

Working Paper Written  
by Dr. Jennifer Shea and  
Dr. Laura Mamo

---

Policy Brief Designed by  
Temur Umarov

---



# CALIFORNIA EMERGENCY HOUSING POLICY SURVEY AND EQUITY

---

**APPLIED HOUSING  
RESEARCH INITIATIVE (AHRI)**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A majority of California cities included components of equity into their emergency housing policy goals and implementation practices.
- Alleviating economic hardship and housing insecurity were the primary immediate goals identified by local government housing officials.
- Local government housing officials identified preventing displacement, alleviating housing insecurity, and stopping the growth of the homeless population as long term goals of emergency housing policy.
- Capacity challenges that hindered emergency housing policy/program implementation include navigating the bureaucracy and insufficient staffing levels, funding, and grant administration capabilities.
- The unprecedented emergency housing policy response served as a focusing event that could shape long-term equity based policy with greater government intervention in the areas of housing and public health.



## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement for racial justice put a larger focus on the need for policies that promote equity. One could argue the COVID-19 pandemic served as a focusing event to uncover and address discrimination and longstanding inequities stemming from housing policy. A key indicator of equity in public policy is enacting policies aimed to help those most “vulnerable” to economic, health, and social burdens. In their [working paper](#) titled “California Cities’ Emergency Housing Policies During COVID-19: Where is Equity?”, Dr. Jennifer Shea and Dr. Laura Mamo explore the results of a survey conducted by the Applied Housing Research Initiative (AHRI). The primary goal was to document which of California’s 482 cities and towns adopted emergency housing policies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the degree to which those policies were designed and implemented to address inequities along three dimensions: economic, health, and race/ethnicity.

## METHODOLOGY

The California Cities’ Emergency Housing Policies Survey was designed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers at San Francisco State University, including both Dr. Mamo and Dr. Shea. It surveyed local government officials in California knowledgeable in housing policy. The survey also sought to document challenges or successes cities faced when implementing those emergency policies. The AHRI survey primarily used likert scale (e.g. a great deal, somewhat, not at all, and not sure) closed ended questions with opportunities to explain responses in open-ended “other” sections.

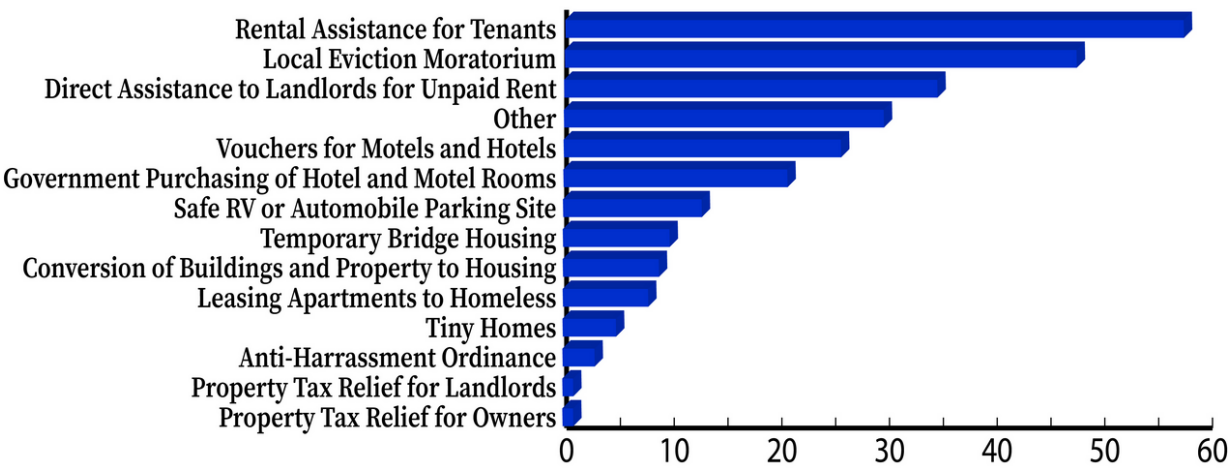




# EMERGENCY HOUSING POLICY

There were a number of housing policies that localities could implement during the pandemic. In the AHRI survey, two-thirds of cities enacted emergency housing policies either as a direct response to the pandemic or as a response to the ongoing housing crisis. Of those that enacted emergency housing policies or programs, 46% reported enacting 1-3 and only 2% enacted 10 or more. The two most frequent types of emergency housing programs were rental assistance programs for tenants (58 respondents) and local eviction moratorium policies (48 respondents).

