

Who Benefits from ADU Legalization?

A Mixed-Methods Study of Urban Informality and Deregulation in Los Angeles

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Abstract

In the midst of a housing affordability crisis for renters and homeowners alike, California State and Los Angeles City governments have passed legislation dramatically easing regulations on building and owning Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) on residential property. Prior to 2016 legislation, these units were strictly regulated across California, and often existed outside of formal legal structures. This exploratory project seeks to examine the ways in which the legalization and rapid proliferation of ADUs in Los Angeles impacts housing affordability and access, and whether and how the landscape of pre-existing unpermitted ADUs in Los Angeles is subsumed into the formal housing market. A framework of housing informality arising from Global South scholarship is utilized to understand informality as a process of production and regulation (de)legitimized by state and class interests. Specifically, this study asks, *what is the impact of statewide ADU permitting liberalization on the Los Angeles housing market?* and *how do ADU residents and owners experience the purported benefits and drawbacks of ADUs, and who do these benefits and drawbacks impact most?* I use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression modeling on Los Angeles ADU permitting data and American Community Survey (ACS) census data to analyze the relationships between ADU count per tract and key housing market indicators for affordability and displacement risk— median gross rent and median home value. I also conduct and code 12 semi-structured interviews with ADU homeowners and renters. Results reveal that under new legislation, ADUs have been adopted unequally across city tracts, and OLS modeling suggests that there are fewer ADUs permitted in areas with higher concentrations of Black, Latine, and Asian residents, and that there are more permits in areas with higher median gross rents. Previous research has found a higher concentration of unpermitted ADUs in BIPOC communities in Los Angeles. Further, study participants experienced uneven code enforcement while constructing ADUs as homeowners, and faced unique vulnerabilities due to uneven state regulation and landlord proximity as ADU renters. I argue that while ADUs add much-needed units to the housing market, and may make homeownership more accessible, deregulation without added structural support is a neoliberal market-based solution that pushes the onus of providing affordable housing units onto individual homeowners and may exacerbate existing patterns of racial inequality in homeownership. Further research on the inverse relationship between unpermitted units in dense BIPOC communities and recently permitted units in whiter, more expensive neighborhoods will be crucial to continuing to develop policy that forefronts racial and economic justice and ensures safe, dignified housing for all.

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Acronyms

ADU – Accessory Dwelling Unit
BIPOC – Black Indigenous People of Color
CalHFA – California Housing Finance Agency
CDHCD – California Department of Housing and Community Development
FPVS – Fundación Pro Vivienda Social
HUD – U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
IMF – International Monetary Fund
JADU – Junior Accessory Dwelling Unit
LA – Los Angeles
NDSC – Neighborhood Data for Social Change
OLS – Ordinary Least Square
RHNA – Regional Housing Needs Assessment
SCAG – Southern California Association of Governments
UCLA – University of California, Los Angeles

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Introduction

Los Angeles, like many major cities in the United States, is facing an affordable housing crisis. In a city that is 63% renters, 59% of these households are rent-burdened, including 32% that are severely rent-burdened (USC Luskin, 2023). Further, rising rents, high costs of living, and speculative property investment displace vulnerable renters (Graziani et al., 2020). The lack of stable, affordable housing has clear repercussions: in 2025, the City of Los Angeles' count of unhoused people was 43,695 (LAHSA, 2025), which is down from a high of 46,000 in 2022 (Gansberg and Holland, 2025). In the face of these challenges, policymakers tout affordable housing as a priority issue: Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass declared a "state of emergency" to combat homelessness upon election in 2022 and has pushed for an expedited increase in housing production, including through her Executive Directive 1 that streamlines permitting processes for 100% affordable housing projects and shelters (Bertoni et al., 2021).

One increasingly popular solution to housing scarcity and unaffordability is rapidly adding infill through Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs). ADUs are secondary, independent residential units on residential lots. Recent policy changes have made them easy to build in California, even for parcels with single-family zoning (Brueckner and Thomaz, 2024). In 2016, when California passed SB 1069 to mandate statewide ADU permitting streamlining, the bill's sponsor, senator Bob Wieckowski, wrote that "accessory dwellings provide part of the solution to the housing crisis. They are the only source of housing that can be added within a year at an affordable price, in existing developed communities...without public subsidy" (Michel, 2016). ADU production has experienced a boom in Los Angeles since statewide reforms starting in 2016 liberalized the permitting process: in 2016, the state permitted 1,336 ADUs; in 2023, that number had increased to 26,924 (HUD, 2025).

However, the proliferation of small, detached housing units in Los Angeles is not new. ADUs have long existed as unpermitted, illegal residential garage, backyard cottages, and other structures housing family members or informal renters. In 1987, the Los Angeles Times published a report on the “shadow market” of unpermitted garage dwellings being rented out for as low as \$150 per month, mostly to migrants from Central and South America; the report estimated that 200,000 people lived in 42,000 garages throughout the city (Chavez and Quinn, 1987). Informal units – found disproportionately in lower-income communities of color, persist to this day (Chapple et al., 2021). A study in San Jose found that an estimated 3-4 unpermitted ADUs were constructed for every permitted ADU between 2016 and 2020 (Jo et al., 2025).

Now, these units are being permitted for construction, upheld as a solution to a slew of housing challenges. Researchers find that ADUs are often market-rate and city and state incentives benefit landlords, calling into question the degree to which ADUs – and our current ADU policy – is equitably increasing access to affordable housing (HUD, 2025; Jo et al., 2024; Cressey, 2023; Dubler, 2022).

This exploratory project seeks to examine the ways in which legalization and rapid proliferation of ADUs impacts housing affordability and access, and whether and how the landscape of pre-existing unpermitted ADUs in Los Angeles is subsumed into the formal housing market. To do this, I ask two inter-related questions utilizing a mixed-methods approach.

First, I ask: *What is the impact of statewide ADU permitting liberalization on the Los Angeles housing market?* I approach this question using quantitative methodology, analyzing Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety (LADBS) permitting data and American Community Survey (ACS) census data to explore the socio-spatial distribution of post-2016 ADU permits. I also explore the relationships between ADU count and key housing market

indicators for affordability and displacement risk— median gross rent and median home value – through regression modeling. I hypothesize that higher permitted ADU counts will be associated with whiter, wealthier demographics – the inverse demographics of neighborhoods that the literature has found to have high unpermitted ADU counts.

My second question is: *How do ADU residents and owners experience the purported benefits and drawbacks of ADUs, and who do these benefits and drawbacks impact most?* I utilize qualitative methods to understand the affective experiences of both renters and homeowners: I conducted and coded 12 structured interviews with ADU tenants and homeowners to add further richness to my data analysis and trace patterns of uneven access and racialized regulatory discrepancies.

These questions are informed by theoretical frameworks of urban informality. Urban informality is a concept that arose from scholars studying Latin American property markets and informal housing in the 1970s (Roy and Alsayyad, 2004) and evolved as a transnational framework of analysis for informal urban settlement and markets. Scholars have built upon this concept by investigating people’s behavior in these informal markets primarily in Latin America and Asia, though some began to apply urban informality to other contexts such as unpermitted property modifications in the United States, primarily in California and Texas. Roy and Alsayyad (2004) emphasize the context-dependency of this field of study, but recognize it as a helpful framework for understanding the relationship of informal urban production within the regulatory regime of the state.

Background

What are ADUs?

Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) are secondary dwelling units that share a parcel of land with an existing home. Units considered to be ‘granny flats,’ converted garages, or back-houses often fall into this category, and their uses include housing older family members, providing extra space for homeowners, and rental (Brueckner and Thomaz, 2024). The state of California and the City of Los Angeles define and regulate ADUs, though many of these secondary houses have existed and continue to exist outside of formal legal structures. The city of Los Angeles Accessory Dwelling Unit Ordinance No. 186,481 defines an ADU as follows:

an attached or detached residential dwelling unit that provides complete independent living facilities for one or more persons and is located on a lot with a proposed or existing primary residence. [It includes] permanent provisions for living, sleeping, eating, cooking, and sanitation on the same lot as the single-family or multifamily dwelling is or will be situated. (2019)

ADUs are independent extra units on the property of a primary residence that include full living amenities, yet they can be built in single-family zoned plots, meaning that they can increase unit density and housing stock without increasing a city’s urban footprint (Brueckner and Thomaz, 2024).

The California Department of Housing and Community Development (CDHCD) touts ADUs as an “innovative and effective” solution to the state’s housing crisis (2025), and both YIMBY (“yes in my backyard) groups and the state government promote these units as an environmentally friendly, affordable infill solution. They build density in single-family-zoned neighborhoods; provide smaller, more affordable units; and are often built in neighborhoods with

high levels of access to public transportation or work opportunities (CDHCD, 2025; Gray, n.d.; Brueckner and Thomaz, 2024), all without dramatically changing the character of the neighborhood (Calder and Gygi, 2023).

ADU Policy Overview

ADU policy in the state of California and in Los Angeles has a long – sometimes contentious – history. State mandates have often directed city policy: in 1982, the State passed SB 1160, ruling that local governments were unable to explicitly outlaw ADU development (Calder and Gygi, 2023), sparking concerns over things like neighborhood character, overcrowding, and traffic (Volmer, 1983). For example, a 1938 Los Angeles Times article details how the San Diego city council crafted a “granny flat” ordinance that severely limited – but did not fully restrict – the building of such units, specifying that granny flats must be inhabited by people over 60 (Vollmer, 1983). Though easing some restrictions, individual municipalities continued to make building and permitting ADUs challenging (Gray, n.d.). Another Senate Bill in 2002 amended the processing of permits, but it was not until 2016 that the state of California took action to pass sweeping ADU reforms. SB 1069 and AB 2299 mandated shorter, easier permitting processes, including ministerial approval of applications given certain conditions, eased parking restrictions, and officially adopted the terminology “accessory dwelling unit” (Michel, 2016). AB 2299 was co-authored by two members of CityLAB, a University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) research center, coming out of ten years of research on secondary units, and in collaboration with multiple community partners (CityLAB n.d.).

Further State Senate Bills in 2023, 2024, and 2025 further eased permitting restrictions. Changes included modifying language requiring permitting agencies to approve or deny rather

than “act on” applications, mandating that municipal agencies impose objective standards for approval, removing owner-occupancy requirements, and allowing for multiple ADUs to be built on single-family and multi-family lots (CDHCD, 2025). The City of Los Angeles passed the most recent Accessory Dwelling Unit Ordinance No. 186481 in 2019, and passed an updated memorandum in 2024 clarifying adherence to those new state laws.

This legislation has created substantial change in ADU permitting and construction rates: between 2016-2023, the number of ADUs permitted annually in the state increased 20 times, from 1,336 to 26,924, and made up over 21% of permitted homes in 2023 (CDHCD, 2025).

Areas of Study

My interest in this project came from seeing the uneven proliferation of newly permitted ADUs spatially mapped. To gain a preliminary understanding of ADU distribution and identify areas of study, I mapped Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety (LADBS) ADU permitting data from 2020 - 2025 (Figure 1 & Appendix 1) These initial maps encompass a shorter time frame than that of my primary research, and are not filtered by status of permit – they are meant to serve as a jumping off point for understanding spatial distribution patterns. I first mapped individual ADU permits by address to gain a rough understanding of the spatial distribution of ADUs in the City of Los Angeles – this highlighted notable patterns such as a lack of ADUs in Los Angeles’ Downtown in Council District (CD) 14 (Appendix 1). Figure 1 shows these points aggregated by council district to illustrate areas with higher and lower ADU frequencies.¹ Figure 1 indicates that CD 14 had the lowest number of permits within this time frame, followed by CDs 9, 13, and 14. CDs 2, 3, and 12 had the highest number of permits. Based on this distribution, I chose to use Eagle Rock and Boyle Heights², which intersect with CDs 1 and 14,

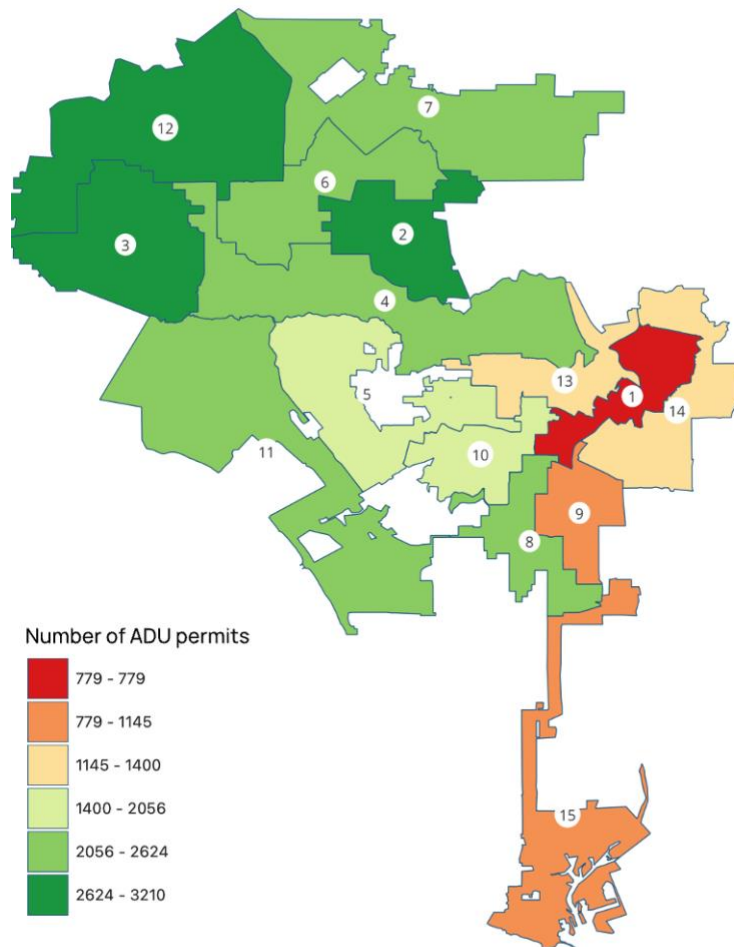
¹ These are simply ADU counts, they are not area or population weighted.

² I use neighborhood boundaries as defined by the LA Times Mapping LA Project

as case studies. I use Granada Hills, which is in CD 12 and home to a high number of ADUs compared to other districts, as a point of comparison. Figure 2 provides a more granular census tract-level overview of this same trend, using updated data from January 2017 – January 2026 that has been cleaned to exclude nulled and incomplete permits.

Figure 1: ADUs per Los Angeles City Council District 2020 - 2025

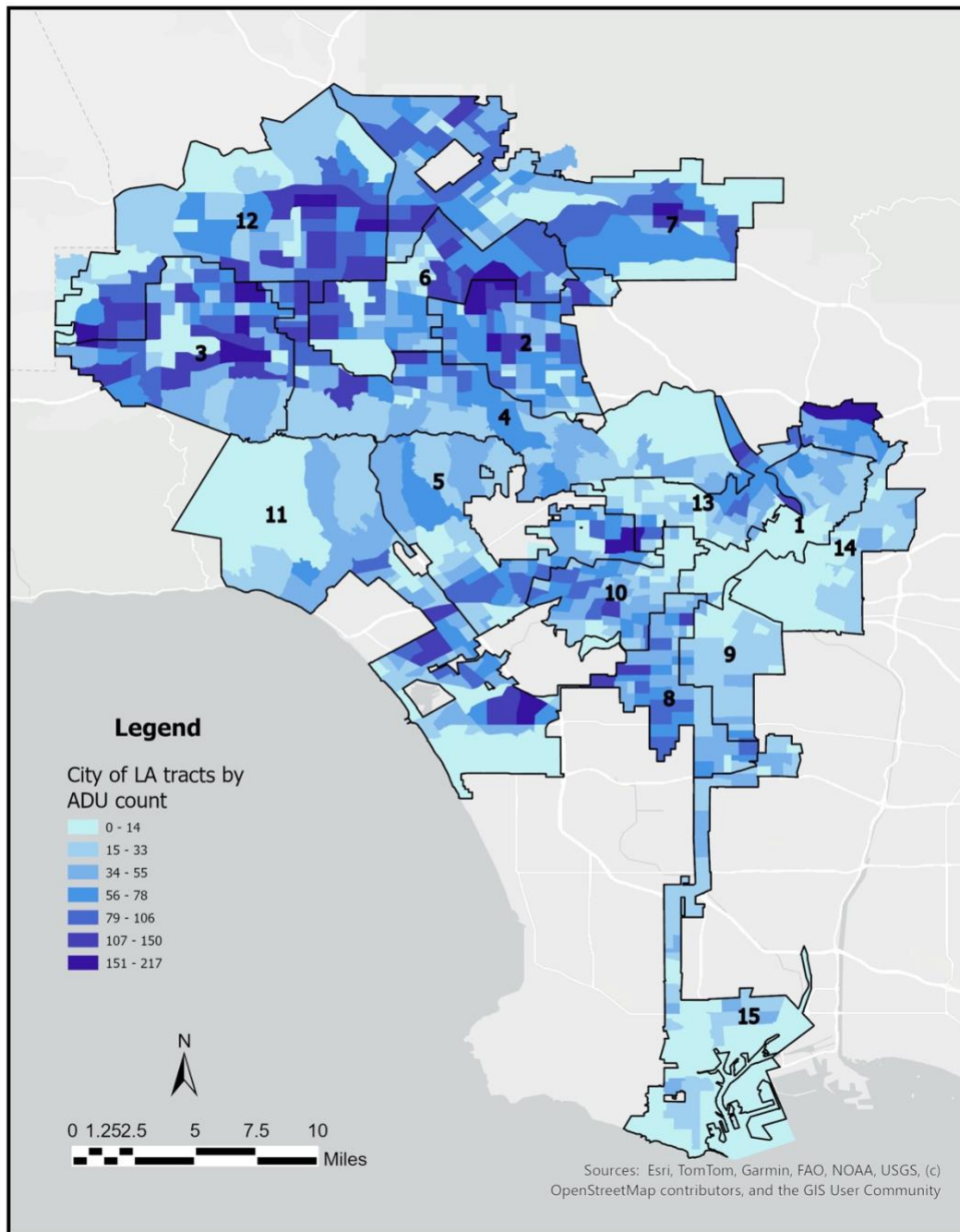
ADUs per LA City Council District 2020 - 2025



Note: LA City Council Districts, as updated in 2021. ADU permits encompass *all* permits filed, including nulled and incomplete. Classified using Jenks Natural Breaks.
Source: LADBS ADU permitting data 2020-2025, compiled by author using QGIS.

Figure 2: Total ADUs permitted Jan 2017 - Jan 2026 by Census Tract

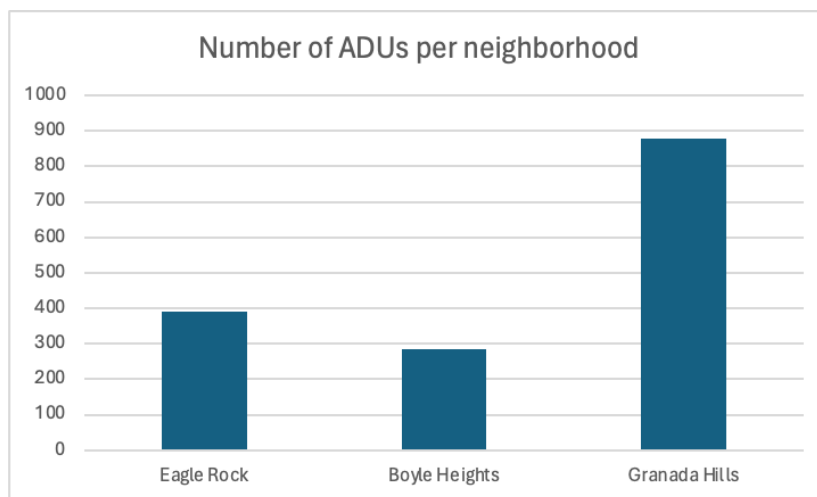
Total ADUs Permitted January 2017 - January 2026 in the City of Los Angeles by Census Tract



Source: January 2017 - January 2026 LADBS ADU permitting data, compiled by author using ArcGIS Pro. Classified using Jenks Natural Breaks.

