POLICY BRIEF

Who Can Actually Rent It

A single renter on Social Security can be too well off for America's deepest affordable housing and too poor to pass a landlord's income screen for the rest of it. This is a 2026 analysis of income-restricted housing at published limits.

HomeShare America · September 2026

SUMMARY

Households headed by or including an older adult aged 62 or over are now **42 percent of all HUD-assisted households, up from 33 percent in 2014**, on the same definition in both years.[1] A third of the country's poorest renter households are headed by someone 62 or older.[2] On a single night in January 2023, more than one in five people experiencing homelessness were aged 55 or over, about 138,000 people.[3]

Much of the income-restricted housing being built is out of reach for a single renter living on the average Social Security retirement benefit without rental assistance attached, and the reason is two separate mechanisms that are usually confused for one.

Income-restricted homes have a published income ceiling, a maximum a household may earn, set as a share of the local median income.[4] They do not have a published income minimum. What they have instead is **an ordinary landlord income test**: because rent in these homes is fixed by a table rather than by what the resident earns, properties commonly require documented income at some multiple of the monthly rent. That test is the landlord's own practice rather than a federal rule, each property sets its own, and this brief models it at three, two and a half and two times.[5]

Run one person at the **2026 average Social Security retired-worker benefit of $2,071 a month, $24,852 a year**,[6] against all 2,644 HUD income limit areas, for a one-bedroom:

- **She exceeds the regulatory income ceiling for the deepest 30 percent homes in 92.7 percent of areas.** This is a pure eligibility exclusion. It involves no assumption about screening at all.
- **At the 60 percent level, a level commonly used in tax credit development, she fails a three times rent screen in 99.4 percent of areas**, and is over the ceiling in the remaining 0.6 percent. Combining both, **there is no area in the country where she both qualifies on income and clears a three times screen at 60 percent.**
- **Across all four levels, both tests are satisfied in 7.7 percent of areas.** At a two times screen, 96 percent.

> Too well off for the deepest housing by regulation. Too poor for the rest by the landlord's income test. That is a missing middle inside affordable housing itself.
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> None of this shows up as empty buildings. In CohnReznick's surveyed national portfolio, tax credit properties reported median physical occupancy of 97 percent.[7] It shows up somewhere else: of the 7.2 million homes whose rents are affordable to the poorest renters, **3.4 million are occupied by higher-income households**, which is why only 35 of every 100 are affordable *and available*.[2] The units fill. The household who could not appears in no statistic at all.

1. Who this housing is now for

The system was largely designed around working households whose incomes were expected to rise. It increasingly serves households whose incomes will not.

- **Households with an older adult, meaning aged 62 or over, are 42 percent of all HUD-assisted households in 2024, up from 33 percent in 2014**, on the same definition in both years. About 1.9 million such households receive assistance, against roughly 6 million eligible.[1]
- **A third of the poorest renter households are headed by someone 62 or older.** There are about 11 million of these households nationally.[2]
- **On a single night in January 2023, more than one in five people experiencing homelessness were aged 55 or over**: about 98,400 aged 55 to 64 and 39,700 aged 65 and over, roughly 138,000 in total, measured against all people counted rather than adults only.[3]
- Assisted older households stay about nine years on average, against about four for families with children.[8]

When HUD proposed work requirements and time limits on assistance in February 2026, older adults and people with disabilities were exempt.[16] That exemption is the clearest official acknowledgment available that for these households, assistance is not a stage on the way somewhere. It is where they live.

2. The homes exist. Someone else is in them.

There are 7.2 million rental homes in the country affordable to the poorest renters, meaning those at or below 30 percent of their area's median income or the poverty line, whichever is higher, against 11 million such households. That is 65 affordable homes per 100 households, which is a shortage but not a catastrophic one.

Then look at how many are actually obtainable:

	PER 100 POOREST RENTER HOUSEHOLDS
Homes affordable to them	65
Homes affordable and available to them	**35**

The difference is 3.4 million homes: affordable units occupied by households with higher incomes. Nearly half the homes whose rents are affordable to the poorest renters are lived in by households earning more than that.

That is not a story about waste or bad management. Those units are full and rent-paying. It is a description of who ends up inside them.

