An LA Housing Project Is Evicting Residents and Making Plans for Gentrification | VICE United States

vice.com · by Daniel Ross

(Left to right) Unknown girl; Raymond Martinez, 4; Elizabeth Martinez, 3; and Jose Martinez, 8

As if the health threats that come with living in spitting distance of a lead- and arsenic-contaminated industrial site aren't enough of a worry, the impoverished
residents of the Jordan Downs housing development have an even more pressing concern: eviction. With an imminent $1 billion redevelopment project slated for the area—one that will see the current 700 units razed and replaced by approximately 1,800 new mixed-income apartments—anxiety is high among Jordan Downs residents and their advocates. They believe the poorest are being strong-armed out of the development to pave way for tenants who will be better able to pay market-rate prices when the project is complete—a scenario that has blighted the legacies of countless other urban redevelopment projects.

“By going around door-to-door talking to tenants, what I’ve found is that they’ve noticed a definite rise in the number of legal notices and evictions at Jordan Downs,” said Thelmy Perez, housing-collective coordinator at Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN). Later that day, following a tip from a resident, Thelmy and I spoke to a mother faced with a Sophie’s Choice between her son and her entire family.

Initially when we knocked on her door, no one answered. As we walked away, the latch clicked and a cautious shadowy figure appeared behind a heavy metal screen door. Thelmy explained in Spanish that she helps residents who have been threatened with eviction, and the woman eagerly ushered us in.

While far from lavish, Maria Espinoza’s unit was immaculately clean and tidy with a glistening floor, clearly mopped a thousand times. The walls were decorated with certificates and prizes awarded to her four children, some of whom had gone through the LAPD Cadet youth program. It’s a home that spoke of a good mother, a diligent mother—the sort that spends hours waiting at after-school programs for her kids. But if Espinoza, 37, doesn’t soon kick her 17-year-old son out of their home of seven years, she and her three other children will all face eviction.
Daniel Encisco's LAPD Cadet certificate

“About three weeks ago, the police called: ‘Are you Daniel’s mother?’” began Maria, in Spanish. Her son, Daniel Encisco, an LAPD cadet, had been arrested for being among a group of people smoking marijuana. Police didn’t find anything incriminating on him, but they said that they saw him toss something aside when they approached. Daniel is on probation for a former marijuana violation. The police searched Maria’s home but found nothing. “He never smokes at home,” she said, before adding that no charges have been brought against him. And yet Maria said that, on the condition that she throw out her son, the police promised to help her secure scholarships for her daughters and help her keep her home. “If he’s here, I know where he is, and I can stop him from doing anything bad. He’s still only a minor,” she said of her fear of Daniel's living elsewhere.

To compound her worries, there’s the issue of Maria’s rent. In October of last year,
her tires were slashed—an expense that depleted her meager budget. The housing manager agreed that, because Maria has always been so reliable, it would be OK if she paid her rent later than normal. But when Maria made to pay her rent, the same manager told her that the rules had suddenly changed and that she was being penalized for being late. Months later, she’s still trying to resolve the issue. Every month she takes out a money order to pay her rent, but she said the manager won’t accept it until they’ve decided her punishment: “I haven’t received any paperwork from them, nothing, explaining what I need to do.”

Maria’s story isn’t unique. Sarah Martinez faces eviction at the end of February.

“They told me I had no choice but to agree to a voluntary move-out agreement,” said Sarah, on the walk back to her home through the units, the residents’ meeting over. Sarah has lived at Jordan Downs with her five children for nearly a year and a half: “It’s the first stable home me and my children have had.” She admitted that she’s far from faultless, but her story paints the picture of a victim of circumstance more than a deliberate wrongdoer.

In October of last year, a police search of her home uncovered drug paraphernalia belonging to her boyfriend, though she said that no police report was filed and the officer didn’t confiscate the offending item. In addition, a friend she invited over was involved in an investigation for car theft, and Sarah failed to disclose on her housing application a misdemeanor conviction for shoplifting (even though the application only required that felony convictions be listed). She said that because of these incidents, the Housing Authority gave her an ultimatum: either sign a voluntary move-out agreement so that she could remain at Jordan Downs for a few more months, or face an enforced eviction at the end of 30 days. “They said that because of my conviction, I wasn’t allowed an informal hearing.”

“This is a clear violation of her rights,” said Thelmy. “Everyone has the right to due
process, and that includes an informal hearing.” Indeed, Sarah felt so badgered into signing that she wrote at the bottom of the form, “I’m surrendering my unit. I’m canceling the informal hearing due to the housing manager telling me that I cannot have an informal hearing.”

Since speaking with Sarah, she and her five children have preempted the eviction and are believed to have moved back into her mother and sister’s two-bedroom apartment in North Hollywood. She can’t be reached, however—her phone is disconnected.

Thelmy believes that these cases are emblematic of a much broader system of tenant harassment. The Housing Authority has recently started clamping down on offenses they previously let slide, and more residents are receiving notices for petty mistakes, Thelmy said. She pointed to statistics taken from a survey she conducted last September: Of 71 Jordan Downs tenants interviewed, 16 of them (22 percent) had received some kind of legal or eviction notice. Many of them, she added, were largely unaware of their rights as tenants.
Thelmy Perez with a band of Jordan Downs residents, including Sarah Martinez, second right

According to Tanuka Loha, program director of Human Right to Housing at the National Economic & Social Rights Initiative, what residents are experiencing at Jordan Downs is a familiar scenario when it comes to urban redevelopment.