Boyle Heights and Eagle Rock are of special interest due to ongoing processes of gentrification. I aim to understand how ADU proliferation in these areas impacts housing affordability; if they simply increase density in areas already undergoing a demographic transformation without being explicitly affordable, added units have the potential to price out and displace locals. However, both Boyle Heights and Eagle Rock have lower ADU counts than Granada Hills, so my semi-inclusion of Granada Hills in this analysis helps to contextualize the other two neighborhoods and better understand drivers of ADU growth. The dramatic difference in permitting across neighborhoods is illustrated in Figure 3. Granada Hills has nearly triple the

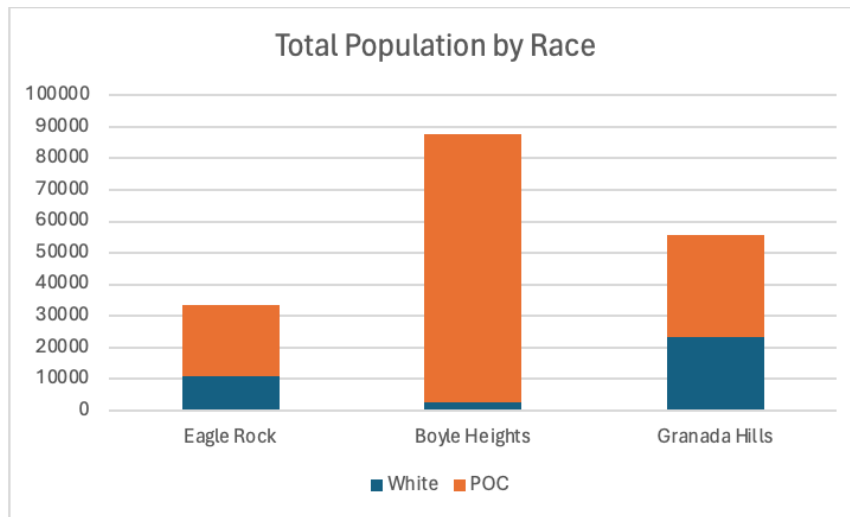
Figure 3: Number of ADUs per neighborhood



Source: LADBS permitting data 2020 – 2025, LA Times Mapping LA neighborhood boundaries. Compiled by author.

Number of recently permitted ADUs that Boyle Heights does. Notably, this chart does not account for discrepancies among housing stock or population by neighborhood. However, as is evidenced by Figure 4, Boyle Heights has the highest total population, despite having the lowest number of ADUs permitted between 2020 and 2025. Additionally, it has the highest proportion of non-white residents. Granada Hills, conversely, has the lowest, at about 60%. This begins to provide a better understanding of the characteristics of neighborhoods in Los Angeles with high

Figure 4: Total Population by Race

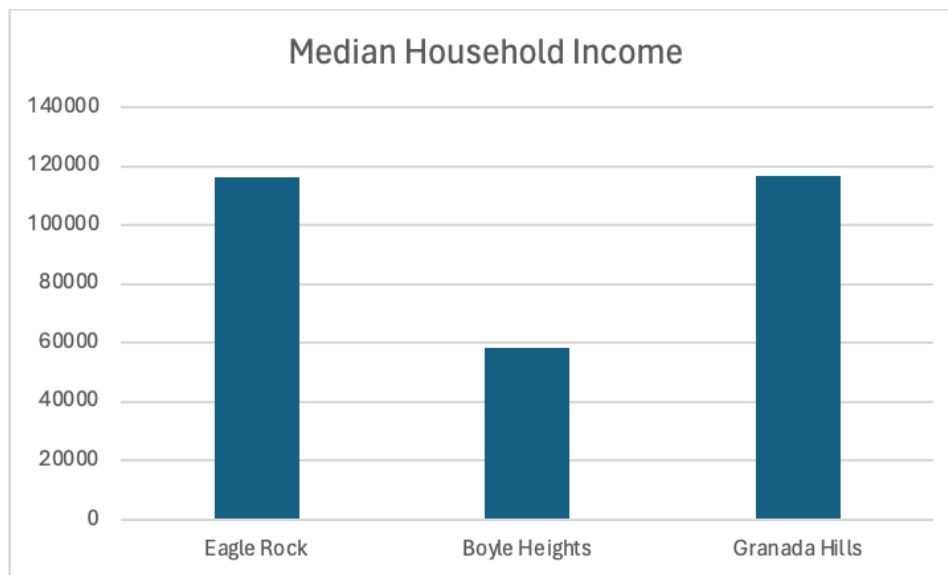


Note: “POC” refers to ‘people of color’. For the purposes of this graph, this category includes all census-designated racial/ethnic groups but white.

Source: Data compiled by NDSC from 2019- 2023 5-year ACS. Chart compiled by author.

ADU counts – it seems from this preliminary overview that there may be a relationship between whiter areas and more ADUs, although these three case studies cannot make a conclusive claim. Factors such as neighborhood density and location – Granada Hills is in the San Fernando Valley, while Eagle Rock and Boyle Heights are more densely populated and closer to Downtown – likely also affect these discrepancies. Figure 5, which shows the discrepancies in median household income, further complicates this picture: Boyle Heights, with a median household income that is almost half that of both Eagle Rock and Granada Hills, but a much higher population, has the lowest ADU count. However, income alone does not seem to be the driving factor in the discrepancies between these neighborhoods, as Eagle Rock and Granada Hills have very similar median household incomes, but Granada Hill permitted almost twice as many ADUs as Eagle Rock between 2020 and 2025.

Figure 5: Median Household Income



Source: Data compiled by NDSC from 2019-2023 ACS 5-year data. Chart compiled by author.

In the coming subsections, I provide neighborhood overviews for Eagle Rock and Boyle Heights, as well as a brief exploration of Granada Hills, to contextualize my research and provide backing for my data analysis and interview interpretation.

Eagle Rock

Eagle Rock is a neighborhood of around 35,000³ residents nestled in the northeast corner of Los Angeles, between the independent cities of Glendale and Pasadena. What is now Eagle Rock was inhabited by the Tongva people before Spanish and Mexican settlers began using the area as ranch land, and a small rural settler community was started. In 1906, the extension of the Los Angeles Railway streetcar to what is now Colorado boulevard attracted development, and an urban area began to spring up around the streetcar line (Eagle Rock Valley Historical Society, n.d. a). Development of a water system and gas mains followed, and in 1911, Eagle Rock was incorporated as an independent city. Along with that development, the construction of Occidental

³ As of 2023.

College's third campus began in Eagle Rock in 1912 (Eagle Rock Valley Historical Society, n.d. a). In 1923, Eagle Rock was annexed to Los Angeles due to concerns over water scarcity and the public school system (Eagle Rock Valley Historical Society, n.d. b).

In the early 1900s, Eagle Rock enjoyed investment in public works such as the streetcar and public services infrastructure. However, starting in the 1950s, the area saw a pattern of disinvestment followed by white flight and the construction of nearby freeways⁴. During the middle of the century, an influx of Asian and Latine residents replaced the fleeing whites, changing the demographics of the neighborhood (Lin, 2015). In 2015, Occidental Sociology professor Jan Lin described the way that the neighborhood has since undergone a cycle he understands through a “stage model” of gentrification, which tracks the historical processes involved in gentrification. After a period of disinvestment, neighborhood activists and artists began a movement of revitalization, starting with Chicana/o art collectives in the 1970s and neighborhood resistance to the encroachment of big box stores and corporatization (Lin, 2015). Decades of building up a vibrant cultural scene set the stage for a wave of gentrification that was expedited by the financial strains and reinvestment opportunities brought on by the 2009 Recession. White, wealthier people drawn to the ‘indie,’ ‘authentic,’ ‘artsy’ charm of the neighborhood began to displace Latine residents from businesses and homes (Lin, 2015). A long-time neighborhood resident whom I interviewed for this project, herself a home-owning white woman, described to me the changes that she experienced living in her home in Eagle Rock since 1989:

⁴ The Eagle Rock Valley Historical Society documents that in 1973, the “134 Freeway opened bypassing Colorado Blvd, the previous highway route” (n.d. a). The construction of freeways through neighborhoods populated predominantly by people of color, especially in the 1970s, was a common pattern in American urban planning history; though Eagle Rock is not bisected by freeways, it is surrounded on two sides.

There's been a lot of gentrification over ... probably [the past] 10 years now, maybe a little bit longer. I would drive York over to South Pas[adena], and I would see all these young, scruffy looking white people. And previous to that, it had been mostly Latino and Filipino... And, you know, it was like the movement from West LA to the East Side, especially the entertainment industry. And then ... these nice bars [and] ... the gradual building up of the neighborhood in terms of businesses and coffee shops. (Int. 2)

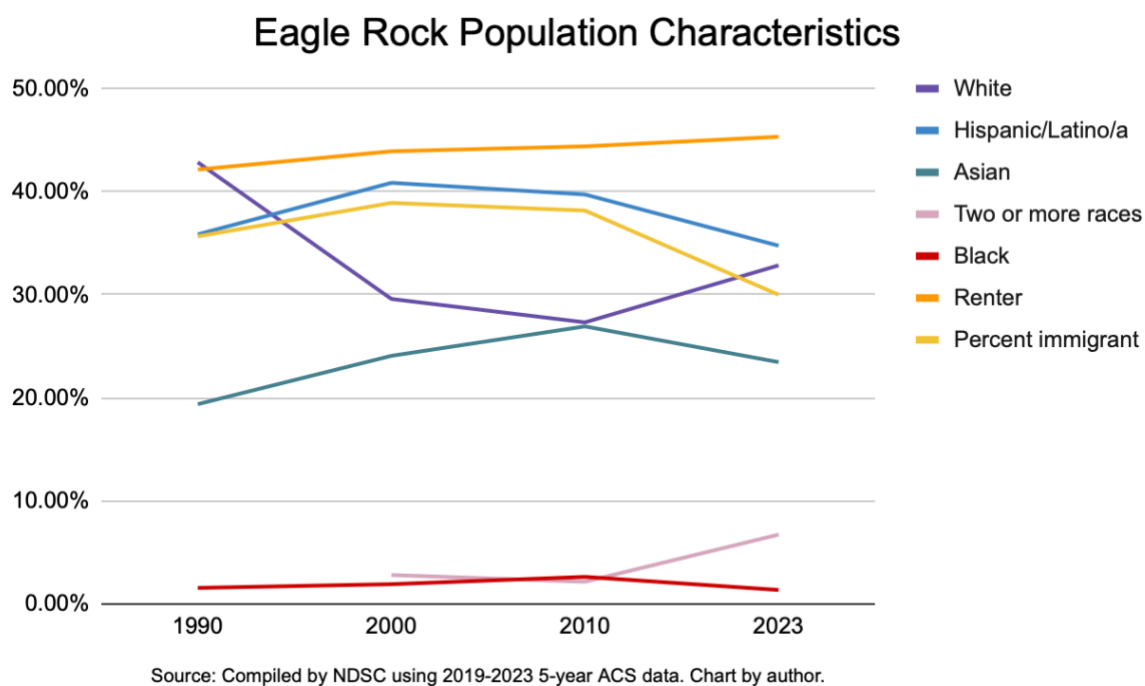
She described to me what she called a “hipster-ization” of the neighborhood that aligns with Lin’s analysis of an influx of wealthier, often white people searching for a neighborhood that feels culturally vibrant and interesting. As an Occidental College student, I see evidence of this continued trend constantly: on York and Colorado Boulevard, every year I see more trendy, overpriced boutiques and cafes, and fewer car repair shops and hand-written Spanish signs.

Currently, the neighborhood is relatively wealthy: the median household income sits just under \$120,000, according to 2023 Census data, and the Zillow Home Values Index puts the average home value for the neighborhood at \$1,233,548, compared to \$933,027 for Los Angeles overall (Zillow, 2025b). In 2023, the average gross monthly rent was \$1,786, and 45.33% of the population were renters (USC Lusk, 2023). In 2021, 23.25% of households qualified as “very low-income households” and 12.98% qualified as “extremely low-income households” (USC Lusk, 2023). Eagle Rock residents are highly educated: in 2023, 50% of residents had a bachelor’s degree or higher. The majority of the neighborhood is zoned for single family residential use, with pockets of commercial use on major streets such as York, Eagle Rock, and Colorado (ZIMAS, 2025). Demographic changes follow the arc of gentrification described by Lin. Between 1990 and 2000, the white population dipped dramatically. In 1990, Eagle Rock’s population was 42.85% white, 35.86% Hispanic/Latine, and 19.38% Asian; by 2000, the white

population was at 29.59%, the Hispanic/Latine population was at 40.86%, and the Asian population was at 24.07%. As the neighborhood has gentrified, especially since 2010, these demographic changes have started to reverse, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Eagle Rock has experienced a horseshoe-shaped demographic transition since 1990, with the white population decreasing and then increasing, and all other ethnic/racial populations experiencing the inverse trend. Notably, Eagle Rock has a low Black population compared to other ethnic/racial groups, and rentership rates have been slowly, but steadily, rising since 1990.

Figure 6: Eagle Rock Population Characteristics



Another trend of note is that the immigrant population has declined substantially since 1990 after rising in the mid-2000s and dropping off steeply in 2010.

Boyle Heights

The neighborhood of Boyle Heights is a historic Los Angeles neighborhood of almost 90,000 residents. Located near Downtown, it has been a part of the City of Los Angeles since 1781, as it fell within the founding area of the Pueblo of Los Angeles (JANM, 2003). Boyle

Heights has long been a refuge for immigrants to the United States, and has undergone multiple racial and ethnic demographic changes, though it was over 92% Hispanic/Latine as of 2023 (USC Lusk, 2023). Since the late nineteenth century, as waves of migrants moved to Los Angeles from across the US and from other countries, many settled in Boyle Heights: in the late 1800s and early 1900s, many African Americans found job and homeownership opportunities in the area; a wave of Japanese Americans followed. In 1910, Mexicans fleeing the Mexican Revolution found a haven in East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights; and in the 1920s, a major wave of Jewish Americans migrated from the East Coast, making Boyle Heights the “biggest Jewish community west of Chicago” (JANM, 2003). The community was greatly impacted by the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans in 1942, and housing was stretched thin when many returned to the area. In the 1970s, global regime changes connected to the Cold War caused waves of immigrants to flee to Los Angeles, many settling in Boyle Heights. Primarily, these migrants fled instability in Mexican and other Central American governments pushed by imperialist US intervention, and the ascension of communist governments in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (JANM, 2003). As new waves of migrants settled into the neighborhood, housing density increased. Boyle Heights remains densely populated: in 2023, 26.36% of households experienced overcrowding (compared to around 6% in both Granada Hills and Eagle Rock) (USC Lusk, 2023).

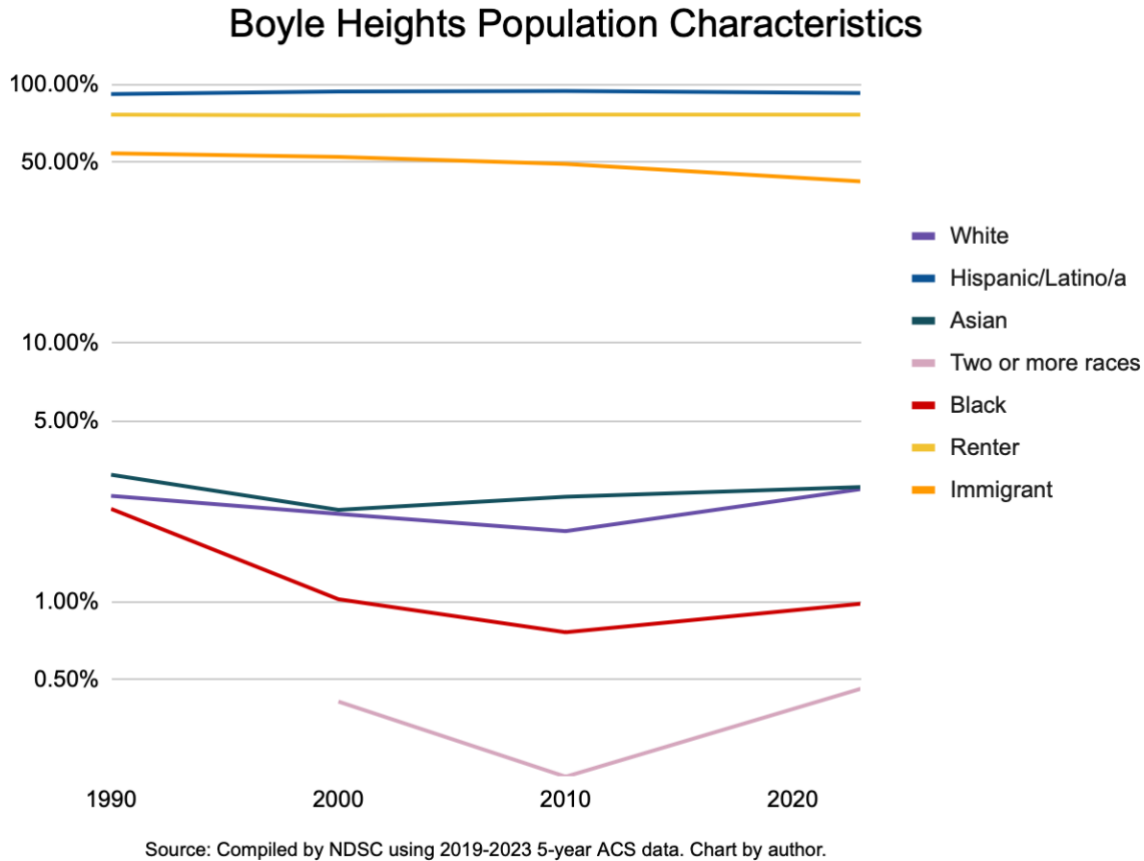
Boyle Heights has a long history of community organizing stemming from the predominantly Jewish and Mexican communities inhabiting the neighborhood in the 1930s and 1940s: they protested the Holocaust, deportation laws, and organized for better labor protections (JANM, 2003). More recently, the neighborhood, now mostly Hispanic/Latine, has rallied around saving the area from gentrification and preventing resident displacement. Following the

revitalization of nearby Downtown Los Angeles and the influx of property speculation and acquisition by global investors in the area, as well as a creep of ‘hipster’ coffee shops and other businesses that signal gentrification, many anti-gentrification organizations have called for these businesses to leave (Caffier, 2017). Community-engaged researchers for the Los Angeles Boyle Heights Museum from the University of Southern California (USC) write that sustained anti-gentrification activism in the 2010s from Boyle Heights residents garnered national attention, but that the gentrification debate is often simplified to a narrative of white, wealthy outsiders invading (Leal et al., 2022). Gentrification concerns often ignore “economically upwardly mobile Latinxs whose social capital has contributed to the displacement of long-standing renters and businesses in the neighbourhood,” calling this process of the return of middle-class, educated Latines to the working-class neighborhood of Boyle Heights “gente-fication” (Leal et al., 2022).

The area also faces major environmental challenges: in 1908, Boyle Heights was excluded from zoning laws protecting Westside neighborhoods from encroachments by industrial development, and by 1950, a quarter of the area was taken up by industry (JANM, 2003). Additionally, four freeways run through the neighborhood, following a pattern of displacing communities of color to build urban infrastructure, limiting walkability, and increasing air pollution.

Boyle Heights’ racial demographics have stayed relatively consistent since 1990 – it remains predominantly Hispanic/Latine (92.5% in 2023), with almost equal proportions of Black, Asian, and white residents making up the rest of the population. Rentership rates have stayed relatively consistent at around 76% since 1990, while the percent of the population who is a first-generation immigrant has decreased from 54% in 1990 to 42% in 2023 (Figure 7; USC Lusk, 2023).

Figure 7: Boyle Heights Population Characteristics



Note: This graph’s vertical axis has been transformed to a logarithmic scale to better illustrate minority demographic changes that are not visible on a regularly scaled graph.

In 2023, the median household income for Boyle Heights was just under \$60,000, and the median rent was \$1,402. Zillow estimates that a typical Boyle Heights home in 2025 cost \$629,466, which is substantially lower than the Los Angeles average of \$933,027 (Zillow, 2025a). The proportion of residents with a bachelor’s degree has increased significantly in recent years – in 2013, it was 6.58% of residents; in 2023, it was 26.36% (USC Lusk, 2023). Between 2013 and 2021, poverty has decreased slightly: in 2013, “very low income” households made up 60.16% of households, while “extremely low income” made up 36.07; in 2021, 52.12% were “very low income” while 31.22% were “extremely low income” (USC Lusk, 2023). These data align with Leal et al.’s understanding of ‘gente-fication’ as a process in which Latines returning

to the neighborhood with higher levels of education and wealth than previous generations also have the potential to be a force of displacement of lower-income residents and businesses.

Granada Hills

Granada Hills is a neighborhood of over 55,000 residents located in the North-West edge of the city limits of Los Angeles. It was built on the traditional lands of the Tongva and Chumash people and was settled by ranchers in the late 1800s. Initially used to farm wheat and beans, and then citrus, what is now called Granada Hills was slow to develop beyond a rural ranch economy (Lee, n.d.). Through promises of public transit to Los Angeles and fortunes to be made in rabbitry, Granada Hills attracted residents through the early 1920s and 1930s. Though these promises did not pan out, Granada Hills has continued to develop, mostly into single-family zoned properties (ZIMAS).

Currently, Granada Hills is home to a racially diverse population, and in the upper percentiles of wealth compared to the rest of Los Angeles. Since 1990, the demographics of the neighborhood have changed: the white population dropped from 72.7% to 41.4% in 2023, while the Hispanic/Latine population increased from 12.29% in 1990 to 31.67% in 2023. The Asian population increased approximately 5 percentage points up to 17.9% in 2023. As of 2023, the median household income was just under \$120,000 and the median rent in the area was \$2,224, the highest of the three neighborhoods I investigate (USC Lusk, 2023). However, the typical home value estimated by Zillow for 2025 was \$966,690, which is below that of Eagle Rock but slightly above that of Los Angeles as a whole (Zillow, 2025a). In 2021, 24.87% of households qualified as very low-income and 9.62% of households qualified as extremely low income, and 34.8% of the population held a bachelor's degree or higher (USC Lusk, 2023). Importantly, the neighborhood overall is much less dense than either Boyle Heights or Eagle Rock.