And it is invisible in every operating statistic a housing agency looks at. CohnReznick's surveyed national portfolio reported **median physical occupancy of 97 percent** at the end of 2024.[7] Nothing in that number tells you who is not there.

3. Two different gates, often mistaken for one

An applicant has to get past two things, and only one of them is written down.

The income ceiling is regulatory. It is the most a household may earn and still qualify, set as a share of the local median income and published by HUD every spring.[4] It is a maximum. There is no matching statutory minimum: federal rules do not require a household to earn any particular amount to live in an income-restricted home.

The income test belongs to the landlord. Because rent in these homes is fixed by a published table rather than by what the resident earns,[5] the property has to satisfy itself the resident can pay a fixed amount. It does that the way landlords generally do, by requiring documented income at a multiple of the rent. Income screens commonly use a multiple of the monthly rent. This brief models three scenarios, at three times, two and a half times and two times rent, rather than asserting a national norm, because no comprehensive source for prevailing multiples exists.[9]

This is the distinction that matters for policy. Being over the ceiling is an eligibility problem, created by regulation, and fixable by regulation. Failing the landlord's income test is a private practice layered on top of a rent the rules had already fixed. They exclude the same household at different levels of the same system, and because no single body owns both, no one publishes the space between them.

Throughout this brief, figures described as a screen are calculated at a stated multiple. They are not a federal requirement and are not presented as one.

4. What this means for an older adult on Social Security

The 2026 average Social Security retired-worker benefit is $2,071 a month, $24,852 a year.[6] At a three times rent screen, that income qualifies a rent of at most **$690.33 a month**. The cheapest 60 percent one-bedroom rent in the country is $315; the national median is $1,012.[10]

How to read the table. An area counts as passing at a given level if the same household both sits at or below that level's published one-person income ceiling and could rent that level's one-bedroom under the stated screening multiple. Both conditions have to hold in the same area at the same level.

One person at that income, one-bedroom, across all 2,644 HUD income limit areas:

LEVEL	OVER THE REGULATORY CEILING	FAILS A 3X SCREEN	PASSES BOTH
30 percent of the local median	**92.7 percent**	6.1 percent	1.2 percent
50 percent	1.6 percent	91.9 percent	6.5 percent
60 percent, a level commonly used in tax credit development	0.6 percent	**99.4 percent**	**0.0 percent**
80 percent	0.6 percent	99.4 percent	0.0 percent
Any level			**7.7 percent**

Read the first column and the second column as different problems.

The 30 percent row is an eligibility exclusion. In 92.7 percent of areas her income is above the published limit for the deepest homes. No screening assumption is involved. The average retirement benefit has risen past the deepest affordability tier in most of the country.

The 60 and 80 percent rows are a screening exclusion. She is comfortably under those ceilings almost everywhere. She cannot document three times the rent. In the 0.6 percent of areas where rents are low enough to clear a three times screen, the income limits are correspondingly low and she is over the ceiling instead, which is why the two columns leave nothing behind.

The screen is the variable, not the market. At two and a half times, some level opens in 51 percent of areas. At two times, 96 percent. Same person, same buildings, same published limits.

Rental assistance removes the problem this screen is measuring. With a Housing Choice Voucher the tenant contribution is generally income-based rather than a fixed amount, so there is no fixed rent for an income multiple to be applied against, and she is under the 60 percent income ceiling in 99.4 percent of areas.[11] Assistance does not exempt anyone from a property's other admission criteria, such as credit, rental or criminal history screening.

One local comparison. In Multnomah County, Oregon, a single older renter in good health needs $38,100 a year to meet every basic need at market rent, according to the Elder Index.[12] A property there applying Portland's capped two and a half times screen would require $43,320 to admit her to the subsidized one-bedroom. The screened requirement is **$5,220 more than the income she would need to live without the subsidy at all.**

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5. Why building more, by itself, does not fix this

The screen is not a policy anyone wrote. It is what ordinary underwriting does when it meets a rent that regulation has fixed in advance.

In programs where rent moves with income, there is nothing for a screen to test. Public housing from 1937, Section 202 housing for older adults from 1959, and project-based rental assistance all set the resident's share at roughly 30 percent of income, with an operating subsidy covering the difference. You cannot be too poor for that structure. It was built for people with very little.

