

### Isla Vista's Housing Crisis, Explained

Strolling through Isla Vista, California on a sunny weekend, it is common to see students lounging on their front lawns, playing drinking games in their driveways, or hosting band practices in their garages. However, at closer inspection one might notice that the garage is converted into a bedroom for two or three students, the driveway is packed with six plus cars, and older community members are collecting the empty cans and bottles on bikes for added income. The signs of Isla Vista's housing crisis are highly visible, if you know where to look.

The one square mile neighborhood, nicknamed "IV" by most residents, that straddles UC Santa Barbara is a paradise in some respects; any home is less than a ten-minute walk to breathtaking views of the Pacific and roads dominated by bicyclists and pedestrians. However, the run-down beachfront apartments, mostly developed in the 1970s, are increasingly neglected by landlords while rents skyrocket. In 2020, some of the most pressing problems are overcrowding, a lack of affordable housing, and the predatory practices by property owners.

With a complicated history sometimes marked by civil disobedience and rowdy partying, Isla Vista has not always maintained the best outward reputation. It has remained a problematic area for the University and Santa Barbara County, that no one has seemed capable or willing to solve. Ultimately, many of Isla Vista's deepest issues stem from a lack of accountability from the university and from the property owners.



View of the Pacific from Del Playa St.

### *How Did Isla Vista Become so Overpopulated in the First Place?*

To understand this complex issue, one must first understand its roots. UCSB was first opened in 1954, after it was donated to the University of California by the Marine Corps, who used it as an air facility during WWII. (Gault-Williams, 13) Even during its inception, stakeholders were already at odds regarding how to zone the surrounding land, and the University did not advocate in the best interest of its adjacent neighborhood. The UC Regents considered annexing Isla Vista for student housing, but ultimately decided to leave the neighborhood open for development, which some argue was “the most trajectory-setting choice in the community’s early history.” (“UCSB’s Adopted Child”) In 1966, a committee, which included a number of local developers, created a custom zoning plan that allowed for larger apartment buildings and fewer required parking spots than the rest of the county. (Gault-

Williams, 15) As committee member and Isla Vista realtor Jack Schwartz stated, “these kids arrive with a backpack [and] a surfboard.” (Gault-Williams, 15)

Today, a developer’s involvement in such matters may seem like a conflict of interest, but at the time, the County Board of Supervisors did not step in. After the committee’s new zoning plan, what was originally envisioned as a small university with single family homes quickly ballooned into a full-blown university, with 13,000 students by 1968. (Gault-Williams, 16) If we look at the crowded homes and apartments common in Isla Vista today, much of this problem is due to the original zoning decisions. The residences were built with much higher densities than current zoning regulations allow (IV Master Plan, 4-44).

#### *How Did the University Step In?*

The University has struggled to adequately address housing concerns for decades. In 1970, in the wake of civil disobedience and police brutality, the UC Regents compiled a committee to make recommendations to UCSB on how to improve Isla Vista. The document, called “The Trow Report,” gave in-depth criticism of the University for its negligence toward issues occurring in Isla Vista. One main theme was that UCSB needed to build a stronger relationship with its neighborhood. It said, “The general attitude of the University as perceived by the students, as well as several members of the administration has been a doctrine summed up as: Isla Vista is Isla Vista and the University is the University.” (Isla Vista Free Press, 12) Some of the biggest issues authors identified were housing and overpopulation; they advocated for the creation of a standard lease, developed collaboratively with the University, students, and Isla Vista property owners (Isla Vista Free Press, 13). However, no such document ever came to fruition. Further, the Report stated, “the university can no longer ignore, if it ever could, the

conditions under which the bulk of its students live and spend the greater part of their time while at the University.” (Braasch 1)

In response to the Report, the UC Chancellor committed \$683,000 to fund a variety of projects (Braasch 3). However, throughout the next ten years, community members expressed their disappointment that UCSB did not do an adequate job implementing these recommendations (Tedone 3). Since the original Report, there have been 8 similar plans for Isla Vista and UCSB, yet the same issues plague the community (Potthoff). In subsequent Long-Range Development Plans, released every 10 years by UCSB, these recommendations were not incorporated, and have remained contentious in the local community still today.