Literature Review

My exploratory analysis is undergirded by a framework of urban informality that emerged from research in the Global South, but that has, infrequently, been applied to housing paradigms in the United States as well. I understand the ADU market in Los Angeles to be part of an informal economic process that has been subsumed into the formal regulatory framework through recent statewide legislation; this facet is often left out of ADU research, and may limit analysis of how ADUs play into housing affordability and stability, and who benefits from their legalization. Leading scholars of urban informality in the Global South understand informality to be a process and a descriptor of relationships of production and regulation. I draw especially on Ananya Roy, whose work helps delineate how designations of legitimate land use are tied to wealth and racial disparities, and how the state sanctions the elite's informal use of space while criminalizing informal use of space by the poor. In the United States, these frameworks have been applied by a small number of scholars to understand how urban informality manifesting as unpermitted subdivisions, construction, and structure use (especially as housing) are tied to socio-spatial discrepancies in regulation and deregulation, and how enforcement is ruled by weighing benefits to the state. Applying this framework to the case of ADUs in Los Angeles, I explore how the state's permitting and legalization of informal units can be understood as a process of deregulation that may be doing little to increase access to affordable housing. This deregulation allows for the legitimization of formerly illegal land use for those who can pay permitting fees, and bringing units into the formal market often means they are rented at market rate; while often unstable, unsafe housing options, unpermitted ADUs have historically been cheap. The state can claim to be adding affordable units to the housing stock while putting the onus on individuals to regulate affordability, and without attention to the uneven distribution of

access and exclusion to ADU ownership and tenancy. Utilizing a framework of urban informality addresses a gap in the literature and gives me a lens with which to critically examine the impacts of the permitting liberalization that has characterized Los Angeles ADU policy since 2016.

Why Urban Informality?

I was introduced to the concept of urban informality while studying abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2025. The built environment of the city offers stark visual evidence of intense wealth inequality and racial and socioeconomic segregation; wealthy neighborhoods of the city such as Recoleta, Retiro, and Palermo are marked by distinctive French, Italian, and Spanish architecture, and expensive, chic shops and restaurants. The largest slum area in the city, Barrio 31, is directly adjacent to Recoleta and Retiro, and filled with small, cramped homes that are self-constructed or occupied former social housing. Buenos Aires⁵ has 41 of these *barrios populares* or *villas* (popular neighborhoods/slums), which contain around 73,371 people in total (ReNaBaP, 2025). They are inhabited primarily by people of color, and Barrio 31 specifically houses many migrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru (Veras Mota, 2019); the rest of the city is predominantly of European descent. When discussing these stark divides on a field trip in my urban studies class, I began to compare Buenos Aires to Los Angeles: racial and wealth segregation and housing insecurity that traces back to legacies of settler colonialism, systemic exclusion, and neoliberal housing policy, among many other things, have caused high rates of housing insecurity and wealth inequality in both cities.

In Los Angeles, lack of access to housing is made most visible through tent encampments and people sleeping on the streets. In Buenos Aires, many pushed out of the formal housing market build their own housing outside of the city on vacant land, or occupy and auto-renovate

⁵ I refer to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (or CABA, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires).

abandoned city social housing projects. Within the city, these communities are siloed, and often rely on informal jobs. Through work with Fundación Pro Vivienda Social (FPVS), a local community development organization operating in the Province of Buenos Aires, I learned more about various efforts to address urban informality: FPVS promotes land titling and home upgrading for unpermitted rural homes, but the Argentine government has had varying approaches. The Peronist government (1946-1955) tolerated ‘illegal occupation,’ while the following military dictatorship, starting in 1955, adopted a ‘slum clearance’ paradigm involving displacing residents to new housing complexes, which remained the dominant paradigm until a full return to democracy in 1983 (Wang and Bazán, 2023). This was followed by an era of neoliberalization in which increased privatization and decreased government services and oversight meant that illegal land occupation was tolerated. Settlement upgrading pilot programs became the state’s new mode of addressing these informal development (Wang and Bazán, 2023). These paradigms arose from the specific social, historical, and cultural conditions of the city, but are part of a global discourse about how to approach informal housing from a policy perspective: legalize; ignore; or criminalize?

Questions about the applicability of such theory in Los Angeles led me to the burgeoning body of literature on urban informality in the United States, and specifically to literature that recognizes extralegal ADU construction understood as a form of informal urban production (Wegmann, 2014).

Urban Informality in the Global South

Though attempts to strictly define informality have led to much discourse, a contemporary understanding of urban informality is grounded in an understanding of the informal *economy* as a relational process of production that exists in contrast to a regulated

market process. Portes et al. (1989) write that the informal economy is *not* simply a euphemism for poverty, but instead a “specific form of relationships of production” (p.12). It is not siloed off from other economic activity, and it functions through many of the same logics, simply “unregulated by the institutions of society in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated” (Portes et al., 1989, p.12).

Urban informality, specifically, emerged as a field of study out of scholarship on Latin American economies (Alsayyad, 2004). In the 1950s and 1960s, hegemonic US-based scholarship had theorized a marginal group of “urban informals” to describe the subjects of the informal markets that they observed; later scholarship *from* Latin America conversely characterized people engaging with urban informality as fully integrated into society (Alsayyad, 2004). Thus, a person *is* not informal, but *engages* in informal economic or developmental processes, often due to economic exploitation and repression.

The size and number of informal settlements in the Global South increased during neoliberal structural adjustment, and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) espoused neoliberal self-help models to address them. At the time, Hernando De Soto framed informality as a means for the urban poor to push back against state capitalism and repression (1989) and established a neoliberal paradigm of land titling to combat urban poverty through valorizing existing capital (2000). De Soto’s (2000) account of informality paints “extralegal” economic actors as “heroic entrepreneurs” who simply need help turning accumulated assets into capital (p.37). This paradigm became the guiding wisdom for the IMF’s interventions in addressing global poverty starting in the 1980s, led by John Turner’s “anarchism and neoliberalism” model that focused on lending for slum upgrading, incentivizing self-help incremental construction, and legalizing “spontaneous urbanization” (Davis, 2006, p.72). This

distinctly neoliberal, deregulatory approach focused on privatization led to a widening wealth gap that redistributed wealth towards elites. As David Harvey (2007) notes, the neoliberal state paradoxically, through deregulation, aligns with elites to intervene undemocratically and prevent free market encroachment on their wealth accumulation. Roy (2009) similarly points out that selective enforcement and deregulation in planning regimes are often in alignment with elite interests.

While de Soto and the IMF espoused the ‘empowerment’ of the urban poor that comes of formalizing self-help housing markets, Mike Davis writes that Soto’s “micro entrepreneurial” neoliberal approach allows organizations such as the IMF to “[renege] on historic state commitments to relieve poverty and homelessness” (Davis, 2006, p.71; p.72). He characterizes urban informality through slums that spatially marginalize the urban poor and are often owned and rented out by irresponsible, extortionist elite landlords. What is considered ‘self-help’ often exacerbates wealth inequality and redistribution of assets and capital towards elite classes (Davis, 2006). Market liberalization generally is attributed much of the growth of informal housing globally (AlSayyad, 2004; Bayat, 2000). These understandings of neoliberal ‘self-help’ housing policies – and the deregulation of economic systems paired with shrinking access to state welfare – as catalysts of wealth redistribution towards elites frame my analysis of the mass deregulation of formerly illegal housing in Los Angeles.

More recent accounts of informal housing emphasize urban informality as a process. In fact, the term ‘informality’ is frequently called into question by modern theorists for being too rigid and stagnant: for Caldeira (2017), ‘informality’ introduces a false dualism with ‘formality’ that erases contingent, unstable categorizations better explained by “peripheral urbanization” (p.4). For Dovey (2019), informal settlements are best conceptualized through a “complex

adaptive assemblage approach” that recognizes destabilized, rhizomatic categories describing active processes of spatial formation and urban production instead of a top-down analytic approach of formality (p. 141). Bayat’s (2000) account of informality similarly emphasizes process through the notion of “quiet encroachment” which “describes the silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives” (p. 547). In this sense, urban informality is a complex, undramatic process that occurs at various levels in response to challenges with and exclusion from the formal market. Bayat, too, emphasizes the active role of the subject engaging in the informal market without assigning them DeSoto’s responsibility of individual heroism.

These complex, systematic ways of thinking about informality tie into Roy’s (2008) explanation of informality as occurring through “a state of deregulation, one where the ownership, use, and purpose of land cannot be fixed and mapped according to any set of regulations or the law” (p.80). For Roy, informality occurs through site-specific processes dependent on state enforcement and regulatory regimes – hence the emphasis on *de*-regulation as opposed to *un*-regulation. Roy (2009) writes that, in India, the planning regime is one of concerted deregulation, meaning that the urban system – often characterized as “third-world sprawl” – in fact functions *through* the enforcement and non-enforcement of extant policy. In contrast to De Soto and Davis’s understanding of informality as tied to a certain *group* or sector, Roy and AlSayyad (2004) argue that urban informality is a *mode* of the production of space. This shifts the lens beyond the urban poor: in many cities, the wealthy, too, flout land use laws of all sorts; it is uneven enforcement that results in unequal outcomes and wealth accumulation for elites.

These forms of informality are no more legal than squatter settlements and shantytowns.

But they are expressions of class power and can thus command infrastructure, services, and legitimacy in a way that marks them as substantially different from the landscape of slums. The important analytical (and political) question to ask in the Indian context, as well in others, is why some forms of informality are criminalized and thus rendered illegal while others enjoy state sanction or are even practices of the state. (Roy, 2009, p.83)

She situates informality as a *feature* of power structures. Roy expounds upon the broad applicability of this line of thought in other work, emphasizing that questions around informality should focus on how certain land uses are designated to be ‘formal’ versus ‘informal,’ how elite’s use of space is legitimized and becomes sanctioned by the state (2016), and how wealth distribution, property ownership, and the mode of housing market at work in a city affect affordability (2005).

Scholars write that informality research is best conducted comparatively and in a site-specific manner to enhance the production of specific findings and avoid generalizing theory (Roy, 2009; Lancione and McFarlane from Wang and Bazán, 2023). My aim, therefore, is to use frameworks of analysis developed through transnational research and comparison, and apply them to an under-researched area in informality studies: the United States.

Informal Housing in the United States

The rich body of literature on urban informality has come out of studying cities across the Global South. However, there are scant studies on informal housing in the United States, and informality is often completely left out of discussions of housing policy under the assumption that informality does not occur here (Durst and Wegmann, 2017). And yet, the U.S. was formed as a settler-colonial project predicated on violent land appropriation and selective enforcement of

land use laws: the settler state benefitted from ignoring, enabling, and carrying out the genocide of native people to illegally – against existing treaties – occupy and encroach on land during westward expansion (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015). When rogue settlers illegally appropriated land, it was allowed and eventually formalized into the State; the state apparatus fundamentally functioned on a paradigm of selectively enforcing land use laws and treaties for its own benefit.

Existing literature on informality in the US has predominantly focused on *colonia*⁶ housing in peri-urban Texas (Durst, 2015; Durst, 2016; Ward et al., 2016; Mukhija, 2007), as well as backyard hidden density in Los Angeles (Wegmann, 2014; 2015; Wegmann and Mawhorter, 2017; Mukhija, 2022). Other authors identify tent encampments as a mode of “self-help” informal housing that can act as an interim solution to a shelter gap (Loftus-Farren, 2011) and explore the challenges of informal home ownership and titling instability (Way, 2009), but lack connection with a larger body of theoretical literature.

The substantial literature gap comes partially from ontological assumptions about *where* informality occurs: Durst and Wegmann (2017) contend that “although informal land and housing markets in places such as suburban Los Angeles or peri-urban El Paso do not physically resemble their irregular settlement counterparts in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro or the bidonvilles in Algiers, they are nonetheless prevalent and pose considerable challenges to planners, policymakers and local governments in the US” (p. 282). Utilizing Roy’s conception of informality as a *mode* of urban production that can exist outside of the ‘urban poor’ or the slum, Durst and Wegmann (2017) emphasize that informality is a process that can occur anywhere, between and in concert with the formal economy in a way that is “geographically uneven,” “interwoven,” and “hidden” (p. 283).

⁶ Under-resourced, often self-built housing developments along the US-Mexico border.

Informal housing in the U.S. takes on myriad forms and its study reveals the idiosyncrasies of U.S. planning regimes: it manifests primarily through infill, subdivision, repurposing of private property, and occupation of public space (Herbert et al., 2022). Durst and Wegmann (2017) also draw attention the ways in which informality as non-compliance, non-enforcement, and deregulation have differing outcomes: the first two descriptors imply that the state benefits from or is unaware of informality; the third often results in the fragmentation of regulation that maps spatially onto patterns of poverty and race. ADUs in Los Angeles have long existed out of view in a paradigm of non-compliance and non-enforcement in which they were neither allowed nor strictly prosecuted by the state; recent laws, however, have made legalization easier, bringing units into the formal market through deregulation.

ADU Policy in the US and Canada

Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver were early adopters of promoting ADU growth to add density through infill to address housing needs, and found success in implementing zoning reforms, financial incentives, outreach programs, and permitting liberalization (Chapple et al., 2011). Cities across California, too, have used variety of strategies to incentivize ADU growth, including Marin County's unpermitted secondary unit amnesty program to bring ADUs in violation of housing code into the formal market, and Santa Cruz's active encouragement of ADU builds through educational programming (Chapple et al., 2021). More recent policy, such as the City of Milpita's Safe ADU Legalization Program provides comprehensive support to homeowners to bring informal units up to permitting standards – including through anonymous permitting consultation support (Greenberg et al., 2022).

ADUs growth has faced many barriers. In 2011, the literature found that zoning and permitting, neighborhood groups opposed to density, and lack of access to capital to be major

blocks to ADU growth across the United States – for example, in Portland, the majority of homeowners built from cash savings due to a lack of access to loans (Chapple et al., 2021). In California, homeowners were confused about permitting processes, and unclear about the legality of building in many cases (Greenberg et al., 2022; Chapple et al., 2021). Additionally, legacies of racially restrictive covenants and home loan that have reduced Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) access to homeownership and generational wealth accumulation through property ownership translate to ADU ownership – to have an ADU, one needs a property – and white homeowners are overrepresented in constructors of ADUs across the state (Chapple et al., 2021). ADU homeownership, however, is recognized as a tool for building wealth or increasing property affordability for homeowners through rent and increased property values (Greenberg et al. 2022). Further, California studies have linked neighborhoods with lower median incomes and a higher proportion of BIPOC residents with a higher number of *unpermitted* ADUs, while newly permitted ADUs generally are built in places with a higher median income and white population (Greenberg et al., 2022). Evidence from Seattle shows a different trend: ADUs have been legal since 2010 in the city, and Maaoui (2018) finds that ADUs are concentrated in neighborhoods with minority and middle-income homeowners in King County.

In a report for the UC Berkeley Turner Center for Innovative Housing, Greenberg et al. (2022) recommend that community organizations take on community engagement to encourage that low- and middle-income BIPOC homeowners adopt ADUs, to provide targeted financial resources, to reduce regulatory complexity, and to simplify formalizing informal ADUs. The authors especially emphasize the importance of simplifying formalization processes as informal units are more likely to be in BIPOC neighborhoods in California and often function as

multigenerational housing; “promoting and subsidizing new ADUs at the same time that homeowners with existing informal units face heightened scrutiny or expensive fees will undermine the relative efficacy and equity in the formalization of ADUs” (Greenberg et al., 2022, p. 10).

These trends and recommendations highlight the potential inequities in the implementation of ADU policy liberalization. However, the literature maintains a focus on homeowners and homeownership as the primary subjects of ADU policy without connecting ADUs to broader housing market trends. A more structural view of homeownership and property traces the intensification of housing commodification and financialization through neoliberal reforms in the United States, and the “assetization” of rental housing through the creation of assets around these properties (Langley, 2008 from Rolnik et al., 2024). Housing has become an asset, and rental properties are treated as investments to profit from; Rolnik et al. (2024) propose that both corporate landlords and small property owners play into this financialization. Situating ADUs in this context of housing financialization connects ADU ownership to the commodification in the US that drives up rent, property value, and competition in the market, making housing less accessible and affordable to both renters and homeowners. The racial and socioeconomic barriers to ADU homeownership can thus be extended to include these more structural issues of competition and accumulation that incentivize the acquisition of rental assets and thus drives up rent prices.

ADUs and Los Angeles

In 1982 following Reagan-era neoliberal Federal budget cuts to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the state of California introduced ADUs into the

Housing Element Law⁷ as a means of increasing affordable unit count. The state implemented a mandate that cities allow for ADU production to address unmet housing needs for “renters, seniors, and low-income households and to avoid providing state housing subsidies” (Ramsey-Musolf, 2018). ADUs were a way to count affordable housing on paper, but not provide state-subsidized public housing. Many city governments, however, were resistant to ADUs, concerned over neighborhood character, lowering property values, and overcrowding. Cities combated state-level oversight with zoning restrictions, the most restrictive being lot-size, parking, and permit approval requirements which effectively stymied large-scale ADU permitting until the state passed sweeping reforms in 2016 (Ramsey-Musolf, 2018).

In US cities, ADUs function as a form of hidden infill (Durst and Wegmann, 2017) and have been established in the literature as a mode of informal housing production when unpermitted (Wegmann, 2014). Ramsey-Musolf (2018) contends that a stifling regulatory environment combined with high need for affordable housing creates the conditions for the construction of “shadow housing” or informal housing. In Los Angeles, before extensive liberalization programs in the state of California starting in 2016, many back-houses, granny flats, and garages were built and occupied illegally. Recent studies found that between 1990 and 2010, the rate of units added compared to existing housing stock was 0.4% for informal units and 1.3% for permitted units in an average California city (Wegmann and Mawhorter, 2017). In a mixed-methods study utilizing home listings, Mukhija (2022) estimated that in 2014, there were 25,000 informal secondary units in the city of Los Angeles, but contends that based on research in San Francisco, it is likely that the actual number is around twice that estimate. Wegmann

⁷ Which was adopted in 1967 to mandate that all cities accommodate housing demand.

(2014) found an unexpectedly high proportion of the urban density of Los Angeles to be attributed to ADUs on private properties.

Mukhija (2022) sees this informality as hazardous to residents, in many cases, drawing on extensive research on informal secondary units in Los Angeles through interviews and housing market analysis, and work with CityLAB, community organizations, and city officials – including research prior to 2016 that helped inform California’s major ADU reforms (Mukhija, 2020). He focuses on how informal housing operates in Los Angeles on a local level, situating the risks and potential harms of informal housing in relation to racial and socioeconomic vulnerability:

[Informal housing] often reproduces the advantages of the wealthy and the disadvantages of the less affluent. Unpermitted housing also underscores the risks and dangers of unsafe housing with few protections and rights for vulnerable tenants. In this context, low-income and disadvantaged residents, including immigrants, are more at risk because they typically rely more on housing regulations and enforcement for safe and decent housing than do affluent households. (Mukhija, 2022)

Mukhija sees the legalization of secondary units as an important project due to these vulnerabilities coupled with risks from fires and floods or unsanitary living conditions and exacerbated by lack of adherence to safety codes. Unlike many Global South cities, which often have pathways to legalization and home upgrading, cities in the United States have not historically had robust policies to legalize housing and subsequently bring it into the formal market (Mukhija, 2022).

Community partners such as UCLA’s CityLab – working with Mukhija –, community-based organization LA Más, and State Senator Robert Wieckowski created a framework of

legalization that was adopted by the state of California in 2016 through AB2299 (Mukhija, 2022). California implemented a top-down approach, finally forcing municipalities to permit ADUs and either adopt clear ordinances or a broad ministerial approach to approve all unproblematic permits. The state government provided a framework for the City of Los Angeles' ADU policy, streamlining the legalization of existing secondary units and bringing them into the formal market, as well as incentivizing new builds, through removing requirements and mandating prompt action on all filed permits. Since this initial bill, the city has taken up a comprehensive ADU policy that aims to remove barriers to entry: parking space and sprinkler requirements are often waived (which have been tools that cities use to make requirements overly restrictive), and zoning restrictions may not stand in the way of permitting an existing unit. In the 2025 Memorandum No. 143 that updates the 2019 zoning ordinance, the Chief Zoning Administrator and Engineer write that “the City may not deny an ADU/JADU permit for an unpermitted ADU based on building code or zoning standards, unless the correction is needed to protect the health and safety of occupants or the building is deemed substandard ... Finally, nonconforming zoning conditions shall not require correction even if they are created as a result of the creation of the ADU” (Mailan and Pak, 2025). Through legalizing units that are nonconforming with building code or zoning standards, the city government legitimizes the breaking of extant codes and standards for those who can afford property and the permitting process. By legalizing some level of violation and easing building and permitting requirements, the state benefits from increased housing production, and homeowners benefit from formalizing added property value.