Then the engine changed. Congress repealed the construction part of Section 8 in 1983, and in 1986 created the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, which has been the country's main way of producing affordable homes ever since. **The credit pays for construction, not for operations.** With no operating subsidy, rent cannot follow each resident's income. It has to be fixed by a table. And a fixed rent has to be tested against something.

The financing shift is documented; what we claim here is about the conditions it created, not about where tenant screening originated.

It also explains why new homes are built at 60 percent rather than 30. A rent set at 30 percent of area median income usually will not cover the cost of operating the building without an ongoing subsidy, and that subsidy is scarce. So the deepest affordability is the thinnest supply, and the level that does get built is the level whose rent produces the highest screening requirement.

The evidence that this is the binding mechanism is in HUD's own tenant data:[13] **in HUD's 2023 tenant data, 57.2 percent of reported tax credit households had incomes at or below the deepest tier, and 48.3 percent received monthly rental assistance.** The poorest residents of these buildings are largely there because a subsidy came in with them. The building alone did not reach them.

Legislation signed in July 2025 made a 12 percent increase in the credit allocation permanent from 2026 and lowered the bond financing threshold from 50 percent to 25 percent, changes projected to finance roughly 1.22 million additional affordable homes over 2026 to 2035.[20] Built the same way, at the same levels, those homes will be reachable by an older adult on a fixed income only where assistance is attached. Rental assistance currently reaches about one in four eligible households.

6. What does change it

Three things, and only three.

Attach assistance to the home. A voucher, or assistance tied to the building itself, makes the tenant contribution income-based, so a rent-to-income multiple has no fixed rent to bite on. Other admission criteria still apply. This works, it is well understood, and it is rationed.

Set some homes at a lower level. Since 2018 a building may put individual homes anywhere from 20 to 80 percent of the local median, as long as the building's average stays at or below 60. Lower-designated homes carry lower rents and therefore lower screening requirements. This is a decision made building by building, and it is available now.

Cap the multiple. The multiple is a property decision almost everywhere. We identified caps in Portland, Oregon, at two and a half times rent, and statewide in Colorado at two times. We did not survey every state and local jurisdiction, so that is what we found rather than a claim about what exists. Moving a property from three times to two times rent opens a level to this household in 96 percent of areas instead of 8.

None of these require new construction. All of them decide whether construction reaches anyone.

7. What we already have, and what it would take

America built serious financial machinery to **create** housing. Tax credits, investor equity, permanent debt, insurance, guarantees, and regulatory credit for the banks that take part. **Roughly $28.9 billion in tax credit equity closed in 2024 alone, about 80 percent of it from banks.**[14] That works because the federal government did not simply declare affordable housing valuable. It manufactured an asset, defined what counted as a unit of production, set the standard, and gave several parties a reason to show up.

There is almost nothing equivalent for **using housing that already exists**.

And unlike most claims about untapped capacity, this one has been measured. Our own research, *The Rooms Already Exist*, counted it from Census microdata:[17]

Spare bedrooms in homes owned by adults 65 and over	**35 million**
Older renters paying more for rent than is recommended	**4.5 million**
Rooms of existing capacity per older renter in need	**nearly 8 to 1**
Share of those rooms needed to house every one of them	**about 13 percent**

Every state and the District of Columbia holds more spare bedrooms in older adults' homes than it has older renters in housing trouble. Not one state is short.

And the same finding names both households at once. Alongside those 4.5 million older renters are **7.7 million older homeowners**, about one in four, paying more than they can afford to stay in homes they already own. That is 12.2 million older households under housing pressure, on both sides of the same front door. One arrangement addresses both: the renter gets a home she can afford, and the homeowner gets income that may be what keeps her in hers.

The economics, plainly

Building a new subsidized apartment is expensive, and it should be. The most recent published figures put total development cost in California at roughly $515,000 to $726,000 per unit for 2020 to 2023, depending on wage requirements.[18] Costs vary widely by state and that is a high-cost example, but the order of magnitude is not in dispute: producing a new deeply affordable home is a several-hundred-thousand-dollar act of capital formation, and the resulting home, as sections 3 and 4 show, is one an older adult on Social Security usually still cannot rent without assistance attached.