Types of Emergency Housing Policies/Programs (n=69)

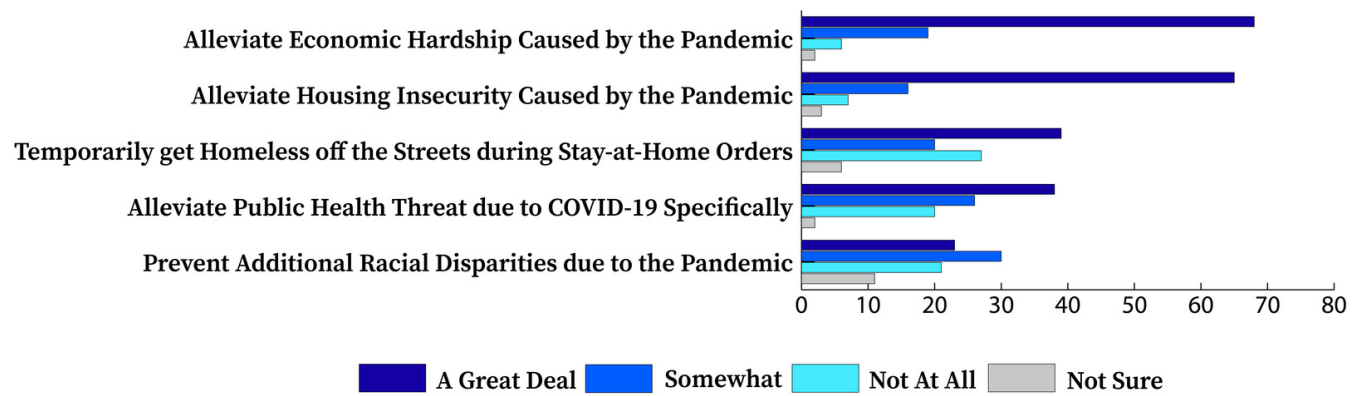




# POLICY GOALS

In terms of policy goals, immediate goals of emergency housing policies most frequently identified by HCD staff were alleviating economic hardship caused by the pandemic (68 said "a great deal" and 19 "somewhat") and alleviating housing insecurity (65 said "a great deal" and 16 "somewhat"). Conversely, preventing racial disparities was the least identified as mattering with only 23 respondents answering it "a great deal" in terms of importance and 30 saying it mattered "somewhat". Twenty-one respondents said preventing racial disparities was 'not at all' an immediate policy goal.

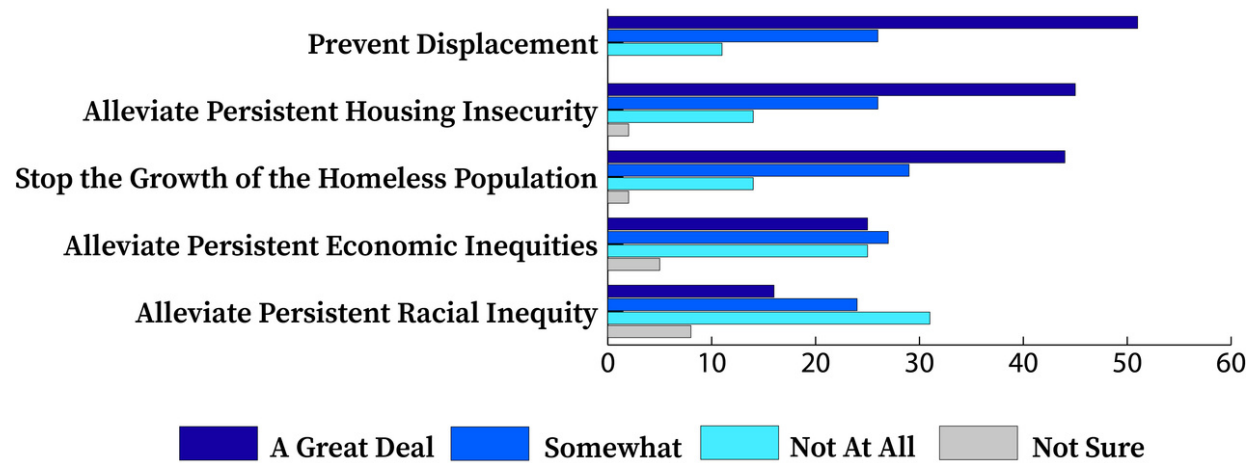
**Immediate-term Goals for Emergency Housing Policies/Programs (n=95)**





For long-term goals of the emergency housing policy, the three most common goals identified were housing stability/preventing displacement, alleviating persistent housing insecurity, and stopping the growth of the homeless population. Explicitly alleviating inequities along racial, health, or economic lines were least commonly identified as primary longer-term goals, with 30 respondents indicating that alleviating persistent health inequities was “not at all” a long-term goal, 27 indicating the same for alleviating persistent economic inequities, and 24 for alleviating persistent racial inequities.