ADU's have produced mixed results for increasing housing availability and affordability. A 2018 study found that while increasing formal ADU stock in California raised the overall local

housing inventory, many were produced as market-rate housing, often while being counted by local governments as affordable housing to fulfill Housing Element requirements (Ramsey-Musolf). California municipalities are permitted to consider potential ADU growth as part of meeting the Regional Household Needs Assessment (RHNA) based on average permits from prior years and growth forecasts; the 2021-2029 City of Los Angeles 2021 – 2029 Housing Element approximates that an average of 5,668 additional ADUs will be permitted per year. Over the 8-year cycle, the city estimated that a potential 45,340 ADUs would be built – including 27,204 lower income units – out of the 266,647 total units, and 81,312 lower income units needed to meet RHNA (Los Angeles City Planning, 2021). A 2021 report found that the median rental price of an ADU in California was \$2000 (Chapple et al.), which is slightly higher than the total median rent of \$1,956 for all units in California between 2019-2023 (PolicyMap, n.d.-a), and substantially higher than the median rent for a 1-bedroom unit (\$1,709), which is comparable to the size of many ADUs (PolicyMap, n.d.-b; Chapple et al., 2021). Additionally, only 51% of new units are going on to the public rental market (Chapple et al., 2021); many go instead to family members or are used as flex space.

According to the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) Regional ADU affordability analysis⁸ (2020), 43% of ADUs in the Los Angeles area⁹ qualify as affordable for low income, only 2% and 6% qualify as affordable for very low and moderate income, respectively, and 34% qualify as affordable for those with above moderate income. SCAG also reports that 15% are affordable for extremely low-income people because their calculation assumes that 15% of ADUs are being used to provide no-cost housing to a family member.

⁸ Calculated using Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) income categories: extremely low; very low; low; moderate; above moderate.

⁹ Los Angeles County was halved by SCAG researchers for analytical purposes; I report on the half of Los Angeles County containing the City of Los Angeles.

However, this assumption flattens the experience of family members living in ADUs – not all rent-free ADU residents are extremely low income, and many extremely low-income people do not have access to a rent-free ADU. A dearth of affordable ADU units has substantial implications for racial equity – due to systemic racism and economic barriers, Black and Latinx renters are disproportionately cost-burdened (Isbell, 2022), and thus disproportionately affected by lack of affordable units.

ADU policy liberalization benefits the City of Los Angeles, increasing affordable unit count for RHNA requirements and allowing the state to renege on a responsibility to build affordable housing by pushing that onus onto individual homeowners. Though many are optimistic about the potential of ADUs to add additional rental units and help families support aging family members, scholars continue to investigate how much affordable housing stock is actually being added to the market (HUD, 2025; Jo et al., 2024; Cressey, 2023; Dubler, 2022).

Methods

This project utilizes a mixed-methods approach to answer two questions:

1. *What is the impact of statewide ADU permitting liberalization on the Los Angeles housing market?*
2. *How do ADU residents and owners experience the purported benefits and drawbacks of ADUs, and who do these benefits and drawbacks impact most?*

To answer my first question, I use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models to predict the impact of ADU permitting per tract on property values and median rent; I provide a secondary OLS regression model as well. To answer my second question, I conducted 12 structured interviews to understand the experiences of ADU residents and owners. A mixed-methods approach combines the breadth of quantitative analysis with the depth of qualitative

analysis, and can provide richer results through the synthesis of these types of data (Dawadi et al., 2021).

Regression Model

The City of Los Angeles publicly provides building permitting data, and began recording ADU permits as a discrete measurement in 2017. I use the binary variable “ADU_changed”¹⁰ which denotes an ADU permit, to filter my data, and kept only those ADU permits with status descriptions of “CoFo Issued,”¹¹ “CoFo Corrected,” “Issued,” and “Permit Finaled;” this yielded 43,554 units permitted between 2017 and January 2026.¹²

I assembled and cleaned the final data for analysis using ArcGIS Pro and Stata. First, I geolocated the ADUs and fixed georeferencing errors in the data using the provided addresses. I then sorted them by permitting status and merged the points with a County of Los Angeles census tract file to identify each ADU’s tract in order to aggregate by tract for my analysis. In order to account for tracts that are not aligned with the boundaries of the City of Los Angeles, I selected all tracts with centroids within the city boundaries, as well as those that contained ADUs but were partially outside of the city. This may introduce a slight limitation, as the ADU feature file is confined to the City of Los Angeles, and so the ADU data for the three tracts I added may be incomplete. I then ran a feature to centroid point operation for each tract, and aggregated points into a Los Angeles neighborhood¹³ shapefile to assign a neighborhood to each tract as well.

¹⁰ In an exploration of the ability of ADUs to address the housing crisis, Cressy (2024) uses Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety (LADBS) permitting data and spatially merges ADU locations with parcel data to conduct parcel-level analysis in Council District 3. He was kind enough to speak with me about his methods, and shared the city-wide ADU dataset that he uses in his analysis.

¹¹ CoFO stands for certificate of occupancy, which is issued by the City of Los Angeles when a new build is completed.

¹² I pulled data from the LADBS portal in January of 2026.

¹³ From the LA Times Mapping LA project.

The other data that I use in my analysis is the 5-year American Community Survey (ACS) data administered by the U.S. Census for the 2015-2019 and 2020-2024 time periods. I choose these time periods as the midpoints correspond with the time periods that I am interested in comparing: 2017 and 2022. I chose these time periods as they allow me to identify trends before and after 2019 policy changes—and also because of data availability¹⁴. I coded and cleaned this data using Stata. To allow for comparison over time, I used the geographic crosswalk files from IPUMS NHGIS (Schroeder et al. 2025) to interpolate 2015-2019 ACS data (which are in 2010 tract shapes) to 2020 tract shapes. I then calculated change variables for my descriptive and regression analyses, and combined all of the data into a dataset for the City of Los Angeles containing ADU permitting data and demographic data. The dependent variables for my two first two, primary regression analyses are median gross rent and renter-occupied median house value for 2022¹⁵. My independent variable of interest is the total 2017 to 2022 ADU permitting count. My control variables are total population racial demographic proportions. I run one set of regressions using 2017 demographic data, and one using 2022 demographic data. For my third, secondary regression model, my dependent variable is total ADUs permitted from 2017 to 2022, and my control variables are 2022 racial demographic proportions.

Limitations to these methods include a limited temporal scope (as ADUs are only discretely recoded starting in 2017); the inclusion of the years 2020-2022, in which the economy was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; and lack of data on unpermitted units, which limits my ability to draw inferences about the status of informal units and their use.

Semi-Structured Interviews

¹⁴ As of March 2026, the 2024 ACS 5-year estimate is the most up-to-date demographic dataset available.

¹⁵ From the 2020-2024 5-year ACS.

I also employ qualitative methods to understand how renters feel about living in an ADU, including size. Affordability, and accessibility, and how landlords feel about permitting and managing ADUs. Similar studies on urban informality and ADUs in Los Angeles leverage structured interviews to gain further insight into lived experience in these types of housing (Wegmann, 2014; Cressey, 2024).

I conducted 12 structured in-person interviews with homeowners and renters in Eagle Rock and Boyle Heights throughout January of 2026. My project was approved for human subject research by the Occidental College Institutional Review Board (IRB). I recruited interview participants by leaving flyers in English and Spanish with study information and a QR code with by to contact me in public areas in all three neighborhoods, including libraries, cafes and restaurants, and other small businesses such as corner stores and laundromats. I also posted my flyers to the Reddit forums R/EAGLEROCK, R/boyleheights_, R/LARentals, R/LosAngelesRealEstate, and R/GranadaHills. I offered interview participants a \$25 compensation for an in-person interview in the location of their choosing; my interviews lasted between 15-40 minutes each, and I met interview participants in cafes, libraries, and visited one home. Despite flyering in Eagle Rock, Boyle Heights, and Granada Hills, the majority of interview participants were from Eagle Rock, and none were from Granada Hills – this was due to interview participant self-selection. Two participants recruited from Boyle Heights later revealed that they lived in East LA; though this is the next contiguous neighborhood, it is outside of the regulatory jurisdiction of the City of Los Angeles. Therefore, I have used these interviews to further understand sentiments about ADUs, but have been careful about their inclusion in discussion of policy, which is city-specific.

I recorded my interviews and used auto-transcription tools (Otter.ai and Atlas.ti) to prepare them for coding. I conducted inductive coding using Atlas.ti (Saldaña, 2016), and created 14 code groups from 189 codes.

My sampling design had significant limitations. First, Eagle Rock community members, who are already familiar with Occidental College and may have some ties to the college (multiple interview participants did) may have felt more comfortable contacting me: this seems to be evidenced by the 9 Eagle Rock interview participants that I spoke with out of 12 total interviews. I spoke to far fewer Boyle Heights residents: I was not able to secure any interviews with homeowners in Boyle Heights, which is a significant gap in my data, and 2 of my 3 interview participants who initially identified as Boyle Heights residents were actually East Los Angeles residents, meaning that they are in an unincorporated community operating under Los Angeles County's regulatory framework. Some of this difference may be attributed to the incongruity between Reddit users in Eagle Rock and Boyle Heights: R/Eagle Rock has 2,300 weekly visitors, which R/BoyleHeights has 2 weekly visitors¹⁶; multiple Eagle Rock participants confirmed that they had found me on Reddit.

Additionally, out of my 12 interviews, 75% of participants identified as white, whereas in Eagle Rock, less than 32.85% of residents were white, and in Boyle Heights, 2.72% of residents were white¹⁷ (USC Lusk, 2023). Though these differences may arise partially from discrepancies in access to owning and renting ADUs, which is supported by Chapple et al.'s (2021) finding that ADU homeowners are wealthier and whiter than the average California homeowner, factors such as racial wealth disparities or comfortability answering questions about living status may have also impacted the self-selection process.

¹⁶ These numbers are accurate as of March 2026.

¹⁷ According to 2019 – 2023 5-year ACS data.

An additional limitation and consideration is the environment of fear in Los Angeles at this moment arising from near-constant federal ICE raids targeting anyone racialized as Hispanic/Latine for detention and/or deportation. This fear has manifested as a downturn in school attendance and hesitancy in participating in certain regular activities of daily life; the Los Angeles Unified School District lost around 7,000 more students than projected this year (Blume et al., 2025). It would then not be surprising if Boyle Heights residents, who are 92.5% Hispanic/Latine and constitute a high proportion of immigrants (just under 40%), felt especially hesitant to engage with a stranger asking questions about housing, family, and informality within this context. These factors may have contributed to my lack of Boyle Heights interview participants, and the disproportionately white sample group compared to the demographics of each neighborhood. These significant limitations in my qualitative methodology limit the generalizability of my findings; however, taken in tandem with my quantitative findings, these interviews add depth to my overall takeaways.

Ananya Roy writes that the fundamental issue at stake in studying informality “is that of wealth distribution and unequal property ownership, of what sorts of markets are at work in our city and how they shape or limit affordability” (2005, p.155), as well as questions of who has the “right to exclude” versus the “right not to be included,” and the role of the state in enforcing and regulating legal codes (Blomley, 2004 from Roy, 2005). Combining structured interviews with quantitative data analysis on ADU permitting and neighborhood housing markets helps untangle how the City’s new ADU legalization paradigm has changed the landscape of Los Angeles housing and impacted the wealth distribution through the legitimization of a previously mostly informal mode of urban production.

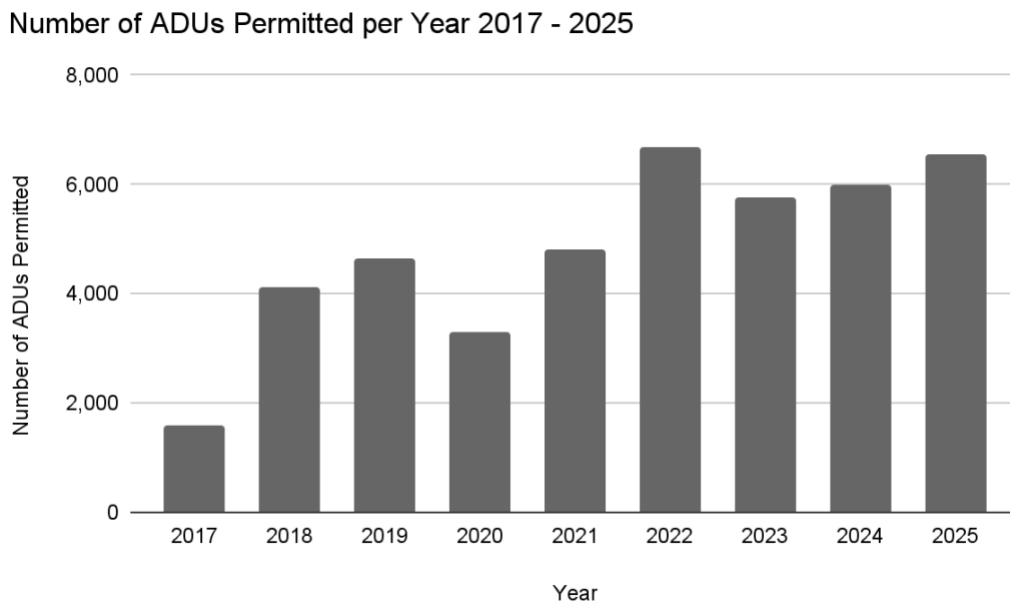
Data Analysis and Results

In this section, I provide an overview of the ADU permitting data from the City, as well as a breakdown of ADU permitting data for Eagle Rock, Boyle Heights, and Granada Hills. I then provide three regression models to understand how ADU permitting is related to median gross rent, home value, and an area's racial demographics.

Descriptive Statistics and Data Overview

Between January 2017 and January 2026, the city of Los Angeles has permitted 43,554 ADUs; since 2017, the yearly frequency has increased immensely (Figure 8).

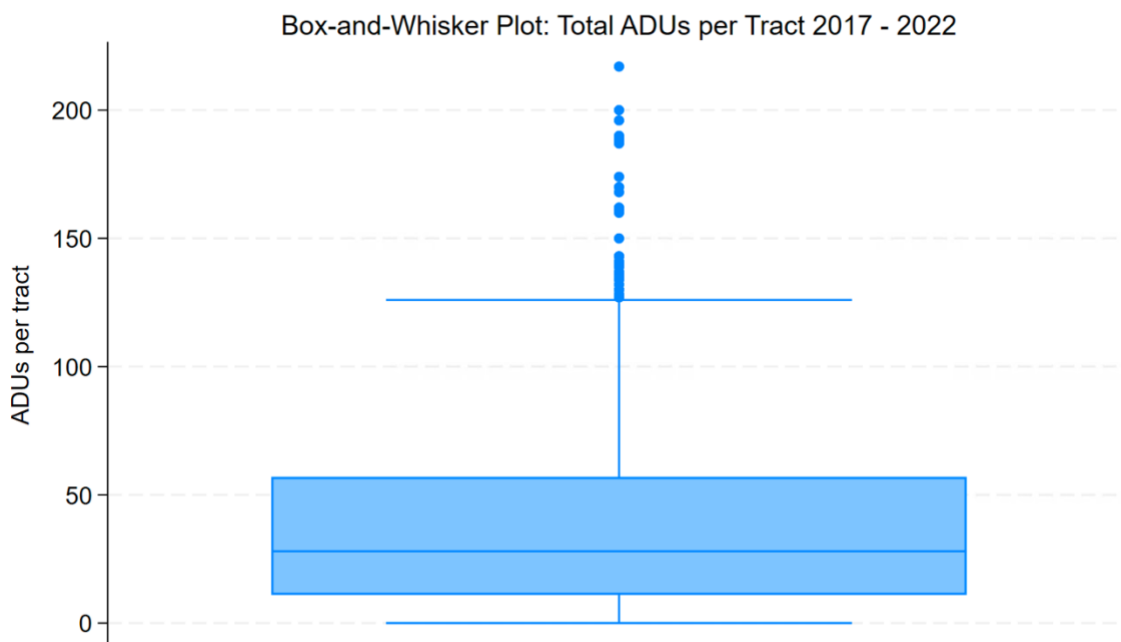
Figure 8: Number of ADUs Permitted per Year 2017 - 2025



2022 had the highest rate of ADU permitting, followed by 2025, which was the most recent full year of permitting data. This shows a significant increase from 2017. These permitting numbers also reflect a slowdown in permitting in 2020 that can likely be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a sharp increase; the global pandemic makes tracking the impact of 2019 ADU permitting more challenging.

To understand these changes at a more granular level, I provide an overview of the data by census tract. The mean number of ADUs permitted between January 2017 and January 2026 per tract across 1,115 tracts that are in – or overlap with – the city of Los Angeles was 39. But a standard deviation of nearly 37 indicates substantial variation between tracts. As Figure 9 illustrates, the median ADU count per tract was 28, but the data is substantially skewed: there are outlier tracts with as many as 217 ADUs.

Figure 9: Box-and-Whisker Plot of Total ADUs per Tract 2017 - 2022



This chart identifies 35 outliers with a mean of 153 ADUs per tract among the outliers. This indicates that while the majority of tracts had relatively low, stable ADU counts, certain areas are seeing outsized growth in ADU permitting.

Most ADU permits granted between January 2017 and January 2026 were either for new buildings, additions, or alterations/repairs (Table 1).

Table 1: Permit Type by Percent of Total (January 2017 – January 2026)

<i>Permit Type by Percent of Total (January 2017 – January 2026)</i>		
Permit Type	Frequency	Percent
Building Alter/Repair	18,621	42.75
Building Addition	14,119	32.42
Building - New	10,793	24.78
Other	21	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>43,554</i>	<i>100</i>

Most permits are for alteration and repair, while new builds make up just over half that number. The predominance of permits for alterations and repair suggests a high number of garage or other home conversions, and may imply, in some cases, conversion from an unpermitted unit. Unfortunately, because these unpermitted units are not reported and often hidden, collecting data on unpermitted ADUs through City of Los Angeles records is near-impossible.

Neighborhood Analyses

I use city permitting data to further understand ADU trends in Eagle Rock, Boyle Heights, and Granada Hills. Across neighborhoods, Granada Hills had by far the highest median ADUs per 1000 persons per tract (23.54), followed by Eagle Rock (14.2), followed by Boyle Heights (4.42). The 2022 count of ADUs built since 2017 as a proportion of total housing units (per 1,000 units) follows a similar pattern: Granada Hills had a median of 37.62, Eagle Rock had a median of 24.23, and Boyle Heights much lower median of 6.13 ADUs per 1,000 occupied housing units. Despite dramatically fewer ADUs per tract than both the city and the other two

neighborhoods, Boyle Heights has seen more growth between 2023 and 2026 than 2017-2022, unlike the other two neighborhoods.¹⁸

Eagle Rock

I identified 508 units permitted across 8 census tracts that make up the neighborhood of Eagle Rock as defined by the LA Times *Mapping LA* project. Within these tracts, the lowest number of permits between January 2017 and January 2026 was 24, and the highest was 161; the median number of ADU permits was 56, and the mean was 64 with a standard deviation of 41, indicating a slight upward skew in the data. Eagle Rock's minimum number of permits per tract was higher than the city-wide minimum, and the maximum number was lower than that of the city's; however, both mean and median ADU counts were higher than that of Los Angeles overall.

To understand Eagle Rock ADU distribution proportionally for comparison with other neighborhoods, I provide statistics on total ADUs per person as of January 2026¹⁹ and ADUs as a proportion of total occupied housing units in 2022²⁰ (Table 2). In Eagle Rock, tracts range from having 7 to 28 ADUs per 1,000 persons; a similar mean and median indicate that ADUs are distributed fairly normally across tracts. Tracts also had a range of 10 to 52 ADUs per 1,000 occupied housing units, with a median of 24 and a mean of 27, indicating that the distribution is skewed towards higher ADU density. These measures aim to normalize counts across tracts with differing populations and housing environments, and I use them to make comparisons across neighborhoods in the following sections.

¹⁸ Boyle Heights permitted 187 ADUs in the first timeframe and 220 in the second; Eagle Rock permitted 322 in the first timeframe and 186 in the second.

¹⁹ This is a rough estimate, using 2020-2024 5-year ACS population data and January 2026 permitting data.

²⁰ Due to data availability.

Table 2: Key Statistics for Eagle Rock Tracts

Key Statistics for Eagle Rock Tracts

ADUs per 1,000 persons (2022)		ADUs per 1,000 occupied housing units (2022)	
Min	7	Min	10
Q1	12	Q1	20
Median	14	Median	24
Q3	16	Q3	32
Max	28	Max	52
Mean	15	Mean	27
Standard Deviation	6	Standard Deviation	12

Boyle Heights

Boyle Heights had 407 total permitted units between January 2017 and January 2026 across 27 census tracts – a much higher tract count than Eagle Rock, but lower unit count. Within these tracts, the lowest number of ADUs per tract was 0, and the highest was 33 – much lower than the Eagle Rock’s high of 161. The median number of permits was 15, and the mean was 15 with a standard deviation of 8.8, indicating a fairly normal distribution across tracts. This indicates far lower ADU permitting rates than both Eagle Rock and the city overall. However, unlike Eagle Rock, the majority of these were permitted between 2023 and January 2026.