Although Isla Vista is instrumental to the success of the University, UCSB does not have the responsibility to improve off-campus housing conditions.

#### *How Do Property Owners Fit into the Problem?*

While historical and administrative shortfalls with housing in Isla Vista should not be overlooked, property owners have also played a massive role in the issue. Further, they have largely not been held accountable for their problematic practices.

Local families have repeatedly faced evictions in the past decade, most notably in two mass evictions in 2006 and 2012. In just these two cases, more than 70 families were forced to relocate in total (“I.V. Uprooted”). In the case of the 2006 eviction, families evicted received only 30 days notice instead of the legal requirement of 90 days for Section 8 housing. They were also offered conflicting information in the English and Spanish versions of the document (“I.V. Uprooted”). In these instances, they were offered little recourse; when they confronted the property owner, families were only offered additional time for relocation on a case-by-case basis

(“New Developments”). For families who are low-income and sometimes Spanish-speaking, they are disadvantaged by the local housing market.

Students, too, struggle to hold property owners accountable, and often choose to let their grievances go, as they do not have the time and resources to take action. In 2019, one property owner was sued in 18 separate suits by Isla Vista tenants who claimed that the company was unjustly withholding security deposits (“Over 40 Former Tenants Sued Isla Vista Luxury Living”). In this case, the tenants won. Although reason to celebrate, this case also shed light on a bigger issue at hand - if 46 tenants had these experiences from just one company, how many more people are experiencing similar problems? Much of the student population is already burdened by rent and living year-to-year on different leases with different companies. For some, taking their landlords to court over a few hundred dollars may seem like a difficult process with little reward.

Conversely, these local property owners operate in a community with one of the highest concentrations of people in California (62.5 people per acre), and with vacancy levels as low as 6% in 2014 (“No Vacancy in Isla Vista”). If students choose not to rent with a landlord, there will always be an “insatiable demand for new housing” (IV Master Plan 4-42). This dynamic does not incentivize property owners to provide quality service and housing to their renters; they can capitalize on the shortage. One 2007 report offers a framework for incentivizing housing improvements, such as low-interest loans or property owners if they develop (IV Master Plan 4-56). However, if the demand is so high that they can continue raising rents while their homes deteriorate, there is little reason to improve conditions.

*Is There Hope for Change?*

The establishment of local governance in 2016, called the Isla Vista Community Services District (IVCSD) has offered hope for the community of Isla Vista (“How We Got Here”). Until this point, there was no representative government entity, which had been a goal for decades. In 2018, Measure R was passed, establishing a utility-user tax for the IVCSD to fund changes in Isla Vista (“How We Got Here”). Further, the success of lawsuits such as the Isla Vista Luxury Living case prove that legal recourse is possible. However, the community will need institutional commitment moving forward. Firstly, the University must stick to its framework, outlined every ten years in a new development plan, and make its plans a reality. In addition, the County must impose more regulations on property owners to support ethical business, and further incentivize making property improvements. As community members we can speak out, but this is a deep, decades-long problem; without the commitment from all stakeholders, change will not be possible.



Measure R Advocates Celebrating

*What Can I Do?*

Educating oneself on tenant's rights is the first step for community members concerned about housing. Isla Vista Tenants Union, located at 6550 Pardall Road, is an organization that provides education and advocacy for all residents regarding housing, and also offers many resources on its website, [ivtu.as.ucsb.edu](http://ivtu.as.ucsb.edu). It provides legal assistance and advice about landlord negotiation. For UCSB Students, the University & Community Housing Services (UCHS) office can help students go over their leases, and offers "Housing 101" events in the residence halls on campus. The more informed the community is, the better individuals can advocate for themselves and others.

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