activity may vary according to owner geography hints at a need for a spatially-targeted approach to code enforcement, sanctions, and related tools to put upward pressure on rental unit quality over time.

ILR Buffalo Co-Lab

Notes

[1] U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates for 2018-2022. Table B25001. “Housing Units”.
[2] U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates for 2018-2022. Table B25003. “Tenure”.
[3] U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates for 2018-2022. Table B25004. “Vacancy Status”.
[4] http://gis.ny.gov/gisdata/inventories/details.cfm?DSID=1300
[5] O’Brien, D. T. (2012). Managing the urban commons. *Human Nature*, *23*(4), 467-489.
[6] Weaver, R. (2016). Evolutionary theory and neighborhood quality: A multilevel selection-inspired approach to studying urban property conditions. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, *11*(2), 369-386.
[7] https://data.gis.ny.gov/datasets/sharegisny::nys-address-points/explore?location=42.730837%2C-75.868697%2C8.06
[8] https://www.tax.ny.gov/research/property/assess/manuals/prclas.htm#residential
[9] https://data.buffalony.gov/Quality-of-Life/Code-Violations/ivrf-k9vm/data_preview
[10] With tax parcel data for the static year of 2023, it was not possible to account for potential transfers of ownership over the period of the analysis. The category “Unknown” is omitted due to low observed frequencies.
[11] E.g.: Weaver, R. C. (2013). Re-framing the urban blight problem with trans-disciplinary insights from ecological economics. *Ecological Economics*, *90*, 168-176.; Weaver, R. C., & Bagchi-Sen, S. (2013). Spatial analysis of urban decline: The geography of blight. *Applied Geography*, *40*, 61-70.; Weaver, R. C., & Bagchi-Sen, S. (2014). Evolutionary analysis of neighborhood decline using multilevel selection theory. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *104*(4), 765-783.