Table 3 provides key proportional statistics for understanding variation between neighborhoods. Boyle Heights tracts have a median of 4 ADUs per 1,000 persons, much lower than the 14 ADUs per person in Eagle Rock tracts, indicating that these discrepancies cannot be attributed to population differences. Boyle Heights tracts have a median of 6 and a mean of 8 ADUs per 1,000 occupied housing units, indicating an upwards skew in the data. This data distribution indicates substantial disparities between tracts, as well as between ADU access in Boyle Heights and Eagle Rock.

Table 3: Key Statistics for Boyle Heights Tracts

Key Statistics for Boyle Heights Tracts

ADUs per 1,000 persons (2022)		ADUs per 1,000 occupied housing units (2022)	
Min	0	Min	0
Q1	3	Q1	4
Median	4	Median	6
Q3	7	Q3	10
Max	11	Max	21
Mean	5	Mean	8
Standard Deviation	3	Standard Deviation	5

Granada Hills

Granada Hills had 1,243 ADUs permitted between January 2017 and January 2026 across 16 census tracts – more than three times the number of those built in Boyle Heights over the same time period in an area with a lower population. ADUs per tract varied more than in Eagle Rock or Boyle Heights, more closely mirroring that of the city overall, with a minimum count of 0 ADUs per tract, and a maximum count of 188. The median number of ADUs per tract was 79, and the mean was 78 with a standard deviation of 54; these means and medians per tract are substantially higher than that of the city overall, and both other neighborhoods of interest.

Table 4 shows the proportional distribution of ADUs for more accurate comparison. Granada Hills, as a point of comparison to Eagle Rock and Boyle Heights, had both a higher variation between tracts, and a higher median, mean, and maximum ADU count, even when normalizing for both population and occupied units count per tract. These substantial variations across these neighborhoods – with very different financial and racial makeups, as well as levels of housing density – suggest a pattern of higher ADU counts being associated with whiter and wealthier neighborhoods.

Table 4: Key Statistics for Granada Hills Tracts

Key Statistics for Granada Hills Tracts

ADUs per 1,000 persons (2022)		ADUs per 1,000 occupied housing units (2022)	
Min	0	Min	1
Q1	11	Q1	14
Median	24	Median	38
Q3	31	Q3	52
Max	48	Max	74
Mean	23	Mean	38
Standard Deviation	13	Standard Deviation	23

Regression Results

To test the veracity of a positive relationship between higher ADU counts and whiter and wealthier neighborhoods in Los Angeles, I created three OLS regression models that measure the association between ADUs and rent prices, house values, and tract racial makeup in LA.

Regression 1: Median Gross Rent 2022

To measure the association between 2017 – 2022 ADU count and median gross rent, I use two sets of data: 2017 “starting-point” racial demographics, and 2022 “current” racial demographics.²¹ The first model (

Regression Analysis Summary of Total ADUs (2017 - 2022) as predictor of Median Gross Rent (2022) using 2017 Starting-Point Demographic Data.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	t	p-value	95% confidence interval	
Total ADUs	3.733	0.636	5.87	0.000	2.48589	4.981413

²¹ The percentage of people in poverty was removed from this model due to a high correlation with percent Hispanic/Latino (0.71 correlation coefficient), and demographic coefficients are reported in percentage points instead of proportions. I kept percent Hispanic/Latino as my analysis focuses on racial demographics in access to ADUs.

Total Population 2017	0.008	0.013	0.64	0.522	-0.0175957	0.0346487
Racial demographics by percent of population (reference group: white)						
Black	-14.298	0.665	-21.50	0.000	-15.603	-12.993
American Indian/Alaska Native	-16.046	1.159	-13.84	0.000	-18.3199	-13.771
AAPI	-7.163	1.36	-5.27	0.000	-9.831	-4.495
Hispanic/Latino	-32.578	32.774	-0.99	0.320	-96.886	31.73
Other	11.005	7.211	1.53	0.127	-3.144	25.154
Constant	2807.063	69.76	40.24	0.000	2670.182	2943.945

Table 5) uses median gross rent as the dependent variable, total ADUs (2017 – 2022) as independent variable of interest, 2017 total population and racial demographics as control variables.

Table 5: Regression Analysis Summary, Total ADUs and Median Gross Rent, 2017

Regression Analysis Summary of Total ADUs (2017 - 2022) as predictor of Median Gross Rent (2022) using 2017 Starting-Point Demographic Data.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	t	p-value	95% confidence interval	
Total ADUs	3.733	0.636	5.87	0.000	2.48589	4.981413
Total Population 2017	0.008	0.013	0.64	0.522	-0.0175957	0.0346487
Racial demographics by percent of population (reference group: white)						
Black	-14.298	0.665	-21.50	0.000	-15.603	-12.993
American Indian/Alaska Native	-16.046	1.159	-13.84	0.000	-18.3199	-13.771
AAPI	-7.163	1.36	-5.27	0.000	-9.831	-4.495
Hispanic/Latino	-32.578	32.774	-0.99	0.320	-96.886	31.73
Other	11.005	7.211	1.53	0.127	-3.144	25.154
Constant	2807.063	69.76	40.24	0.000	2670.182	2943.945

Note: AAPI refers to Asian American/Pacific Islander.

This model shows a positive, statistically significant relationship between ADU permits and rent.

An increase of one ADU per tract between 2017 and 2022 accounts for a \$3.7 increase in 2022 median gross rent. A 1% increase in 2017 Black population compared to white population is associated with a \$16 decrease in 2022 median gross rent. A 1% increase in 2017

Hispanic/Latino population compared to white population is associated with a rent decrease of around \$14. These statistics indicate that gross rent is higher in neighborhoods with higher percentages of white residents. The model has an R-squared value of 0.51, indicating that 51% of the variability in median gross rent can be accounted for by these variables.

I ran this regression again (Table 6) using 2022 population and racial demographics to investigate whether current demographics more accurately predicted 2022 median gross rent. Other than changing demographic years, all other variables remained the same.

Table 6: Regression Analysis Summary, Total ADUs and Median Gross Rent, 2022

Regression Analysis Summary of Total ADUs (2017 - 2022) as Predictor of Median Gross Rent (2022) Using 2022 Demographic Data.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	t	p-value	95% confidence interval	
Total ADUs	2.86	0.624	4.59	0.000	1.636	4.08411
Total Population 2017	0.045	0.013	3.46	0.001	0.019	0.070245
Racial demographics by percent of population (reference group: white)						
Black	-17.306	1.258	-13.76	0.000	-19.775	-14.838
American Indian/Alaska Native	-7.963	1.36	-5.86	0.000	-10.631	-5.295
AAPI	-34.911	28.544	-1.22	0.222	-90.92	21.097
Hispanic/Latino	-3.588	4.977	-0.72	0.471	-13.354	6.177
Other	-16.291	0.697	-23.38	0.000	-17.658	-14.923
Constant	2849.034	73.011	39.02	0.000	2705.773	2992.294

Note: AAPI refers to Asian American/Pacific Islander.

The impact of the variables changed slightly: ADUs account for a \$2.86 increase in rent per additional unit in this model. Additionally, a 1% increase in the 2022 Hispanic/Latino population compared to the white population is associated with a \$16 decrease in median rent, and a 1% increase in the Black population is associated with a \$17 decrease in median rent. When calculated with 2022 demographic variables as controls, ADUs do not have as large of an impact

on rent changes; the pattern of rent increase, however, stays stable across models. This model accounts for 52.2% of variability in median gross rent costs across tracts.

Regression 2: Owner-Occupied House Value 2022

This model (

Table 7) measures the association between total ADUs (2017 – 2022) and owner-

Regression Analysis Summary of Total ADUs (2017 - 2022) as predictor of Owner-Occupied House Value (2022) using 2017 Starting-Point Demographic Data.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	t	p-value	95% confidence interval	
Total ADUs	189.701	437.803	0.43	0.665	-669.422	1048.823
Total Population 2017	-23.375	9.201	-2.54	0.011	-41.431	-5.3181
Racial demographics by percent of population (reference group: white)						
Black	-10388.76	447.564	-23.21	0.000	-11267.03	-9510.478
American Indian/Alaska Native	-7869.508	817.052	-9.63	0.000	-9472.85	-6266.166
AAPI	-10071.06	983.203	-10.24	0.000	-12000.45	-8141.666
Hispanic/Latino	-53570.1	23894.86	-2.24	0.025	-100460.2	-6679.986
Other	-310.084	5016.283	-0.06	0.951	-10153.79	9533.623
Constant	1728691	48785.59	35.43	0.000	1632957	1824426

occupied house value.²² I use the same population and racial demographic variables as in the last model, and run the regression using both 2017 and 2022 demographic data.

Regression Analysis Summary of Total ADUs (2017 - 2022) as predictor of Owner-Occupied House Value (2022) using 2017 Starting-Point Demographic Data.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	t	p-value	95% confidence interval	
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²² Median house value data from the ACS is available only for owner-occupied units; a more complete analysis would include property values for rental homes and owner-occupied homes.

Total ADUs	189.701	437.803	0.43	0.665	-669.422	1048.823
Total Population 2017	-23.375	9.201	-2.54	0.011	-41.431	-5.3181
Racial demographics by percent of population (reference group: white)						
Black	-10388.76	447.564	-23.21	0.000	-11267.03	-9510.478
American Indian/Alaska Native	-7869.508	817.052	-9.63	0.000	-9472.85	-6266.166
AAPI	-10071.06	983.203	-10.24	0.000	-12000.45	-8141.666
Hispanic/Latino	-53570.1	23894.86	-2.24	0.025	-100460.2	-6679.986
Other	-310.084	5016.283	-0.06	0.951	-10153.79	9533.623
Constant	1728691	48785.59	35.43	0.000	1632957	1824426

Table 7: Regression Analysis Summary, ADUs and Owner-Occupied House Value, 2017

Note: AAPI refers to Asian American/Pacific Islander.

In this model, total ADUs do not have a statistically significant impact on owner-occupied house value. Higher proportions of Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Asian American/Pacific Islanders compared to whites have a statistically significant, negative association with median home value. Repeating this model using 2022 demographic data yields similar results (Table 8).

Table 8: Regression Analysis Summary, ADUs and Owner-Occupied House Value, 2022

Regression Analysis Summary of Total ADUs (2017 - 2022) as predictor of Owner-Occupied House Value (2022) using 2022 Demographic Data.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	t	p-value	95% confidence interval	
Total ADUs	2.717	434.6596	0.01	0.995	-850.2379	855.6715
Total Population 2017	-14.764	9.163736	-1.61	0.107	-32.74612	3.21881
Racial demographics by percent of population (reference group: white)						
Black	-8329.123	891.489	-9.34	0.000	-10078.54	-6579.709
American Indian/Alaska Native	-9676.209	994.338	-9.73	0.000	-11627.45	-7724.97
AAPI	-20029.57	20467.07	-0.98	0.328	-60193.15	20134.01
Hispanic/Latino	-729.893	3405.369	-0.21	0.830	-7412.422	5952.635
Other	-11009.34	478.69	-23.00	0.000	-11948.69	-10069.98
Constant	1722629	50164.56	34.34	0.000	1624189	1821070

Note: AAPI refers to Asian American/Pacific Islander.

A 1% increase in percent Black compared to white lowers home value by \$8,329 (compared to a slightly lower impact of \$7,869 based on 2017 demographic trends); similarly, a 1% increase in AAPI and Hispanic/Latino populations decreases home value by \$9,676 and \$11,009, respectively. However, the impact of total ADUs had a statistically insignificant impact on home value in this model.

Regression 3: Predicting ADUs as a percentage of total housing stock

My final regression model (Table 9)uses the proportion of total housing made up by ADUs as the dependent variable, and 2022 racial demographics as the independent variables of interest to capture the relationship between racial demographics and ADU permitting.

Table 9: Regression Analysis Summary, Racial Demographics and ADUs, 2022

Regression Analysis Summary of 2022 Racial Demographics as Predictors of the Proportion of Housing Fulfilled by ADUs.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	t	p-value	95% confidence interval	
Hispanic/Latino	-0.0018774	0.0026941	-0.70	0.486	-0.0071636	0.0034088
Black	-0.0219169	0.0049665	-4.41	0.000	-0.0316618	-0.012172
AAPI	-0.0330362	0.0052933	-6.24	0.000	-0.0434223	-0.0226501
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.1018078	0.0701506	1.45	0.147	-0.0358359	0.2394516
Other	-0.0133018	0.0188996	-0.70	0.482	-0.050385	0.0237814
Constant	2.46482	0.2376786	10.37	0.000	1.998467	2.931174

Note: AAPI refers to Asian American/Pacific Islander.

The R-squared value indicates that only 4.8% of variation in ADUs as a percentage of housing stock across tracts can be attributed to this model, but it does indicate a statistically significant association between both Black and Asian/Pacific Islander population and ADUs. For every 1% increase in the Black population compared to the white population, ADUs as a percentage of total housing stock per tract decreased by 0.02%. For every 1 percent increase in the AAPI population compared to the white population, ADUs as a percentage of total housing stock per tract decreased by 0.03%. These results start to show a pattern between racial

demographics and permitted ADUs (specifically, recently permitted ADUs) on a census tract level. Though one can make no conclusions regarding Hispanic/Latino populations and ADUs, which could reveal more about access to and use of permitted ADUs, it seems from these two statistically significant demographic groups that ADUs are being built in whiter neighborhoods, supporting my earlier hypotheses.

Conclusions and Limitations

These regression models support my initial hypothesis that ADUs are associated with higher median rents, and therefore may not be a viable solution to increasing affordable housing, but I am unable to draw conclusions about their relationship to home values overall due to a lack of statistical significance. Additionally, in all of the regression models, the scatterplots of residuals and total ADUs showed somewhat pronounced heteroskedasticity, indicating that something is missing from my model. Therefore, these regressions act as an exploratory step towards better understanding the impact of ADUs on housing affordability as well as the relationship between ADU frequency and racial demographics. Future models should add variables accounting for land use and housing density to improve the accuracy of the model.

Interview Analysis: Homeowners and Renters

In this section, I analyze and discuss my findings from 12 structured interviews using urban informality and ADU literature to frame my findings. Participants in these interviews included 4 homeowners from Eagle Rock, 5 tenants from Eagle Rock, 1 tenant from Boyle Heights, 1 tenant from East LA, and one participant from East Los Angeles who lived in an

ADU and owned a different property with an ADU on it. I also incorporate evidence from casual conversations with a Los Angeles City Planner²³ and other housing scholars.

This analysis is framed by my research question regarding how tenants and homeowners experience ADU policy liberalization, and who it is impacting. The State – here the Los Angeles municipal government – has gone from excluding ADUs from the regulatory landscape, and relegating them to informality in many cases, to legalizing them, leading to formalization in the housing market. Scholarship questions whether this shift adequately addresses affordable housing need or shifts the onus onto homeowners to self-regulate, and whether access to the benefits of ADU homeownership are distributed equitably among racial groups and across income levels. My quantitative research revealed that Boyle Heights, which is 92.5% Latine and has a median household income of under \$60,000 had a median of 6.13 ADUs²⁴ per 1,000 occupied housing units, while Eagle Rock, with a median household income just above \$120,000 and a more racially diverse, but gentrifying population, had a median of 24.23 ADUs per 1,000. Additionally, my regression analysis provides preliminary evidence that ADUs may be associated with higher rents per tract. Though these findings are not conclusive, these interviews help further explore the hypothesis that rapid, mass deregulation of ADUs is causing socio-spatial fractures that disproportionately benefit wealthier whites through wealth consolidation and access to housing in densifying, gentrifying neighborhoods.

I have organized my findings into four sections: interactions with the Los Angeles regulatory regime; tenant experiences living in ADUs, homeowner experiences owning and renting ADUs, and participant sentiments regarding ADUs as a solution to housing accessibility and affordability in the city.

²³ Who was in the process of drafting the City of Los Angeles' new ADU ordinance.

²⁴ Permitted between 2017 – January 2026, estimated by the criteria detailed in my methods section.

The Regulatory Regime and Informality

This section of analysis focuses on the ways in which interview participants interacted with, perceived, and discussed ADUs in relation to the state – the Los Angeles City Government. My analysis is organized around assessing participant responses to key parts of the state’s regulatory regime, including deregulation through simplified and relaxed property permitting rules, eased parking restrictions, interactions with informality, and tenant protection measures.

Interview participants contended with challenges and benefits arising from specific pieces of regulatory legislation. I briefly overview the City of Los Angeles’ updated ADU ordinance, the Mayor’s Executive Directive 1, and a slew of tenant protection laws that shape, limit, and enable the construction, conversion, and use of ADUs as units on the formal property market in order to frame my analysis.

First, the city’s 2025 updates to the 2019 ADU Ordinance aims to simplify and ease onerous permitting requirements that apply to building regular housing in order to incentivize and streamline the construction of new units. The City Planner I spoke to expressed that though ADU codes are relatively straightforward and short compared to other building codes, making them more accessible as well as less restrictive, it is often environmental regulations that stack up and make building costly and complicated. Following recommendations from literature on California ADUs, Ordinance updates include a clause to allow ADUs built unpermitted before 2020 to become permitted without fully meeting code requirements as long as they do not pose excessive health hazards (Mailan and Pak, 2025). These changes deregulate ADU construction, and attempt to provide homeowners a pathway to formalize unpermitted units without punitive measures for code violations.

Secondly, the Mayor's Executive Directive 1 eases barriers to building affordable housing, which many ADUs qualify as. Importantly, a 2024 update waives built-in parking requirements for both pre-approved affordable and "100% affordable" projects within ½ mile of major transit stops (Bertoni, 2024). ADU construction is thus often able to circumvent parking requirements. Additionally, under SB 1211, cities are not required to replace parking lots demolished for ADU builds; in some Los Angeles neighborhoods such as Koreatown, this has already caused controversy as scant parking spaces are removed to build more housing density (Buchanan, 2025).

Further complicating the regulatory paradigm governing ADUs, Los Angeles has two key tenant protection laws that homeowners in my study alluded to as shaping their decisions about putting ADUs onto the formal: the rent stabilization ordinance (RSO) and the just cause ordinance (JCO). The RSO was passed in 1978 as a tenant protection measure to cap annual rent increases and mitigate evictions, and applies generally to units on multi-unit properties that were built on or before October 1st, 1978 (LAHD b, 2025). Each year, an allowed annual rent increase is determined based on the consumer price index (CPI), and the Los Angeles City Council recently decreased the maximum rental increase from 8% to 4% (LAHD c, 2025). Most other properties not covered by the RSO are still subject to the JCO, which places restrictions on evictions just as the RSO does; evictions are either at-fault evictions, in which tenants are evicted for violating the terms of the lease (this includes things like failing to pay rent), or no-fault evictions which can be triggered only in specific circumstances such as owner occupancy and withdrawal of the unit from the rental market, and may require the homeowner to pay tenant relocation fees (LAHD a, 2025). Withdrawal of all rental units from the market as grounds for eviction is covered under the Ellis Act, which is a state law that overrides city-specific legislation

(LAHD, 2026). These tenant protections are not particularly robust, and the Ellis Act is frequently used to take valuable units off the market: “more than 27,000 rent-controlled units have been removed in Los Angeles since 2001 using the Ellis Act despite the city’s increasing need for affordable housing” (Magaña, 2024).

Additionally, homeowners in my study contended with the eviction moratorium and RSO-property rent freeze that lasted from 2020-2023 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the Los Angeles Housing Department (LAHD) mandated that “no owner can evict a residential tenant for nonpayment of rent if the tenant is unable to pay rent because of circumstances related to the COVID-19” (LAHD, 2020).

In the following sections, I detail interview participants’ complex interactions with these regulatory structures.

Homeowners who built, converted, or considered doing so found relaxed regulation helpful, but still faced challenges of confusion, hidden costs, and inconsistent regulation.

I spoke with three interview participants who had recently undergone the process of doing a new build, one of whom was considering an additional garage conversion. All detailed to me their challenges with the permitting and building process, highlighting the remaining complexities and confusion remaining in ADU permitting codes, and thus in the regulatory regime.

One participant explained that she faced major setbacks in building due to surprises and confusion throughout the permitting process, and that she was happy to have worked with an experienced contractor who handled the details. Her biggest example was learning, partway through the process of building, that she needed to install a greywater drainage system in her yard, which included a sump pump – adding \$15,000 to her building costs. Both the City Planner

I spoke with, and a second interview participant, individually brought up that grey water drainage requirements posed potentially major challenges to homeowners. Another example this participant gave was the requirement to plant trees to replace shade lost through construction from an approved list which proved impossible to find without the help of a city inspector. Thus, her perception of the city's regulatory system was that it was disorganized and inconsistent. For example, she explained to me the time it took to get her ADU's plans approved:

I think we submitted the plans maybe in early 2024, and it took till the fall to get them fully approved. They kept coming back for changes, even things that were already there on the plans, but the plan checker just didn't look closely enough. So, then they had to have the person come out and or, you know, it's just there were issues with the plan check process where it seemed like people weren't reading the plans. (Int 2)

She described a process of irregular enforcement and compliance with city codes and laws, indicating practices of selective enforcement that necessitate inspectors to adopt a more standardized practice.