Activating a room that already exists costs a fraction of that, and there is a public price on it. Portland's home sharing pilot, launched in February 2026 with $500,000 in city funding, pays a home provider **$1,500 for the first qualifying room** and $750 for each additional room, after thirty days of successful rental through a qualified provider, with rent capped at $250 a week including utilities.[19] The room needs no land, no construction financing, no thirty-year compliance period and no new heating system. It is already built, already heated and already standing.

That is the case for Housing Capacity Parity. Not that building is wrong: many households need independent, deeply subsidized, accessible or family-sized homes, and America needs substantially more construction than it is doing. The position is build, preserve, convert **and** activate. The argument is that a country which manufactured an entire asset class to finance the first three has left the fourth with no unit of measurement, no incentive, no risk infrastructure and no recognized event at which anything happens.

An arrangement between two people has neither of the gates in section 3. There is no published income limit to exceed and no landlord multiple to document, so nobody is turned away here for earning too much or for earning too little. It is the one form of supply this population is not screened out of on income, and it is the one the system does not count.

Verification still happens, and it is a different kind. Identity checks confirm that the person on the other side is a real person, and a comprehensive background check is made available to the party someone is considering sharing with rather than used by us to disqualify anyone. Those safeguards exist because a platform connecting older adults and people with low incomes would otherwise be attractive to fraud and predation. What is absent is the financial gate, not the protection.

What a shared arrangement does not carry is the rest of what regulation provides. There is no rent held down by a published table, no thirty-year compliance period keeping it there, and no guarantee of the independence, accessibility, or security of tenure a subsidized apartment is built to offer. It is a different form of supply rather than a cheaper version of the same one. That is precisely why the position is parity and not substitution: the argument is that this capacity should be measured, incentivized and financed on equal terms with new construction, not that it should stand in for it.

What parity would require is set out in the framework itself: a defined unit of production, an incentive for placing a room into affordable service, financing mechanisms that already exist being pointed at it, standardized risk and verification, and clarity on how room rental income interacts with means-tested benefits.[21] None of that is exotic. All of it was done once already, for construction.

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8. What this means, depending on where you sit

If you set housing policy. All three levers in section 6 are already in your hands and none requires new construction money. The scoring rules your state uses when it awards the housing tax credit can favor buildings that designate homes below the 60 percent level. Waiting-list preferences for older applicants are already permitted, and a preference for local residents must treat someone who works in the area the same as someone who lives there.[15] And a cap on the rent multiple a property may require is the single change that moves the household in section 4 from 8 percent of the country to 96 percent.

If you fund or finance housing. The landlord's income test is why capital put into construction does not convert into access for this population at the rate the unit count suggests. A project that adds fifty homes at the 60 percent level adds fifty homes an older adult on Social Security usually cannot rent unless something else comes with them. Two better questions than the unit count: what income multiple will the manager apply, and how many of these homes carry rental assistance.

If you build or operate housing. You know this from lease-up already: applicants who want the home, need the home, and cannot document the income. That pressure rarely shows up as an empty building. It usually resolves the other way, as someone better off taking the home rather than the home sitting empty, which is why surveyed occupancy sits at a median of 97 percent while the households these homes were intended for are outside them.[7] A full building is not evidence that the intended household was reached, and occupancy is the wrong measure to run a mission against.

If you fund organizations rather than buildings. This is the part with no financing machinery behind it, and it is where HomeShare America needs support.

The rooms exist. The households on both sides exist. What does not exist, and what no capital stack currently pays for, is the connective work between them: identity verification, background checks for both people, a matching process built on how two households actually live, agreement templates written for shared homes rather than borrowed from leases, and the support that carries a match past the first difficult month. That work is efficient precisely because most of the money in a home sharing arrangement reaches a household directly rather than a transaction chain, which is also why it generates no fee pool to fund itself the way development finance does.[21]

We operate that platform through partners already on the front lines: Area Agencies on Aging, community action agencies, housing authorities and community development corporations who meet older adults at the moment housing is coming apart. Those partners do not need a new program. They need a functioning platform to refer into, and the platform needs operating support to be there when they do.

