

# In Prince George's, hundreds of vacant houses drag down neighborhoods

By [Annys Shin](#), Published: January 13

The two-story brick house in Clinton had been vacant for two years when the vandalism began. First, a door was busted. Then a window was shattered. Then the air conditioning unit was stolen.

Neighbors tried for months to get the [foreclosed](#) house on Student Drive boarded up. Finally, about 6 p.m. New Year's Day, Leroy Button looked out his window and saw the five-year-old house across the street [engulfed in flames](#) — a blaze being investigated as a possible arson. The next morning, all that was left was a charred shell and a sense of frustration.

“Why they didn't board it up, I don't know,” said Button, who summoned police to the house several times and tried contacting the loan servicer. “I said, ‘You going to wait until the house catches fire?’ And sure enough . . . ”

This is what the end of a housing crisis looks like: [steadily rising home prices](#), [foreclosure filings](#) at five-year lows, but also millions of vacant [foreclosed](#) homes.

Years after the housing market crashed, recovering communities from Las Vegas to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., continue to grapple with a glut of vacant properties, which drag down property values, attract vandals and drain public resources.

While Prince George's County escaped the kind of double-digit vacancy rates seen in Nevada and Florida, it had one of the highest percentages of vacant homes of any county in the Washington region.

About 7.4 percent of homes in Prince George's, one of the Maryland jurisdictions hit hardest by [foreclosures](#), were vacant in the 2010 Census, compared with 4.6 percent in Prince William County, another local epicenter of the housing meltdown.

The housing market in Prince George's turned a corner in the spring, said Lisa Sturtevant, who studies housing data for George Mason University's Center for Regional Analysis. Prices have been slowly climbing ever since, providing hope to the [more than half of Prince George's homeowners](#) who owe more than their houses are worth.

But there is still a stubborn backlog of [foreclosures](#), created by a nationwide moratorium on

foreclosures two years ago and by a [Maryland foreclosure process](#) that averages more than 500 days, one of the nation's longest.

As a result, houses in Prince George's are still sitting empty two or three years after foreclosure. No one is sure how many vacant houses there are. The county's registry of foreclosed properties now tops 51,000, according to the Department of Environmental Resources. In July, the department, which oversees code enforcement, started tracking vacant properties that are the target of complaints. So far, it knows of 1,922.

But the actual number of vacant foreclosures is likely higher. Nationally, as many as 50 percent of homes in foreclosure are vacant by the time the process is over, the Government Accountability Office reported in 2011.

Vacant properties impose costs on communities whether they tend to them or not. Neglect, maintenance and demolition all come with a price.

In Maryland, officials have tried various strategies to deal with problem, including distributing funds to buy, renovate and resell vacant foreclosures. In October, they began fast-tracking foreclosures of some abandoned properties and began requiring banks to register foreclosed homes to help local code enforcers.

The majority of bank-owned homes are well-maintained, said Anthony Williams, president of the Prince George's County Association of Realtors. But when they are not, sorting out who is responsible can be tricky. Homeowners are supposed to keep up their residence until it is auctioned. If they don't or they walk away, the bank could step in, but they are not necessarily obligated to.

"It is very frustrating," said Hank Jacob, vice president of community management for Allied Realty Corp., a Bethesda-based company that manages townhouse communities in Montgomery and Prince George's counties. "With a lot of these foreclosures, we get into gray areas. Our hands are tied because it's not our property."

### **Financial drain**

Cash-strapped local governments have had to shoulder the cost of boarding up windows, cutting grass, or even demolishing vacant bank-owned properties, the GAO report found.

Prince George's spent \$731,674 last year fixing up vacant properties, \$100,000 more than in 2011.

The burden is even harder to bear for small municipalities such as Capitol Heights, which has one of the highest foreclosure rates in Maryland, state data show. The town now spends nearly \$50,000 a year complying with court orders to address code violations, said Keith Credit, neighborhood services director. That is a significant amount for a town of just over 4,000 people, with a total budget of \$3 million.

In nearby Suitland, another foreclosure hot spot, people who live around vacant foreclosures sometimes step in to mow grass and deal with unopened mail or other giveaways that the house is unoccupied.

As head of the Suitland Civic Association's code enforcement committee, Sam Cox, 64, keeps an eye on vacant properties in the inner Beltway community of about 26,000 residents. Tall, bearded, and wearing sensible white tennis shoes, the retired Amtrak engineer takes note of caving roofs, overgrown grass and front stoops that have become graveyards for waterlogged newspapers. He recently filed more than 40 code violation complaints during a single weekend. "A good start to the week," he said.

On a weekday tour in December, Cox steered his car down Porter Avenue, pulling over at a small vacant house that was foreclosed in 2009. Cox got out for a closer look. The roof was in bad shape, and the whole structure listed to one side.

"Well at least there is no crime here," he said. "Nobody wants to go in there."

The county has been scoping out some areas on its own. Using \$2.1 million in federal and state funds, its housing department is in the process of buying eight vacant foreclosures in Suitland to rehab and resell. County leaders have also made code enforcement part of a coordinated crime-fighting strategy, knowing that run-down or vacant properties can invite trouble.

### **Vandals grew bolder**

In Clinton, the \$420,000 house on Student Drive went into foreclosure in 2010, after its original owners, a D.C. police officer and his wife, split up. For a while, neighbors said, the police officer came back to the house to check on it. But he eventually stopped. GMAC Mortgage took over maintenance once it began servicing the mortgage in April.

Within weeks, residents started noticing teenagers hanging out inside the house. They got in by busting the basement door. Over time, they grew more bold, and the vandalism spilled over to nearby homes.

Scott Midgett, who lives around the corner, found windows broken on the back of the vacant house and also on the unfinished house next door. During construction of another house on the cul-de-sac, the appliances were stolen.

"For us, it brings an element of people who don't normally come around here," Midgett said.

"Vandalism and stealing — we don't have those problems here."

After Thanksgiving, there were more broken windows, then a small fire at the unfinished house next door.

The real estate agent tasked with selling the house and at least one neighbor said they contacted GMAC about the vandalism but did not hear back.

GMAC would not discuss the house, citing its policy of not disclosing information on specific properties for privacy reasons, said spokeswoman Susan Fitzpatrick. But the company “encourages customers, neighbors, whoever to contact customer service should they have a problem.”

In mid-December, the county did respond to complaints by ordering the house boarded up, a spokesman for the environmental resources agency said. A follow-up inspection to check whether the work was done was scheduled for early January.

The morning after the fire, Button, the neighbor, stood in front of the blackened property, surveying what authorities estimated was \$250,000 worth of damage.

“It was a beautiful house,” Button said. He and a man who had helped build the house recalled the sitting area with cathedral ceilings and the spacious master suite. Now they could see the ceiling was gone, along with most of the roof. And in place of the master suite, only fallen beams and rubble remained.

Six days later, there would be another fire in the unfinished house next door, triggering an explosion and damaging a neighbor’s car. Investigators think it was intentionally set, just like the first one.

“It’s a shame,” Button said, “to let it get to this point.”

*Jennifer Jenkins contributed to this report*