This sentiment of sporadic regulation by city government was echoed by another ADU builder, who told me that during the building process, she learned that she was required to add both a sprinkler system and a methane mitigation system due to proximity to a decommissioned oil well, which added three months to the building process. This information was not made clear until well into the process. Not only did she face surprises, but she expressed that from her experience, acquiring permits has gotten easier overall, but inspectors were making subjective judgments that changed building requirements throughout the process. She explained:

[something] that we experienced going through the permitting [and] ... construction when they have to come kind of approve levels of the build ... [is that] you can get a

good inspector. [Or] you can get one that's kind of a dick, which we found very interesting. My mom is very loud and vocal, so there was a couple times where we had to go to the City planning office, because they were just giving us a really hard time. (Int 9)

This perception – that the city simultaneously has made permitting easier, and that individual inspectors are making subjective judgments – conjures the image of a disorganized, selectively enforced regulatory regime.

This selectivity appeared to be raced and gendered. Her family is Mexican, and her mother was “loud and vocal” on the site, and they had to work out multiple issues directly with the City to circumvent inspector judgment. This perception alone creates barriers to entry: she told me that many people in the Mexican community have a mistrust of contractors and feel that they may be taken advantage of. She herself was extraordinarily familiar with ADU policy, and wanted to encourage more people in East Los Angeles to take advantage of liberalized ADU permitting laws and build more, but emphasized that further education and simplification of the process may be necessary. Though her experience was with a different permitting agency than that of the City of Los Angeles, California State ADU laws mandate similar permitting simplification processes across municipalities. Additionally, the selective and sporadic enforcement is consistent with City of Los Angeles participant experiences, and her experience serves to further explain how historical housing injustices creating cultures of mistrust may be adding to unequal uptake in ADU development across racial groups and neighborhoods. Additionally, selective enforcement practices raise the likelihood of judgments based on gender and racial biases, indicating that regulatory expectations are not applied equally and adding to existing injustices.

The final participant who spoke about having a new build told me that he worked with an all-inclusive ADU company, but regretted it. The company misquoted the initial total permitting and building, and seemed to make the process more complex than it needed to be. The participant was initially intimidated by the City's bureaucracy and thus opted to go through a third party, but expressed that he would have preferred to be an owner-builder. This sentiment, that he would rather have had less help than more, was unique among the interviewees, but may be partially explained by his background in Real Estate. Regardless, third-party companies complicate the regulatory picture: they profit off of unclear regulatory processes.

Homeowners looking to build ADUs faced barriers working within the regulatory framework of Los Angeles that both enforces and *deregulates*: unclear expectations, confusion, and idiosyncratic application of rules led to higher costs and subjective judgments throughout the permitting process. The state's irregular enforcement of regulation functions through informality to produce subjectively legitimized or criminalized land use through lack of clarity of initial expectations (Roy, 2009) – if the law is unclear, it is actively determined through inspection and code enforcement processes, which creates room for racialized over-policing of ADU informality or code violation.²⁵

Deregulation of requirements such as parking availability has varied effects based on neighborhood housing characteristics, and can shift responsibility onto residents.

Because ADUs add density to residential neighborhoods without the parking infrastructure of apartment buildings, neighborhood residents across the city are concerned about a lack of parking – a recent poll found that 56% of Los Angeles survey respondents listed parking as a concern when thinking about legalizing secondary back homes (Mukhija, 2022). I

²⁵ As described by Chappel et al., 2021.

did not ask participants about parking, but 8 interview participants brought it up; interestingly, despite the majority of Eagle Rock residents not having parking included, none expressed concern or frustration with their own parking situations. Both East Los Angeles residents were concerned about parking – either due to having experienced a lack of street parking, or due to concerns about overcrowding in a potential future rental situation. Some Eagle Rock respondents brought up challenges parking in other neighborhoods such as Silverlake and Koreatown, imagining that parking would be challenging for ADU tenants there²⁶.

Though parking has become a contentious issue in debates about streamlining permitting for purposes of rapidly building more housing, Eagle Rock residents seemed content with the amount of street parking available. One homeowner expressed that while she felt no direct impact from it, the city’s assumption that ADU tenants living near major transit stops will necessarily be transit users ignores the reality that many ADU tenants own cars. In a car-centric city, ushering a mass transition towards public transportation us will require more work than simply cutting parking. Additionally, as ADUs are rapidly added to neighborhoods like Eagle Rock that do not yet struggle with parking, the participant expressed that adding units to small residential streets is “just a pending issue that I don’t know how that’s going to be dealt with ... because ... there’s seven houses counting mine on the street that in the time I’ve been here have either added, expanded their own building, or added an ADU” (Int 2). I myself currently live on an Eagle Rock property housing 9 people in 5 units, and have certainly faced challenges finding parking directly on my street on garbage day; however, even with such a high number of people on the property, with the number of driveways that the neighbors have, there is generally enough space. When parking mandates are waived through deregulation, neighborhood residents are

²⁶ As is corroborated by Koreatown residents who recently staged a sit-in to protest losing parking (Buchanan, 2025).

tasked with figuring out how to make their own neighborhood accessible. As density increases, Los Angeles planners will have to continue to contend with making parking accessible and use increased density as leverage to robustly expand reliable public transportation to serve residents of all neighborhoods.

Confusion, hurdles, and high costs led to partial departures from formal building and permitting processes.

Vinit Mukhija writes that “informal housing reflects what is needed in the housing market and how households have adapted to its limitations” (2022, p.21). This reflection of needs in the formal housing market is clear in the way that informality was invoked in my interviews – all interview participants lived in and owned permitted units, but some described having made minor unpermitted changes to existing properties, knew of neighbors or family members with unpermitted units, or admitted to having considered circumventing the costly, time-intensive formal permitting and building process altogether.

Cost was the most common motivation cited for unpermitted construction or conversion. One participant told me that she had seriously considered going through an unlicensed contractor in the building process – and was asked if she would do so by friends and neighbors – and also that she was still considering adding an unpermitted second unit to her lot because it would be less costly. She was restrained from doing so by fears of inspection of the permitted unit, or neighbors “snitching”. The Los Angeles City Planner I spoke with corroborated this finding, and said he felt cost was the biggest reason people choose not to go through formal channels.

A second reason that arose for operating informally was convenience and lack of friction. This applies especially to units housing family members or other non-rent-paying tenants. In these situations, moving into or converting existing structures without going through regulatory

channels is much simpler when a rental agreement is not involved. One homeowner I spoke with described to me a “DIY” conversion to the backyard ADU in which her parents-in-law resided: “[my father in-law] added the kitchen, I think. So, I don’t know if that was technically supposed to be there. But there’s a kitchen in there [now], but it [already] had a bathroom and everything ... [and then he] just added a wall. So, kind of, because it’s a fairly big space, there’s actually two rooms [now]” (Int 6). The interview participant was unsure about the status of the original space – which was likely not permitted for residency if it did not initially include a kitchen – and described the addition of a kitchen and wall space by her father-in-law as the simplest way to accomplish their goals of making the unit more livable. Homeowners and residents begin to take ownership of the space, crafting it to fit gaps in what is provided by the formal market.

Another participant expressed to me that growing up, she remembered visiting family members living in back houses in East LA, and told me the story of a friend of hers that lives in another city nearby, but lives in an unpermitted, converted garage behind his mother’s house. She reflected that she had no idea as to the legality of the backyard units, but that they are a regular part of how she understands multifamily housing to look like. The ADU real estate agent I spoke to described to me that in his experience,

most existing [unpermitted ADUs] that are out there, that are unknown or serve that function, would be for family members that – ‘oh, well, we converted this corner of the garage and they kinda had a bedroom back there but they mostly were inside the house’, which, you know, especially when these families have owned these houses for decades, you gotta do what you gotta do, because what are you gonna do? Sell your house and buy something that makes sense for the short-term when you bought your house for \$30,000? (Int 11)

He emphasizes both that he thinks most of these unpermitted units are inhabited by family members of the main house, and that these families have been living on their properties for a long time – families entrenched in a property, especially those who are financially struggling, use the materials available to them to provide for their families.

Other participants had peripheral knowledge of the pervasive existence of second units that have been inhabited, and on a property, for a long period of: one participant described how the garage she plans to legally convert into an ADU for rental was actually once an unpermitted unit that was re-registered with the city. As I was interviewing another participant, we encountered a neighbor who lived in a 100-year-old “shack” rent-free in Boyle Heights.²⁷

Further, the ADU real estate agent I interviewed explained that unpermitted ADUs can be “grandfathered” in on a property if they are already built; properties can be sold without properly permitting converted garages or back houses as long as those spaces are marked as recreational spaces not residential spaces. In this way, homeowners can ostensibly acquire existing converted units without going through permitting processes, and subsequently choose what to do with them.

The city has measures to bring these units into the formal market and grants amnesty from fees or code violation corrections for units built before 2020. An attitude of amnesty towards unpermitted, non-hazardous living situations is promising for ensuring the welfare of ADU homeowners and tenants. However, in tandem with selective enforcement practices, limited amnesty measures have the potential to harm to racialized homeowners facing extra scrutiny (Chapple et al., 2021) and tenants experiencing uncomfortable, sub-par living conditions due to more lax regulation.

²⁷ The neighbor declined an interview.

Homeowners expressed fears over renting out units due to tenant protection laws and other responsibilities.

None of the homeowners that I interviewed were actively renting out units, but all of them expressed anxieties about becoming a landlord. As the cost of living increases, as well as the cost of utilities, and newer homeowners have to pay off mortgages or other loans, renting out a unit has to feel worth the trouble – “incentives have to align on both sides” for both landlords and tenants, one homeowner explained to me. These rising costs, and fears of losing money on a rental property, were prominent anxieties that surfaced across my conversations – and one tenant seemed to validate this concern, describing how her landlord was about to sell the property she lived on due to living costs that increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, while refusing to charge her more than below-market-rate rent (\$1,400 per month). A homeowner laid these fears out: “As interest rates increase, insurance increases, property taxes go up. You've got utilities, you've got maintenance and labor on that maintenance is always going up. I mean, the numbers have to make sense” (Int 8).

This calculus is complicated by tenant protection laws in Los Angeles, according to multiple homeowners with whom I spoke. Three out of five homeowners in my study raised anxieties about managing tenants, and two of them connected these anxieties directly to the current regulatory environment. One homeowner was imminently going to be a landlord pending ADU completion and emphasized going through “appropriate processes” – she joined the Apartment Association of Greater Los Angeles to help manage the “stress-slash-responsibility of being a landlord” (Int 1). Two homeowners described fears of being “stuck” with “bad tenants” due to Los Angeles tenant protections such as the RSO and eviction protection measures. One homeowner described how she had to go through an Ellis-Act eviction process to remove a

tenant from the ADU her mother now lives in. She would not like to repeat that process, nor feel stuck in a situation in which she would be losing money on a tenant: “we wanted to rent it out, but I’m a little shy about that, just because of all the talk about rent control, because I don’t know that I would want to commit to renting to somebody knowing that my costs might increase at the same time” (int 8). Another homeowner explained that he would probably stick to short-term rentals to avoid having to contend with tenant protection measures: “when we have looked at getting a tenant in there, we’ve mostly looked at doing furnished finder, so we can potentially get traveling nurses, that sort of thing so people have a set date that they’re gone” (Int 11). All of the homeowners I interviewed feared losing money on renting, and two repeatedly emphasized concerns over being stuck with a bad tenant or in a bad economic situation due to anti-eviction measures.

Los Angeles’ COVID-19 eviction moratorium and rent freeze was also cited as a reason for hesitancy to become a landlord. One tenant told me he believed this complete moratorium sent landlords into a panic, and subsequently turned them into “bloodthirsty leeches,” leading to dramatic rent hikes and fears about the city’s rent control policies.

This narrative arose among multiple interview participants. One homeowner suggested that renter protection policies may be inadvertently causing more housing scarcity, scaring individual homeowners away from adding more units to the market. She suggested that exemptions from rent control for people with a single property could promote the addition of units into the formal market. Another homeowner recognized the relative weakness of Los Angeles tenant protections, but still cited them as a reason not to use his ADU as long-term rental property. Another homeowner suggested that she might list her ADU on Airbnb should the family members inhabiting the unit pass away.

These attitudes reflect a market in which everyone is struggling – individual homeowners and renters alike. When homeowners fear for economic stability and safety, they are disincentivized to put their ADUs on the market. This points to a greater issue with the city’s approach to housing supply and accessibility: housing is commodified and financialized, treated as an investment with expected returns (Rolnik et al., 2024), but affordable housing solutions such as ADUs rely on those same individual actors who invest in real estate to provide low-cost housing. When homeowners rely on rental incomes and are met with rent freezes, renting out a unit may no longer feel stable or worthwhile.

This is not to say that tenant protection laws should be eased; however, austerity measures and neoliberal solutions to housing affordability– such as incentivizing homeowners to build and rent out ADUs – place an onus on individual homeowners to provide adequate and affordable housing (Ramsey-Musolf, 2018). Contrastingly, corporate landlords – which include some ADU landlords – enjoy protection from market risks and consolidated power over rental markets and properties (Graziani et al, 2020). Tenants and small ADU landlords are subsumed into a web of relations in which financialized housing markets become increasingly competitive (Rolnik et al., 2024), tenants are at risk of exploitation, homeowners are disincentivized from expending resources to become landlords, and the state has escaped its responsibility to stabilize the market and ensure access to housing.

Tenant Experiences

Having framed interview participants’ ADU experiences within the context of statewide deregulation, I explore the experiences of tenants more specifically.

Most interview participants perceived ADUs to be more accessible and affordable than apartments or other accommodations.

Rent in Los Angeles is high – median gross rent for the was \$1,941 in 2023 (USC Lusk). In comparison to the rest of the United States, average rent for 1- and 2-bedroom units are particularly high in Los Angeles (Table 10). ADU tenants that I spoke to were cognizant of, and grappling with, high rents in the city, and many saw ADUs as a means of staying in or living in neighborhoods that would otherwise be too expensive, or attaining a free-standing home despite being unable to afford a full-sized home. When asked if their rent seemed fair, participants’ responses ranged from highly affirmative to negative, but all carried the caveat that Los Angeles is an expensive city, and that their ideal rent prices might not be realistic.

Table 10: Zillow housing estimates per region per type, 2026

	Los Angeles		United States	
	Apartments & Condos	Houses	Apartments & Condos	Houses
Studio	\$1,639	\$1,900	\$1,356	\$1,565
1 Bedroom	\$2,130	\$2,200	\$1,302	\$1,300
2 Bedrooms	\$2,440	\$3,495	\$1,500	\$1,750

Source: Zillow housing estimates per region per type, 2026

One interview participant, an Eagle Rock resident who pays \$1650 monthly for an ADU that she lives in alone, summed up the tensions expressed around ADUs in her response:

Interview Participant 3: I feel like it generally hits the target. It's nice to have a free-standing place, versus an apartment, like even for \$1650, you could probably only get a studio. So, there's like, more separation, but definitely proximity to your landlord can be interesting sometimes. ... That's kind of the one con sometimes – it's like, she can send workers back anytime, which is, you know, nice to get the work done, but sometimes it's not the best time.

Author: And do you feel like – you kind of touched on this – but do you think the rent that you pay is reasonable?

Interview Participant 3: I mean, rent is unreasonable, but for what it is, yeah.

The proximity of an ADU tenant and a landlord who lives on the property is not common among many other housing types; this intimacy can be a drawback as landlords exert more control over minutia, tenants expressed. However, for this interview participant, a free-standing unit in the existing rental market it offered enough privacy at a low enough price to be considered a good deal. Two other Eagle Rock residents expressed feeling that their \$3,000+ per-month rents (for two people) were reasonable for the neighborhood; the ADU is a way to live in an area that would otherwise be financially inaccessible (Table 11).

The only person who expressed outright that their rent was “unreasonable” was a Boyle Heights resident who lives with his partner and their young child who pays \$2,300 per month – “I think the threshold to move into a rental unit that is the third most desirable unit on the property is *really* high for a city that has a super duper bad homeless problem,” he told me (int 7). This tenant points to the inaccessibility of housing prices in Los Angeles overall, and how ADUs may be failing to contribute to filling that gap, especially in the face of a dearth of affordable housing units. However, he also expressed that “the ADU kinda became the answer because here in Boyle Heights, there are not very many houses for rent. People are really embedded here like multi- generations going back thirty forty years of people living in their houses” (int 7). When neighborhoods are saturated with long-term residents, ADUs, as infill, have the unique capacity to add flexible units without directly displacing residents for construction (Calder and Gygi, 2023). However, as flexible units, ADU prices may be exploited due to high housing demand and low supply, especially in neighborhoods where community members are solidly entrenched.

Table 11 displays tenant’s attitudes and their rents in comparison to average neighborhood rents.²⁸ Only one participant expressed that he found his rent unreasonable; all others, including those paying far above neighborhood median rent, found their situations to be reasonable. In fact, residents expressed that their ADU was a “good deal,” \$1,000 less than comparable options, and a more affordable downsize from a full house. Notably, of the tenants who expressly found their situations affordable resided in Eagle Rock, a steadily gentrifying neighborhood. All of these tenants also happened to be white, relatively young, and were mostly professionals who moved from out of the area. These characteristics, combined with the ability of some to pay above median neighborhood rent, suggest that ADU rental may also be a conduit of gentrification, raising property values and rent prices in a neighborhood. This hypothesis adds richness to my finding that higher median gross rents and lower proportions of racial demographics at risk of being displaced by gentrification were associated with Los Angeles census tracts that contained higher total ADU counts, but requires further research to establish a causal relationship.

Table 11: Interview Participant Monthly Rent & Sentiments vs. Median Neighborhood Rent

Interview Participant Monthly Rent & Sentiments vs. Median Neighborhood Rent

Would you consider your monthly rent to be reasonable?	Housing type	Eagle Rock	Boyle Heights	East LA	Median Neighborhood Rent²⁹
n/a	Studio/1bdrm			<i>n/a: family</i>	\$1,540
n/a	Studio			<i>Section 8</i>	\$1,540
“[It’s] well below market at this point”	Studio/1bdrm	\$1,400			\$1,894

²⁸ See footnote above. Median rent does not account for housing type.

²⁹ I used the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation calculator to calculate 2023 neighborhood median rents in January 2026 inflation-adjusted dollars for more accurate comparison. 2023 rental price data is the most recently available data from USC Luskin’s neighborhood-level aggregation of the 5-year ACS data through Neighborhood Data for Social Change.

“Rent is unreasonable, but for what it is, yeah [it is reasonable]”	Studio/1bdrm	\$1,650	\$1,894
“[1800/mo] is a deal out here”	Studio/1bdrm	\$1,800	\$1,894
“I think it’s too much”	2 bdrm	\$2,300	\$1,487
“Considering there’s like a Hearst castle at the end of our block, I think it’s pretty good”	2 bdrm	\$3,000	\$1,894
“Yeah, it is, I guess so. I mean, I’d love it to be less ... It can feel like a lot for a little bit”	2 bdrm	\$3,825	\$1,894

Residents valued the space, privacy, and amenities that an ADU offers.

ADU tenants across differing household sizes and makeups (Table 12), and across neighborhoods, emphasized themes of spaciousness and privacy.

Table 12: ADU Household Breakdowns

ADU Household Breakdowns
n = 8

	<i>Eagle Rock</i>	<i>Boyle Heights/East LA</i>
Single woman	3	2
Husband, wife, cat(s)	2	0
Partnered man and woman with young child	0	1

Source = my interviews

The most oft-cited positive aspects of ADU living were “privacy” and “space.” Interview participants also brought up access to a yard 5 times across interviews, and mentioned that ADUs are “quiet,” and that they had “independence,” and an ability to make noise without fear of disturbing neighbors. One Eagle Rock tenant described an idyllic scene: “The privacy is fantastic. We’re not facing the street. I mean, we just go down a driveway and ... there’s a pool in front of us and a garden in the back, and it’s just – the rest of the world kind of disappears”

(Int 10). As ADUs are generally behind a front-facing main house, often on a single-family zoned lot, many tenants expressed that access to a yard, distance from neighbors, and being away from the street contributed positively to their living experiences. A Boyle Heights resident corroborated this – “Our ADU ... how it's situated on the block... It's, like, mega private. It's super quiet back there. If you're from Boyle Heights, it's hard to imagine Boyle Heights having a quiet anything ... So, it's a really nice change of pace to have this quiet, private, off the map kind of spot” (Int 7).

These sentiments highlight both the importance of access to outdoor spaces for quality of life, and the values of independence and space baked into the urban planning paradigm of Los Angeles that often end up hindering an increase in vertical housing density. ADUs are able to bridge this gap, in some respects, adding density without disrupting the single-family feel of neighborhoods and offering more privacy and outdoor space than housing types like apartments might. According to a Los Angeles City Planner working on the new ADU ordinance, this neighborhood character is something that residents, and the city government, aim to protect; this popular appeal is another reason that the city pushes ADUs as a way to add much-needed housing units to the market.