The proportions are the argument. Housing every cost-burdened older renter in America would take about 13 percent of the spare bedrooms older adults already own. Physical bedroom capacity, on paper, is abundant. How much of it can realistically be activated is the open question, and answering it is part of the work rather than something we claim to have settled. What is already clear is that the constraint is not a shortage of rooms. It is the absence of infrastructure to connect them, which is currently the only part of America's affordable housing system asked to run on goodwill.

How these figures were checked

Every area-level figure comes from HUD's published FY2026 tables, processed by script rather than transcribed. The build reads the HUD workbooks directly and emits one record per income limit area, failing rather than filling any gap. Maximum rents are derived from the statute for every one of the 2,644 income limit areas, and the national percentages in section 4 are sums over those same area-level records rather than separate estimates.

Those results are then checked against a **second implementation that shares no code with the first**. It re-reads the same HUD workbooks with its own parser, re-derives every rent from the statute and recomputes both gates independently. It reproduces all four levels to the tenth of a percentage point, with **zero mismatches across all 2,644 areas**, and the build stops if that ever stops being true.

The underlying income limit tables are published by HUD and are public. The method, the derivation and the full national results are set out in the companion technical brief, *Between the Ceiling and the Floor*.

This product uses HUD published data but is not endorsed or certified by HUD.

Companion work. *Between the Ceiling and the Floor* is the technical brief behind these figures, with an interactive tool covering every county in the country. *Housing Capacity Parity* sets out the policy framework this evidence points toward. *The Value of a Match* prices what home sharing is worth to both households.

Statement of interest. HomeShare America operates a home sharing platform, and sections 7 and 8 make a case for funding that work. We publish this research for one reason: home sharing is the one form of affordable housing capacity the country does not measure, incentivize or finance, and our intention is that it be recognized and treated on equal terms with new construction. We are not arguing that it should replace construction. The analysis in sections 1 through 6 describes the regulated system on its own terms and stands independently of anything we do.

Suggested citation. HomeShare America. (2026). *Who Can Actually Rent It: income eligibility, tenant screening, and who America's affordable housing reaches.*

Notes and sources

1. Urban Institute, "Staffing and Funding Cuts at HUD Would Have an Outsize Effect on Older Adults," 2025, analyzing HUD's *Picture of Subsidized Households*. Older adult is defined as aged 62 and over, and the 2024 and 2014 figures use that same definition. Roughly 1.9 million such households assisted in 2024 against about 6 million income-eligible.

2. National Low Income Housing Coalition, *The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes*, March 2026, using 2024 American Community Survey data. Extremely low income means at or below the greater of the federal poverty guideline or 30 percent of area median income. Report figures: 11 million extremely low income renter households; 7.2 million homes affordable to them, or 65 per 100; 35 affordable **and available** per 100; 3.4 million affordable homes occupied by higher-income households; approximately one third of extremely low income renter households headed by someone aged 62 or over.

3. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Annual Homelessness Assessment Report*, Part 1, point-in-time count of January 2023, as reported by HUD and by the Government Accountability Office (GAO-25-106622, October 2024): more than one in five people experiencing homelessness on a single night were aged 55 or over, approximately 98,393 aged 55 to 64 and 39,696 aged 65 and over. The denominator is all

people counted, not adults only. **A single vintage is used deliberately.** HUD's 2025 report describes a similar share but does not publish a discrete 55 and over count in Part 1, so the 2023 figures are quoted rather than blended across years.

4. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Multifamily Tax Subsidy Project income limits and income averaging tables, FY2026, effective 1 May 2026. Covers 2,644 income limit areas across 4,764 counties in 56 states and territories. Income limits are maximums. Federal rules governing these programs do not set a minimum household income for occupancy.

5. Internal Revenue Code section 42(g)(2), rent restriction and imputed household size. Maximum rents are 30 percent of the income limit for an imputed household size over twelve months, with the imputed size set at one person for a studio and 1.5 per bedroom thereafter.

6. Social Security Administration, average monthly benefit for a retired worker, $2,071 as of January 2026, following the 2026 cost-of-living adjustment. **This is a 2026 income figure applied to FY2026 income limits.** Where it appears alongside a homelessness count taken on a single night in January 2025, the two are different vintages and are not combined in any calculation.