### Longer-term Goals for Emergency Housing Policies/Programs (n=89)







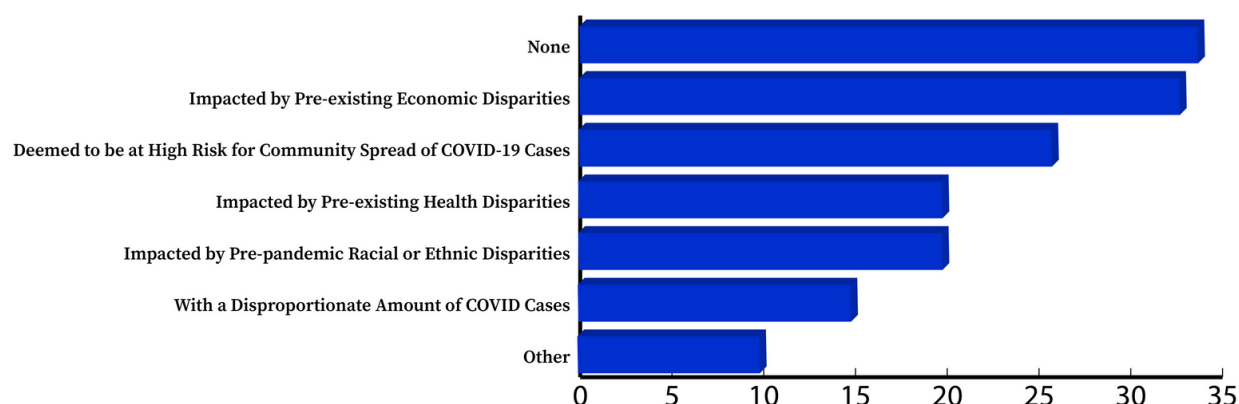
A majority of California cities implemented emergency housing policies and perceived their design and implementation to have been successful in achieving their goals. However, many faced capacity challenges that impacted the effectiveness of emergency housing policy/program implementation. The AHRI survey found that local governments faced insufficient staffing levels, funding, and grant administration capabilities and they struggled to process applications in time. Additionally, respondents noted their localities experienced relational capacity challenges with navigating the bureaucracy as the most notable issue. Other relational capacity challenges include residents wary of working with government agencies and residents unwilling/unable to provide income information.

## POLICY TARGETING

In responses to questions about target populations, a majority of respondents indicated that tenants/renters and the unhoused/homeless were the top targets of emergency housing policies. For geographic targeting, 34 respondents noted their cities used no geographic targets in policy design or implementation, while 33 indicated targeting communities impacted by pre-existing economic disparities and 26 targeted communities at high risk for community spread of COVID-19. For racial or ethnic identifiers, a clear majority of respondents indicated their jurisdictions did not use any racial or ethnic identifiers in the (64 respondents). In terms of income targeting, most emergency housing policies/programs targeted extremely low income (69), low income (63), and/or very low income (62) residents.



## Geographic Characteristics Targeted in the Design or Implementation of Emergency Housing Policies/Programs (n=87)



## CONCLUSION

Although the report found equity principles included in some emergency policies, there still needs to be a long-term equity-focused social change mindset in policymaking/implementation. A focus on “equity” contrasts with “emergency” because equity deals more with structural and systemic issues that persist even after an emergency (e.g. the pandemic) ends. The target populations of housing policies can shed light on whether and to what degree concerns for pervasive and longstanding inequities are part of a local government's policy agenda. Partnering with certain community organizations that have the cultural competence and longstanding engagements with the target populations can help government programs reach these groups. Struggles with administrative and relational capacity can hinder a commitment to equity. Ultimately, it is not enough to have written commitments to equity, but they must be reflected in the planning, implementation, and outcomes of policy.