Tenant experiences and rents seem closely related to landlord relationships, opening up both vulnerability to specific types of landlord abuse and exploitation, as well as possibilities for community building.

Experiences with landlords varied across my interviews, but tenant contentment with their living situations and contentment with their landlords appeared to be highly correlated across interview. All Eagle Rock tenants expressed a positive relationship with their landlord, ranging from friendly and familial, “like an uncle” to positive but strictly transactional.

In Boyle Heights and East LA, one tenant described a challenging rental process that included an (illegal) \$10,000 down payment in lieu of a credit check and lack of action on a pervasive cockroach issue, while another tenant described her landlord as a “B-I-T-C-H ... mean and unresponsive” (Int 1), citing poor infrastructure and inaction on abusive neighbors. This second tenant lived in a converted garage – paid for through Section 8 housing – that had no working washer /dryer, poorly wired appliances with cables chewed up by rats, kitchen plumbing that leaked; in the process of conversion, “they did a very bad job, or used cheap material,” she told me. The landlord, who did not live on the property, did a bad job both managing these structural issues, and creating a safe living space on the property; the interviewee detailed the verbally abusive behavior of a neighbor’s son who frequented the property. For her, living in an ADU was isolating and unsafe, and she had no landlord support.

On the other end of the spectrum, the tenant who described his relationship to his landlord as akin to that of an uncle spent 10 years renting from that landlord before moving into the ADU behind his house, and now uses the pool regularly and interacts as friends. Another tenant described to me that she had been living in the same ADU for the last 10 years, and pays a very low rent, a “family price,” because she took over the lease from a co-worker whose family owns the property.

Out of the tenants I interviewed, 4 people lived on the property with their landlords, 3 with other renters, and 1 with family. Tenants described the constant access that landlords have to their rental units when living on the same properties, as well as dynamics emerging among other tenants: for the person experiencing verbal abuse from a neighbor’s son, the neighbors – a family in the main house, as well as a second ADU – became untrustworthy. An Eagle Rock tenant described how his ADU had been newly built as a way for his landlord to pay their

mortgage because the other property was rent controlled. This set up a strange relationship in which the landlord found the ADU tenant indispensable but had a contentious relationship with the long-term tenants of the main house, who pay much less in rent for a full-sized house than the tenants of the ADU on the same property. Yet another ADU tenant described three other rental units on the property, remarking that his landlord must be “bringing in 6 or 7 thousand dollars a month from her rentals” (Int 7).

These tenant-landlord relationships are difficult to regulate, especially because informality and legalization are not clear-cut, but interwoven into market behavior and geographies (Durst and Wegmann, 2017). These relationships are complicated by the inherent characteristics of an ADU as a secondary residential unit that I propose exposes tenants to unique vulnerabilities. ADUs are generally either new builds or garage conversions, and can range in size and quality. They are always on the property of a main house. When a property is full of tenants – and multiple interviewees described seeing or experiencing over-full properties – each tenant may have very different experiences. Tenants may live in units of different sizes, with differing rents of differing affordability levels (in one example, a tenant paid over \$3,800 in rent to subsidize, for his landlord, the rent-controlled main unit) and have little to no support from landlords. When landlords live on the property with tenants, a tenant-landlord arrangement more intimate than most others – issues of surveillance and privacy crop up as well. ADUs may also be especially vulnerable to being shoddily converted, especially as permitting laws have become laxer. Still, most of the tenants I spoke to said that living in an ADU provided a much better experience than their previous apartments.³⁰

³⁰ All but one tenant had been previously living in an apartment.

Regardless of individual positive experience, ADUs come with unique tenant vulnerabilities due to spatial characteristics, lax regulatory oversight, and lowered potential for collective resistance. Additionally, my interviews suggest that deregulation creates fragmented and inconsistent policing of formality, which maps on to extant patterns of race and poverty, as Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles tenants experienced distinctly worse conditions and regulatory oversight than Eagle Rock tenants. Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles have a significantly higher Hispanic/Latino population and lower median income than Eagle Rock (UCLA Lusk, 2024). Further, the East Los Angeles tenant who described living in a poorly converted garage lived there on a Section 8 housing choice voucher, meaning that the property was approved by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD is a federal agency; through providing support for untenable living situations, the state legitimizes what is ostensibly a code violation through selective enforcement. This functions as state-sanctioned informality through a violent apparatus of racialized uneven enforcement (Roy, 2009), and exemplifies the fragmentation of enforcement that occurs through deregulation (Durst and Wegmann, 2016).

ADUs thus put tenants at risk of interpersonal exploitation or abuse and state violence through ignorance of regulatory violations. These risks must be considered further in ADU regulation to avoid further fragmentation of experiences living in ADUs across racial, wealth, and geographic lines. In positive conditions, ADUs seem to provide many of the perks of living in a single-family home, such as privacy, space, and outdoor access; policy must ensure that these experiences are equitably accessible.

Homeowner Experiences

ADUs are built and sought out by homeowners to house family members, add flex space, or for rental.

ADUs can give homeowners more living space, a place to house aging family members, increase property values, and add income streams through rental. Of the homeowners I spoke to, none were actively renting out their units, but two were housing aging family members, one was using the ADU as extra office and hosting space, and one was in the process of finishing the build to rent it out to a young couple she knew. A final interview participant lived in ADU but owned another property on which she planned to convert her garage into an ADU.

As I discussed, ADUs are frequently used to house family members, and many homeowners seek them out for that purpose. One interview participant emphasized the importance of intergenerational living for immigrant communities living in Eagle Rock, and the opportunity ADUs present for “people who have elderly parents, like my mother-in-law ... she needs some help” (Int 6). Additionally, her father-in-law helped with their home loan, and the ADU provides a financially feasible alternative to an elderly care facility. She told me, “given the demographics, the cost of living ... I feel like ... in some way, we had to do that” (Int 6). Her and her partner decided to buy the property partly because of the ADU. Now, with extra space on the property, she hopes to potentially build another ADU that could house her own parents. Another interview participant chose a property with an ADU so that she could move her mother into it. In our conversation, she emphasized providing for her family: the ADU was for her mother, and would leave her daughters with a two-unit inheritance. She was even considering building a second ADU for her husband’s parents.

Another interview participant lived in an ADU on her mother’s property: her mother lived in the unit above her, and her brother and uncle lived in the main house. She described to

me how the units were added to support her family: “my uncle is a convicted felon, and so has a really hard time finding work. My brother has an addiction issue, so in the front house, they don't pay for anything at the moment. That's more like, I'd say, maybe personal reasons [that] ... added to us building, and knowing that we have a very large family, and just knowing that we would have somewhere where people needed to stay if they needed it” (Int 9). In all of these cases, ADUs are being creatively leveraged to support family members without charging rent. My 8th interviewee pointed out that without the ADU, she “probably would have ended up renting a room for my mom, somewhere. So, this saves us that whole hassle of dealing with annual rent increases” (int 8). ADUs are then, in these cases, providing stable, proximate, controlled environments to care for family members or loved ones who might need extra support.

The other homeowners I spoke with were using their ADUs as rental property, and flex space with the possibility of becoming rental space, respectively. One homeowner started building an ADU after she lost her husband and was looking to build community and avoid living alone while supporting young people struggling with a challenging housing market. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she housed multiple family friends who had recently graduated from college free of charge. When her ADU is completed, she plans to charge a young couple below market-rate (\$2,600 monthly instead of her market rate estimate of \$3,200 - \$3,700) in exchange for 10 hours of labor on the property. Eventually, she planned to move into the ADU herself, which would help maintain both community and privacy while aging in-place: “I didn't want to be on the property alone,” she told me, emphasizing that ADUs are a way that “you can be in community with your family [or community] members, but not have to all share the same bathroom” (Int 2). Her plan, much like that of the homeowners housing family members, centers

around a vision of building community and stable housing outside of a strictly transactional model of housing.

These findings align with Mukhija's (2022) survey findings from Los Angeles residents, which found housing for extended family, higher property or rental income, housing supply and affordability, and housing for elderly parents to be the top four positive attributes associated with ADUs.

When not for family, ADUs function as valuable investments, providing homeowners housing security, increased property value, and rental income.

Mitigating costs and making home ownership affordable was a major driver of ADU acquisition. One homeowner, who plans to rent out her ADU upon construction completion, expressed that "I need to make money on [the ADU] but ... I'm not trying to get rich off of it ... this is a long-term plan for both my own housing security, but also having a community with other people that I enjoy" (Int 2).

This framing of a mutually beneficial setup extended to tenant sentiments about ADU ownership, though the equitability of that relationship came into question; tenants pointed out that landlords often use ADU rent profits to cover mortgage. One tenant identified this as a positive relationship: "there's a lot of house poor people in California, because ... the properties are so expensive. [ADUs can] ... help both renters and people who maybe are overextended on their mortgage a little bit" (Int 3). Homeowners, she suggests, might be motivated to pursue having an ADU on their property to ease high mortgage payments, which could increase access to homeownership. Another tenant sees this relationship in a slightly different light: "I think ... they built [our ADU] to cover their mortgage, like, they weren't really making any money on those other people [who live in a rent-controlled main house]" (Int 4). He described a contentious

landlord relationship with the other tenants that provided relative security in his own position as the one ostensibly paying off his landlord's mortgage with a much higher monthly rent. Yet another tenant told me, "I think I'm paying the majority of my landlord's mortgage via my ADU rental" (Int 5).

Some homeowners explicitly identified this as part of the return on investment they sought from owning an ADU. One homeowner planning to build an ADU explained that her goal is that "the rental income from both [the main house and ADU] pays for the mortgage at a minimum – if it generates extra income, that would be even better. But if I can just get it paid off, and fully own the house, and I'm 60, that would be ... the most ideal situation for me" (Int 9). The realtor specializing in ADUs told me that he sees them as a great way to increase the affordability of homeownership, as the buyer has "got someone in the ADU that can help" pay off an expensive mortgage that would otherwise be too daunting (Int 11). These answers point to the tension between formalized ADUs being framed as both investment commodities and as affordable, secure housing solutions for both renters and homeowners.

The narrative of a mutually beneficial relationship is challenged by the fact that tenants with few options for housing are often paying the mortgages of homeowners without reaping the rewards of property ownership, and are vulnerable to extraction of further profit. When houses are not paid off, tenants I spoke with described higher rents; conversely, another tenant is being displaced due to the owners selling the property as costs have gotten too high. These narratives further develop the tension between affordability for tenants and for landlords, and the way that these needs are pitted against each other – affordability for one party becomes reliant on increasing costs for the other – in such an expensive housing market. Additionally, much like in the synthesis of tenant narratives, outcomes seem to depend heavily on interpersonal

relationships between tenants and landlords, who inherently have a power imbalance, leaving open the possibility of extractive rental practices, and ultimately, displacement, under the guise of a mutually beneficial relationship.

Many homeowners also explicitly cited profit as a driver of acquiring an ADU. One interviewee summed this up succinctly: “so the reason I want to do it [convert garage into an ADU] is definitely just more income. That's sort of my like investment property, so I rent out the house that's in the front, and with being able to add the ADU in the back, it would just definitely be for more income. That's my primary reason” (int 9). Another interview subject emphasized that ADUs increase property values, and have the potential for bringing in substantial income through the short-term rental market – a neighbor was using their ADU for Airbnb rentals (Int 6). Yet another subject is considering using his ADU for short-term rentals. A Boyle Heights tenant estimated that his landlord earns between \$6,000 to \$7,000 monthly from having multiple ADUs and rental properties, despite being an absent and erratic landlord (Int 7). Homeowners are incentivized to add units to the property to increase property values, as well as look for properties with ADUs or garages that could be converted to add revenue streams. These motivations can, once again, lead to extractive relationships, but can also be incentives for private homeowners to add units to a rental market that desperately needs them. The question becomes how to balance homeowner incentives with institutionalized tenant protections.

Are ADUs a Solution to the Housing Crisis? Participants Weigh In.

Previous extensive research on sentiments regarding legalizing backyard units in Los Angeles prior to ADU policy reforms surveyed neighborhood members as well as informal ADU residents, and found that people were concerned about parking, overcrowding, infrastructure capacity, disorder and crime, safety, low-income renters, a decline in property values, and

changes to single-family character (Mukhija, 2022). Now, the regulatory landscape has changed, and legal ADUs have become much more common, but I use these concerns to frame my understanding of how participants thought about the utility of ADUs.

I asked all participants at the end of my interviews whether they thought that ADUs were a meaningful solution to housing scarcity and affordability. My findings are summarized in Table 13. Most respondents felt that ADUs were part of a broader solution to a lack of affordable housing in Los Angeles, though most tenants expressed, as a caveat, that ADUs could not be the city’s policy solution to structural issues. Homeowners did not add that caveat; their responses, however, tended to be about affordability for homeowners rather than for tenants.

Table 13: Responses to: Are ADUs a solution to housing scarcity and affordability?

Most common responses to: Are ADUs a solution to housing scarcity and affordability?

	Tenant total	Homeowner total	% of tenants	% of homeowners	% of total
Yes, they are part of the solution	5	5	71.4%	100.0%	83.3%
No, they are not a solution	2	0	28.6%	0.0%	16.7%
Solution that retains neighborhood feel	4	1	57.1%	20.0%	41.7%
Neighborhood-level solution, but not structural solution	3	0	42.9%	0.0%	25.0%
Adds density efficiently	2	1	28.6%	20.0%	25.0%
We should be focusing on vertical density	2	0	28.6%	0.0%	16.7%
ADUs are not affordable to the most low-income	2	0	28.6%	0.0%	16.7%
Help homeowners afford property, build wealth	1	3	14.3%	60.0%	33.3%

Can provide affordable multigenerational living	1	2	14.3%	40.0%	25.0%
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Source: Author’s semi-structured interviews.

Note: responses are sorted by most frequent tenant responses.

One tenant expressed that in his experience, many unhoused people needed more than just a home, and that “the system is broken, but each of these homeless people needs to be addressed on an individual level. There's no blanket solution” (Int 7). Another expressed that ADUs are just a “band-aid” for lack of density and housing supply. Some tenants expressed concerns about ADUs not actually being affordable for the most vulnerable – an intuition reinforced by SCAG’s most recent ADU affordability analysis (SCAG, 2025). Others imagined a Los Angeles with vertical density and felt that ADUs were a way for the city to circumvent more substantial planning changes that would yield higher overall density, efficiency, and affordability. Respondents also saw value, however, in the capacity of ADUs to add non-invasive density to neighborhoods, and to increase unit count without changing the character of the neighborhood.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

In this section, I briefly recapitulate my main findings from my data analysis and structured interview analysis, and provide policy recommendations based on these findings. This study aimed to understand the impact of rapid ADU deregulation on the Los Angeles housing market, and how both tenants and homeowners experience those changes and challenges. Through legalization and deregulation by the state, ADUs are added to the market through the function of neoliberal self-help incentives for homeowners to become developers, allowing the state to renege on responsibilities to guarantee stable housing. Simultaneously, ADUs add vital

housing units through infill in a non-invasive manner that does not inherently require displacement from and redevelopment of existing property. For a city with the sprawling, single-family housing characteristics of Los Angeles, adding vertical density will be a challenge, but adding density through infill is a viable and increasingly popular solution to a dearth of affordable housing. This complex relationship leads to vastly differing outcomes across geographies of race, wealth, and neighborhood characteristics.

Summary of Main Findings

My regression analyses found that every new ADU permitted per tract was associated with a rent increase of \$2.85 in that tract, and that decreases in Black, AAPI, and Hispanic populations, compared to the white population, had a statistically significant negative relationship with the number of units per census tract. Additionally, descriptive analyses of the data showed that ADU permitting count varied dramatically between tracts – between 0 and 217 ADUs between 2017 and 2022 – indicating an unequal adoption of ADUs across the city. These findings support my hypothesis that ADU deregulation creates uneven access to, and benefit from, ADUs along socioeconomic lines, and that the state benefits from the unclear boundaries of legality that come with deregulation.

My structured interview analysis adds further richness to these quantitative findings. I organized my findings around three major modes of interaction: participant interaction with the regulatory regime, tenant experiences, and homeowner experiences.

An analysis of participants' interactions with the state's regulatory apparatus yielded a deeper understanding of the outcomes of legalizing and rapidly deregulating informal modes of housing: enforcement and benefits are fragmented. Participants experienced subjective, unclear, and uneven code enforcement that made the process of building an ADU more onerous and

daunting; additionally, this raised concerns over racially or geographically biased enforcement which is made possible by uneven application of codes. For tenants, selective enforcement of housing codes led to vastly unequal outcomes: an East Los Angeles resident living in Section 8 housing described the untenable conditions of the garage she lived in, legitimized by HUD funding. Other tenants in Eagle Rock had the opposite experience, with full amenities and privacy. In this way, the state operates through a selective enforcement of informality, blurring the line between what is formal and informal in a way that aligns with structures of power (Roy, 2009). The state is able not only to put the onus of building affordable units onto private homeowners, but, in some ways, to leave tenants responsible for finding tenable housing (Ramsey-Musolf, 2018) – even in housing specifically sanctioned by the federal government.

Similarly, ADU homeowners and tenants blur those lines through unpermitted renovations and additions, and through informal or semi-legal contracts with tenants, including family members. For homeowners, informal production occurs due needing to house family members, to lower costs, and to mitigate bureaucratic hassle – especially if changes to property are small. Often, these small changes are made to otherwise legal and permitted activities. Landlords operate informally as well in tight markets, making illegal amendments to rent contracts, or through informal agreements with family or community members. Informality must be understood, as the literature argues, as a complex process that operates outside of strict bounds of legality/illegality.

I suggest that ADU tenants are vulnerable to unique risks arising from the physical characteristics of ADUs and the interpersonal relationships with small landlords that ADUs often facilitate. Physical characteristics include potential proximity to landlord and spatial isolation. Additionally, because ADUs act as infill, they may be the only available units in crowded

neighborhoods where people are entrenched in their homes. Tenants also face sociospatial irregularity in regulation and must contend with state-sanctioned informality through that state's ignorance of poor living conditions.

Simultaneously, those who can afford ADUs in popular or crowded areas may need to be willing to pay above market rate, furthering a cycle of rising rents and property values that facilitates gentrification and displacement. However, for many, ADUs were a way to afford to live in otherwise expensive neighborhoods, and provided tenants with privacy and space. All of the Eagle Rock tenants I spoke to had very positive experiences living in ADUs. ADUs have the potential to provide high-quality housing at different affordability levels, but tenable living conditions must be available to renters in all neighborhoods. The ADU literature focuses mainly on homeowners, but if ADUs are to be endorsed as a way to increase affordable housing, more attention must be paid to the experiences of renters to ensure equitable access.

For homeowners, ADUs served multiple purposes: expanded personal space, family space, or space for rental. Multiple homeowners emphasized housing family members as a reason for building or acquiring an ADU; this can keep families housed together and relieve cost burdens on aging or young-adult family members as well as caretakers. Many homeowners also saw building a permitted ADU as a way to increase property value and collect extra rental income, including for the express purpose of covering a mortgage. However, many homeowners are hesitant to put ADUs on the market and become landlords, due in part to tenant protection and anti-eviction measures. This keeps much-needed units off the market.

The tension between homeowners' need to profit off of renting out property and renters' need for stable, affordable housing gets at a major crux of the contradiction behind neoliberal "self-help" housing policy: the state pushes the responsibility for providing and regulating

housing onto small homeowners who are burdened with their own expenses in a competitive housing market, and then those homeowners further push costs onto renters. I apply this schema only to single-property owners who live on the property and have an ADU: these homeowners are incentivized to build housing, but feel that it is unprofitable to rent it out at higher levels of affordability, or view ADUs as an investment from which to extract profit. This behavior is incentivized by the assetization of property in the housing market (Rolnik et al., 2024).

Recommendations

As the city has rapidly deregulated ADUs, the impacts and benefits have not been distributed equally. I offer four recommendations to increase the equitability of ADU proliferation and the impacts of legalization and deregulation.

Provide obligation-free resources and education for legalizing unpermitted ADUs

Although further research is required to fully understand the current scope of informal units in Los Angeles, scholars understand there to be higher rates of unpermitted units in denser, majority-BIPOC communities. Further, findings suggest that code enforcement is more intense in these neighborhoods (Greenberg et al., 2022), leading to hesitancy to begin the permitting process at all with unpermitted units, even if the city has a forgiving policy that allows most code violations for older ADUs to be waived. Thus, I recommend that the City of Los Angeles create an anonymous hotline to advise homeowners on their situations without fear of repercussions. The City of Milpitas has a “Safe ADU Legalization Program” aimed to encourage residents to legalize unpermitted ADUs, and includes an anonymous phone call with a Program Coordinator in this process. Residents can call the hotline and ask questions without an obligation to reveal names or addresses until they want to schedule an inspection (City of Milpitas, n.d.). This eases confusion about permitting laws and fees (which are mostly waived), allows homeowners to get

an understanding of the potential fees to pay and construction to do to become permitted, and allocates specific coordinators to provide expert consultation.

