

Housing's hidden crisis: Rural Americans struggle to pay rent

By Aimee Picchi

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- A quarter of America's most rural counties have witnessed a jump in severely cost-burdened households.
 - Rural counties with spikes in such households range from Maine to Oregon.
 - Incomes in many rural areas are stagnating or even declining.
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Housing has been famously unaffordable in expensive cities such as San Francisco for a while. But now in tiny towns and counties across the country, an increasing share of rural residents are struggling to pay their rents and mortgages.

The housing affordability crisis is spreading to rural communities such as Aroostook County, Maine, and Malheur County, Oregon, where the share of residents who are severely burdened by housing costs has surged since the housing crash of 2006 to 2010, according to the County Health Rankings. Other researchers are also calling attention to the issue, with Pew's Stateline finding that one of four of the country's most rural counties have seen a rise in severely cost-burdened households -- those that spend more than half their income on housing.

Fifty years ago, the most urgent issue for rural communities was substandard housing, such as whether residents relied on outhouses rather than indoor plumbing, noted Lance George, director of research and information at the Housing Assistance Council, a nonprofit focusing on rural housing. But affordability now ranks as the top housing concern among rural residents, he said.

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