“When you have these one-for-one replacement type agreements, one-for-one doesn’t mean like-for-like,” said Tanuka, perched on the lip of the small traffic island at the center of Windward Circle at Venice Beach, Los Angeles, after a day of protests over the Homeless Bill of Rights. Around her, a community of activists settled down for the night with bowls of soup. “There is a real climate of fear among the residents. Somebody we spoke with who signed a voluntary move-out agreement did so because she was worried about potential reprisals if she didn’t. That’s a very serious thing to be saying if you’re a public-housing resident. This is
your home; you should feel secure in it. There should be security of tenure, but there isn’t.”

Tanuka pointed to a number of bureaucratic obstacles residents have faced as a series of legal notices has mottled the neighborhood. An on-site attorney from a nonprofit legal firm was brought in to advocate for residents going through eviction, but was removed from his post. Language barriers have been another problem. “There were folks who would go in to speak to someone official about the situations they were facing, and there would be no one there who could speak Spanish. You’re talking about an area where 60 percent of residents are Latino.”

Doug Guthrie, the Housing Authority’s president and CEO, disputed the claims. He said that the plans clearly state that none of the residents will be forced to move as long as they stay in good standing as tenants. “It’s not the highest eviction rate of all our various housing developments, and it's not the lowest," he said. According to statistics provided by the Housing Authority, for the whole of 2013, Jordan Downs had the fifth highest percentage of evictions per unit, with 14 evictions from 700 units, a rate of 2 percent. The development with the highest rate, Imperial Courts, had 15 evictions from 490 units, 3.1 percent. “There’s absolutely no indication that Jordan Downs has been treated any differently to any other site," he said. "In fact, I’d say it’s the exact opposite.”

As proof of his point, Doug highlighted a number of programs and services that were introduced a couple of years ago to prepare Jordan Downs’s residents for the redevelopment process, including credit counseling, educational services, job preparedness, language courses, and social service screenings. “We’ve invested more there than the rest of the housing authority combined. We have no interest in doing any sort of accelerated evictions at Jordan Downs. We’re trying hard to be the least disruptive to our residents. Our goal is to ensure no displacement.”
Thelmy said that she asked the Housing Authority for figures further back than 2013 in order to confirm conclusively whether the eviction rate has increased from years past, but they told her that they did not have the data. Similarly, when I asked for stats going back a few years, I was given figures only for 2013. Thelmy also believes that, were it not for the work of LA CAN advocating for residents, especially from June onward, the eviction rate would have been higher.

“I say this because in the first six months of last year, Jordan Downs had the highest eviction rate of any development in the whole city,” said Thelmy, spotlighting more figures presented to her by the Housing Authority. Jordan Downs had the second highest number of cases of legal action between January and June of 2013—38, compared to 69 for Nickerson Gardens. Yet Jordan Downs had the highest rate of evictions in the same period—nine in six months. Nickerson Gardens had seven.

“It speaks to all the problems with accountability and transparency,” said Thelmy. “The idea that if you’ve got an organization working with residents, it’s not transparent when they don’t give data on grounds that they haven’t run a report. They have the data, so why not run a report?”

At the nucleus of the issue concerning evictions is a caveat (either vague or concrete, depending upon whom you ask) as to whether or not a tenant will be rehoused under the new development: the imperative of remaining "in good standing.” According to a leaflet distributed to tenants last fall, residents will be considered in good standing if they abide by 15 obligations listed on their rental agreement, “at minimum.” Among the 15 obligations, tenants cannot display signs or advertisements of any kind on their residence or housing estate. Residents must also ensure that all persons under their control do not “disturb the rights of other residents of the development to the peaceful enjoyment of their residences or the public areas.” Not listed among the 15 tenets is rent payments—but the
leaflet states that “rent shall be paid on or before the first day of each calendar month.”

Fernando Gaytan, senior attorney at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA), is one of those who believe the caveat is vague in its requirements of tenants. “You have this particular population under the microscope, and what you’ve got people saying to them is, ‘You’re going to be OK as long as you’re in good standing.’ But what does good standing mean, exactly? Why and according to whom? Is it different than before? You ask yourself these questions, and it’s clear why tenants might fear displacement.”

Fernando has been helping tenants from Jordan Downs for a matter of months, but during that time, some residents have come to LAFLA expressing concern about the arbitrary delivery of legal notices. “They’ve seen their neighbors get snagged for the littlest things, like trash that may have been blown to their door from elsewhere or for being behind in their rent by a nominal amount, like 54 cents.”

LAFLA has a history of representing displaced tenants. The foundation helped people move from Ujima Village—a redevelopment project that is now a ghost town where 300 units were built on a heavily contaminated site formerly used to store oil tanks. Fernando’s experience allows him the luxury of foresight, and he fears that many of the same issues that have marred other redevelopment projects are percolating through the cracks at Jordan Downs.

“In this particular development, they’re saying that tenants are going to be rehoused one-for-one, but when you really press them on it and when you really get down to the details, there is no one-for-one replacement of public housing, and the currently proposed funding structure will exclude at least 125 families and likely more,” said Fernando. "At the end of the day, they’ll say that we guarantee
you one-for-one replacement, but ultimately, lo and behold, not everyone currently there will qualify for the units they plan to create.”

As for Maria, foresight is a luxury she would love but can’t afford. For now, Maria hasn’t agreed to kick out her son—she’s waiting on his March court date before she makes her decision.

@1danross

Recommended

vice.com by Daniel Ross