Provide targeted funding to BIPOC communities for ADU permitting and construction costs

To address ADU permitting disparities, and racial wealth disparities tied to historic redlining limiting BIPOC homeownership and contributing to ongoing spatial-racial segregation, I propose an ADU grant for low- to moderate- income homeowners to support the permitting, constructing, and/or conversion of garages or unpermitted units. Measures aimed to help low- and middle-income homeowners will especially benefit under-resourced BIPOC living in historically redlined neighborhoods. At a city level, this could be modeled after the now paused³¹ statewide California Housing Finance Agency (CalHFA) ADU grant that provided homeowners with up to \$40,000 for ADU pre-development and non-recurring costs associated with ADU construction (CDHCD, n.d.). For the City of Los Angeles, funding for such a project could be supported by various state-level grants that provide cities with money to support low-income homeowners, such as the CalHOME program (CDHCD, n.d.). It is vital to ensure that BIPOC homeowners have equal access to the benefits of ADU ownership, and/or to the resources to update unpermitted units to meet health and safety baseline requirements. Such a grant may be especially impactful in changing ADU ownership trends as upfront costs can pose significant barriers to low-resourced homeowners, and may stop them from beginning the process of legalizing, constructing, or converting ADUs (Greenberg et al., 2022; Casita Coalition, 2021).

Continue to simplify ADU permitting codes and provide educational resources

³¹ As of April 2026, the CalHFA grant was neither accepting more applicants nor confirmed to re-open due to running out of its over \$100 million budget.

Complexities in the City of Los Angeles' ADU permitting codes continue to cause confusion and apprehension for homeowners, who experienced hidden costs, confusing requirements, and inconsistent regulation.

The city should work towards creating a comprehensive permitting requirement overview that is accessible to the layperson – and that eliminates the subjective enforcement of inspectors, who may make judgment calls in line with racial, geographic, economic, or gender biases. The city should work to provide further education on potential surprise costs that could crop during construction, as well as standardize inspection and permitting assessment across the city.

Confusing permitting and building processes may be especially intimidating to low-resource, low-income homeowners, making them apprehensive to the process (Greenberg et al., 2022). Thus, local community organizations could partner with the city to provide further education about permitting processes and funding opportunities.

Subjective enforcement in the wake of deregulation can cause highly differentiated outcomes that are worse for marginalized groups; land-use expectations must be clear both to the regulatory bodies that enforce them, and to the people subjected to them.

Build mixed-income social housing

Ultimately, Los Angeles should attempt to move away from commodified housing, and away from policy that places the responsibility of providing affordable housing on to individuals. Deeply affordable and stable housing will not organically arise in a market structured for continuous growth and property appreciation. In lieu of a complete overturning of our market-based housing paradigm, I propose that the City of Los Angeles build mixed-income social housing. Social housing, according to the literature, is housing that is permanently affordable, accountable to community, and publicly owned (Suh, 2025).

I do not lay out a full proposal for a social housing model, but instead outline some of the key functions of Vienna’s system, and suggest potential funding sources for such a project. I defer to other scholars who have laid out more comprehensive plans for the implementation of such a model in Los Angeles (see Suh, 2025). Currently, the majority of housing subsidies in the United States go towards housing demand, and much less towards supply, but case studies such as Vienna’s social housing model can guide the creation of a stable affordable housing supply managed by the city, and thus not subject to market pressures. Vienna’s model relies on both government-owned and managed housing, and government partnership with private investors. Vienna uses a mixed-income model, so revenue from market-rate renters helps subsidize other units in the building, who receive affordable, rent-controlled, stable housing that is contingent on maintaining low earnings (PD&R Edge, n.d.). Further, the city is able to stabilize the housing market overall through the ownership and management of land, and provide stable, affordable housing to both low- and middle- income groups (Suh, 2025).

Measure ULA (United to House Los Angeles) seeks to do something very similar – also dubbed the “mansion tax,” this recently passed ballot measure taxes property sales of over \$5 million and funnels these funds into an affordable housing trust, of which 70% goes to the construction, preservation, and rehabilitation of affordable (Suh, 2025; Dreier, 2023). Though Measure ULA is facing backlash for lowering the sales of high-value property (Manville and Smith, 2025), its dedicated affordable housing trust can be a jumping-off point for implementing larger scale mixed-income social housing, and its passage by ballot demonstrates the political will for taxpayer-funded public housing.

Conclusion

ADUs can function as a beneficial, efficient means of adding extra housing units to a market that needs it – they are affordable for homeowners to build, and often affordable for renters. However, their implementation as a neoliberal market-driven apparatus to create new affordable units without cost to the state comes at a cost to individual homeowners and renters, who are put at odds with each other in a commodified housing market. Further, the state's legalization and deregulation of ADUs has led to disparate uptake in ADU permitting, suggesting that the benefits of owning – and living in – a permitted, and therefore marketable and regulatable, ADU are not equitably distributed. Specifically, my modeling suggests that there are fewer ADUs permitted in areas with higher concentrations of Black, Latine, and Asian residents, and that there are more permits in areas with higher median gross rents.

In this paper, I suggest that framing the legalization and deregulation of ADUs through a lens of informality can help bring to light the ways in which the state operates to sanction and criminalize certain uses of space along lines of power. The effects of deregulation thus must be examined critically, lest the benefits that ADUs bring come with the violence of displacement, racialized uneven code enforcement, and tenant exploitation.

This exploratory study cannot draw conclusive results about the relationship between ADU permitting, the housing market, and disparate impact, but its results suggest multiple avenues for future research. Multiple changes to my regression model could develop its accuracy further. First, in 2022, the ACS counted 1,557,083 total housing units in Los Angeles; out of these, 510,019 were owner-occupied, and I found 43,554 of them to be ADUs permitted since 2017. Until 2024, ADUs were required to be built on land with owner-occupied units, so I left that variable out of my regression in this paper, but it will be important to track the impact of removing owner-occupancy laws on rental outcomes pending data availability. Second, my

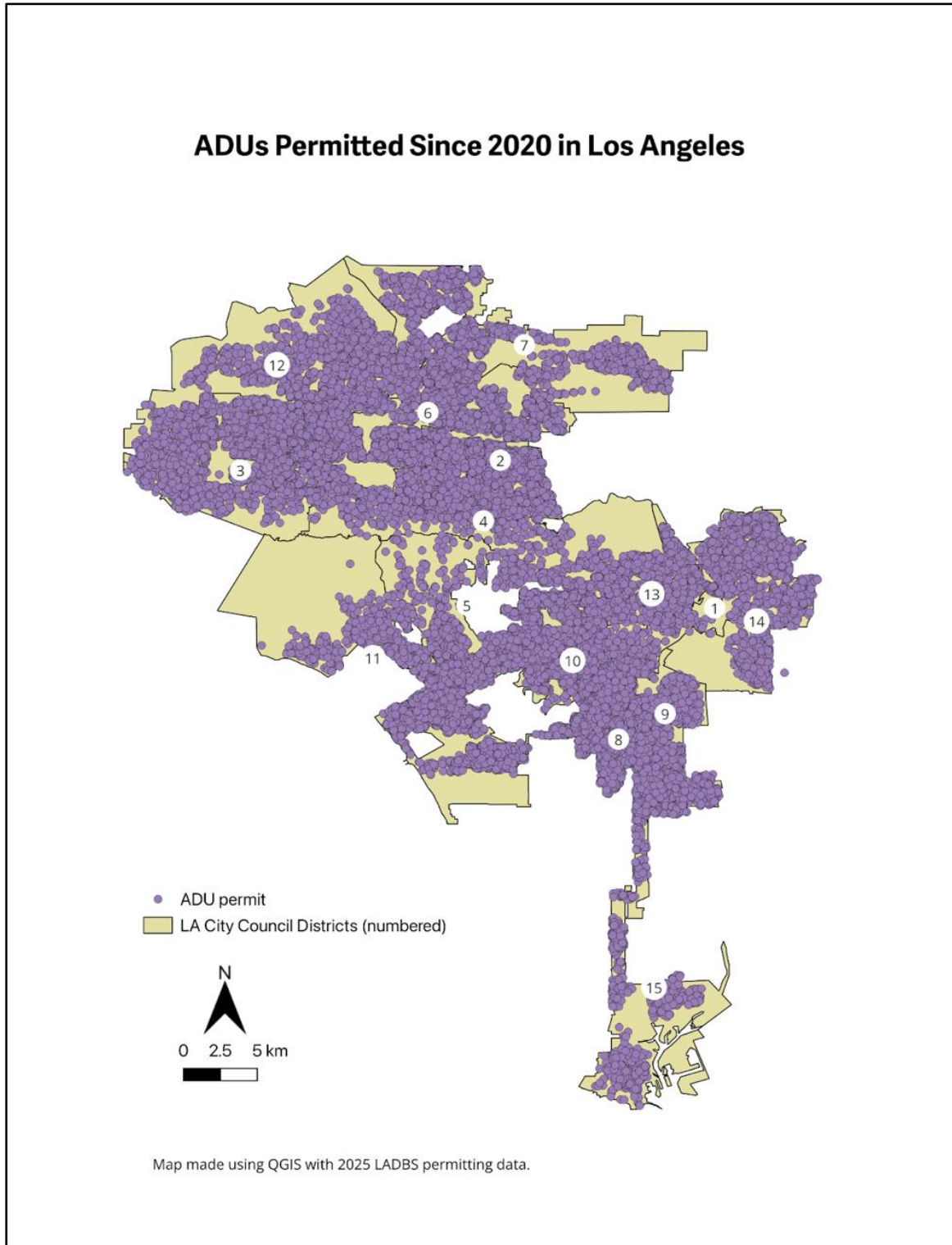
regression model predicting median house value is incomplete, as median house value data from the ACS is available only for owner-occupied units; a more complete analysis would include property values for both rental homes and owner-occupied homes. Third, experimenting with more control variables related to housing density, neighborhood zoning, and lot size could make the model more accurate and address the heteroskedasticity in my model.

Further research on ADUs more generally would be aided by a theoretical lens of informality and an assessment of the structural role of government in the production – and destruction – of adequate, accessible housing. I urge future research to continue to investigate the disparate experiences of ADU tenants and make further headway on understanding the unique vulnerabilities that they may face. Additionally, researchers must continue to investigate how many unpermitted units are going through processes of formalization, how many remain as part of informal markets and familial housing, and how to ensure that people in neighborhoods with fewer permitted ADUs are able to access the benefits of legal ADUs – be that through access to construction, or through renter protections and dignified, safe conditions in secondary units that are currently unpermitted. Understanding the inverse relationship between unpermitted units in dense BIPOC communities and recently permitted units in whiter, more expensive neighborhoods will be crucial to continuing to develop policy that forefronts racial and economic justice and ensures safe, dignified housing for all.

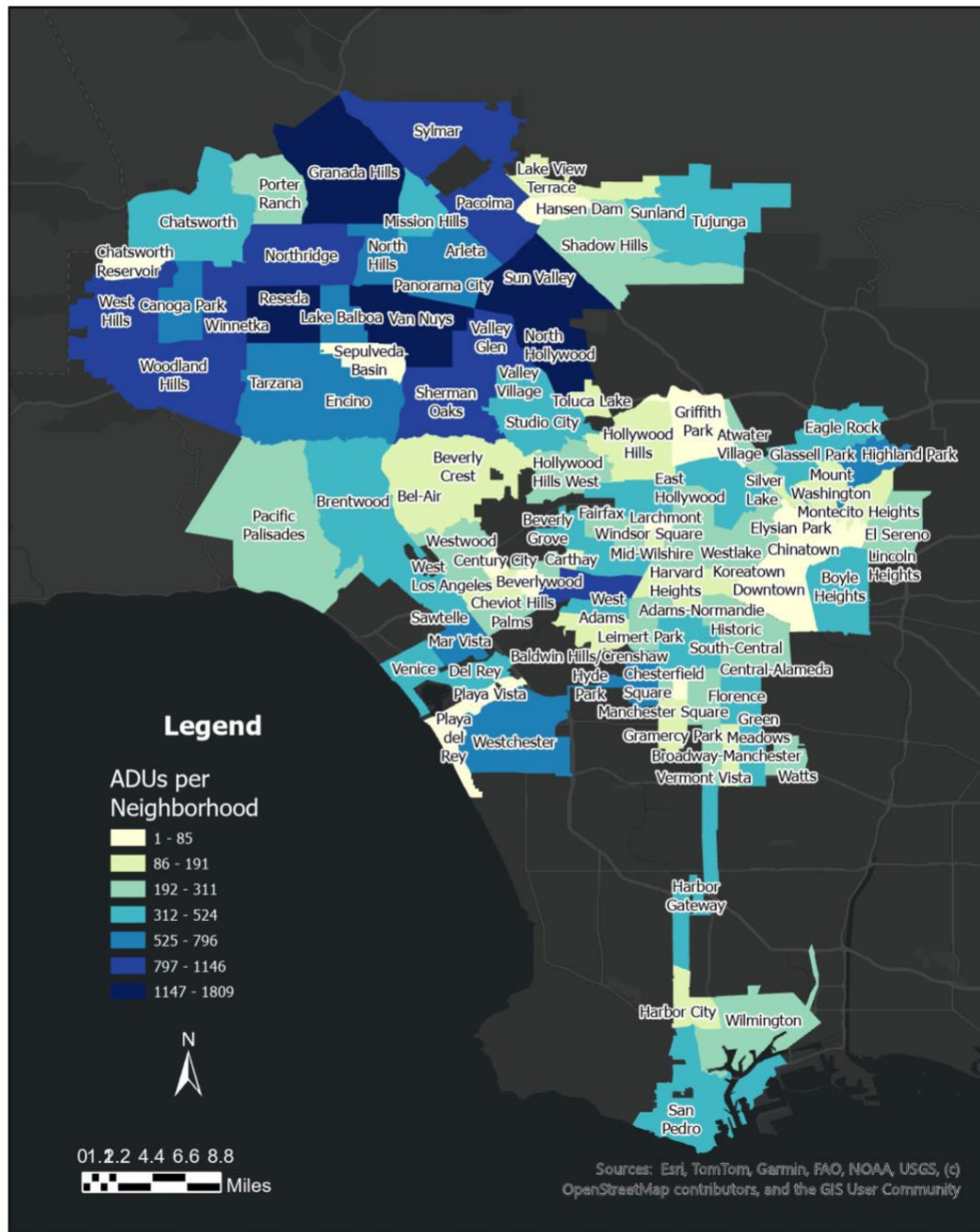
Appendices

Appendix 1: ADU Permitting Maps

Appendix 1a: ADUs permitted 2020 – 2025 by mapped by address. Map made by author.



Cumulative ADUs 2017 - January 2026 in the City of Los Angeles by Neighborhood



Source: 2017 - Jan 2026 LADBS ADU permitting data, compiled by author.

Appendix 3: Interview Question Guides

Tenant Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this interview!

I'm going to start with some questions about you and your life story. Feel free to skip any questions you don't feel comfortable answering - it won't impact your eligibility for the \$25 gift card!

1. Before we dive in, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where are you from, what do you do for a living, and how long have you lived in your current neighborhood?
2. If you feel comfortable sharing, approximately how much do you make per year?
 - a. How would you identify your racial/ethnic background if you feel comfortable sharing?
3. I'm going to ask a few questions about familial status. Do you live alone? If not, how many people do you live with and how are you connected to them?
4. Can you tell me about the relationship you have with other residents on the property, including your landlord?

Thank you for sharing! I have some more specific questions about your current living situation.

5. How did you find out about your ADU?
6. Can you tell me about the rental process? For example, did they do a background or credit check, did you pay a deposit, and do you have a formal rental agreement?
7. Can you tell me approximately how much you pay per month to live here and how your rent has changed over time?

I'm trying to understand what the experience is of people living in ADUs, and how much ADUs are actually acting as accessible, affordable housing.

8. Tell me about how you feel about your living situation – what are some things you do and don't enjoy about living in an ADU?
 - a. (follow-up): Do you feel like you pay a fair or affordable amount of rent?
9. Why did you decide to move here and where did you live previously? What made you move?
10. How secure do you feel in your current housing situation?
11. Finally, do you think that ADUs are a meaningful solution to the issue of affordable housing scarcity in Los Angeles?

Do you have anything else you'd like to add or share with me?

Thank you so much!

Homeowner Interview Guide

Thank you for participating in this interview!

I'm going to start with some questions about you and your life story. Feel free to skip any questions you don't feel comfortable answering - it won't impact your eligibility for the \$25 gift card!

1. Before we dive in, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where are you from and what do you do for a living?
2. Do you live on the same property as your ADU, and if so how long have you lived in the neighborhood?

Thank you for sharing! I have some more specific questions about your ADU situation.

3. How long have you had an ADU? Did you construct it? Did it come with the property?

This information won't be shared with anyone but my research advisor (and I can keep your name off the record):

4. Is your ADU permitted? If yes, can you describe to me the permitting process and any challenges you faced?
5. If your ADU is not permitted, can you tell me why? Are the permitting challenges related to cost, the paperwork, construction, etc.?
6. What challenges, if any, do you have with upkeep of the ADU? How much do you interact with inspectors and the city?
7. Next, I'd like to talk about *why* you have an ADU on your property. Can you tell me about what motivated you to have an ADU – was it because of extra space or income, or city incentives?
8. How do you find tenants for your ADU – is it through a service or a site like Craigslist or Zillow?
9. How much do you charge for rent and do you have a formal rental agreement?
10. Finally, do you think that ADUs are a meaningful solution to the issue of housing scarcity in Los Angeles? What about affordable housing availability?

Do you have anything else you'd like to add or share with me?

Thank you so much!

Appendix 3: Other Regression Models

In addition to the regression models included in this paper, I constructed two further models to understand how total ADUs per tract was associated with change in median gross rent and median home value. The models were ultimately excluded from my analysis due to coefficient interpretability challenges – all of the independent variables were change from 2017 – 2022. Though ultimately discarded as models, ADUs stayed stable as having a statistically significant positive association with median gross rent, and a statistically insignificant association with median house value.

Regression output of total ADUs (2017 – 2022) as Predictor of Median Gross Rent (2017 – 2022)

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	1,086
Model	67947704.7	10	6794770.47	F(10, 1075)	=	20.25
Residual	360778211	1,075	335607.638	Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.1585
				Adj R-squared	=	0.1507
Total	428725916	1,085	395139.093	Root MSE	=	579.32

MedianGrossRent	Coefficient	Std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
ADU_cumu	5.898943	.7630474	7.73	0.000	4.401712	7.396174
pov_mean_change	530.9085	177.6722	2.99	0.003	182.2848	879.5322
Pop_change	.2771037	.034922	7.93	0.000	.2085808	.3456267
Black_prop_change	1774.506	395.8874	4.48	0.000	997.7066	2551.306
AmerIndAlNat_prop_change	170.6544	2878.762	0.06	0.953	-5477.975	5819.284
Asian_prop_change	708.041	392.0143	1.81	0.071	-61.15899	1477.241
NatHawPacIsla_prop_change	-3543.009	2679.799	-1.32	0.186	-8801.238	1715.22
OtherRace_prop_change	3657.035	1289.982	2.83	0.005	1125.868	6188.203
TwoOrMoreRaces_prop_change	2280.957	619.7407	3.68	0.000	1064.919	3496.996
HispanicLatino_prop_change	374.3619	271.3373	1.38	0.168	-158.0488	906.7727
_cons	1939.196	27.75447	69.87	0.000	1884.737	1993.655

Regression output of total ADUs (2017 – 2022) as Predictor of Median House Value (2017 – 2022)

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	1,003
Model	1.7575e+13	10	1.7575e+12	F(10, 992)	=	11.31
Residual	1.5411e+14	992	1.5536e+11	Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.1024
				Adj R-squared	=	0.0933
Total	1.7169e+14	1,002	1.7135e+11	Root MSE	=	3.9e+05

MedianHouseValue	Coefficient	Std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
ADU_cumu	1010.98	540.444	1.87	0.062	-49.56437	2071.525
pov_mean_change	715161.5	129900.5	5.51	0.000	460250.1	970072.8
Pop_change	86.04411	25.51552	3.37	0.001	35.97353	136.1147
Black_prop_change	858205.2	283540.3	3.03	0.003	301797.6	1414613
AmerIndAlNat_prop_change	260288.6	2079358	0.13	0.900	-3820157	4340734
Asian_prop_change	776280.6	283653.1	2.74	0.006	219651.5	1332910
NatHawPacIsla_prop_change	-881961.4	1908366	-0.46	0.644	-4626860	2862937
OtherRace_prop_change	2976481	809142.1	3.68	0.000	1388655	4564308
TwoOrMoreRaces_prop_change	2094898	435744.1	4.81	0.000	1239812	2949984
HispanicLatino_prop_change	125972.2	195620.8	0.64	0.520	-257906	509850.4
_cons	955838.9	20407.82	46.84	0.000	915791.4	995886.4

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