7. CohnReznick, *2025 Affordable Housing Credit Study*, data through year-end 2024. This is a survey of a large national portfolio rather than a census of every tax credit property. Median physical occupancy of 97 percent across that surveyed portfolio; 22 percent of the portfolio reporting economic vacancy above 10 percent, predominantly from collections rather than physical vacancy; watch-list share of 16.9 percent.

8. HUD USER, on tenure of assisted households.

9. Portland City Code 30.01.086, which caps the screening multiple at two and a half times rent, and two times above a rent threshold; Colorado Revised Statutes 38-12-904, two times statewide. Minneapolis requires landlords asking three times or more to consider alternative evidence. **These are the caps we identified, not the product of a comprehensive fifty-state and local-law survey**, and no national source for prevailing screening multiples exists. Both facts are why this brief models stated multiples rather than asserting a norm.

10. Calculated by the authors from the source in note 4. At $2,071 a month, a three times rent screen qualifies a rent of at most $690.33. Across the 2,644 areas, the 60 percent one-bedroom maximum rent ranges from $315 to $2,447 with a median of $1,012, and 17 areas have a 60 percent one-bedroom rent at or below $690.33.

11. 24 CFR part 982. With a Housing Choice Voucher the tenant contribution is approximately 30 percent of adjusted income, so there is no fixed rent against which to apply a multiple.

12. Elder Index 2025, Gerontology Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston: Multnomah County, single-person older-adult household in good health, renting at market rate. The Elder Index is a trademark of UMass Boston.

13. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, LIHTC Tenant Tables, 2023 data: 57.2 percent of reported households at or below 30 percent of area median gross income; 48.3 percent receiving monthly rental assistance, the highest share since HUD began reporting it in 2015. The denominator is reported tenant households, not individual people, and reporting is not complete for every property.

14. CohnReznick, *2024 LIHTC Equity Market Volume Survey*, March 2025: approximately $28.9 billion in investor equity closed in 2024, with bank investors approximately 80 percent of the equity surveyed.

15. 24 CFR 960.206(b), local preferences, including residency, working families, disability, domestic violence and homelessness. A residency preference must treat applicants who work in the area, or are hired to work there, the same as residents, and may not be based on length of residence.

16. HUD news release 26-018, February 2026, proposing work requirements and time limits, with older adults and people with disabilities exempt.

17. HomeShare America, *The Rooms Already Exist*, using American Community Survey 2023 1-Year public use microdata. Universe: owner-occupied households with a householder aged 65 or over. A spare bedroom is bedrooms minus household members, floored at zero, summed across households. It means possible capacity inside an occupied home, not proof a room sits empty; some are offices, guest rooms or storage. Cost-burdened means paying more than 30 percent of income for housing. National context of roughly 44 million U.S. homes containing at least one spare bedroom is from John Burns Research and Consulting.

18. Terner Center for Housing Innovation, University of California Berkeley, *Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Construction Costs: An Analysis of Prevailing Wages*, August 2024. Total development cost per unit in California, 2020 to 2023: approximately $726,000 where prevailing wages applied and $515,000 where they did not. **This is a high-cost state and is cited as an order of magnitude, not a national average.** No current national median is used here because none was located from a primary source.

19. Portland Housing Bureau, Home Sharing Pilot Program, updated 9 July 2026: $500,000 in city funding; $1,500 for a first qualifying room and $750 for each additional room after thirty days of successful rental through a qualified provider; rent capped at $250 per week including utilities and fees. HomeShare Oregon is one of the qualified providers under this pilot.

20. Affordable Housing Tax Credit Coalition, on the reconciliation bill signed 4 July 2025: a permanent 12 percent Housing Credit allocation increase beginning in 2026 and a permanent reduction of the bond financing threshold test from 50 percent to 25 percent, also from 2026. Novogradac estimates the combined provisions would finance approximately 1.22 million additional affordable rental homes over 2026 to 2035. **The homes figure is a modeled projection by a third party, not an outcome.**

21. HomeShare America, *Housing Capacity Parity: Creating a Parallel Pathway for the Affordable Housing We Already Have*, September 2026, at homeshareoregon.org/research/housing-capacity-parity/.