

# Why Don't People Who Can't Afford Housing Just Move Where It's Cheaper?

*California is in fact losing population to domestic migration, but for many people, the calculation is more about social networks than economics.*

*New York Times, by Emily Badger, May 15, 2018*

SAN FRANCISCO — Many San Francisco renters I met while reporting an article on affordable housing lotteries had responded to the region's housing crisis by putting up with great discomfort: They crammed in with family; they split apartments with strangers. Some even lived out of their cars.

Why, lots of readers wanted to know, didn't they simply move away instead?

Many have. High-cost California has long been losing population to domestic migration, particularly its poorer residents (who head to cheaper places like Arizona, Nevada and Texas).

And in the country's most expensive metropolitan areas, according to an analysis this year by Issi Romem, BuildZoom's chief economist, the people moving in have significantly higher incomes than those moving out. That's consistent with the notion that those who can't afford expensive places are leaving them, changing the makeup of these regions over time.

But for the poorest renters — making less than 30 percent of a region's median income — there is a shortage of affordable housing virtually everywhere in America. Moving, itself is expensive, isn't guaranteed to solve their problem. A cheaper housing market may indicate that a region has fewer jobs. And low-skilled jobs in a city like San Francisco pay some of the highest wages in the country; the minimum wage here is twice what it is in much of America, a real benefit that weighs against the high housing costs.

For many, however, the calculation about whether to leave is not primarily about economics.

Before readers raised the issue, I posed the same question to Mya Mack, whom I first met at the public lottery last fall for Natalie Gubb Commons, a new 95-unit affordable housing development in San Francisco that drew 6,580 applicants.

She had been looking for housing since the summer, when she left an affordable apartment for a relationship that didn't work out. She and her 7-year-old daughter, Jaiya, then moved in with her mother, a niece and two nephews — back into the now-crowded house where she was raised.

Ms. Mack, who works as a phlebotomist, applied to every housing opportunity she could find. She checked the city's online affordable housing site on her phone as reflexively as she looked at Facebook. She questioned construction workers when she saw what looked like new apartments rising around town. But when I asked if she had ever considered moving somewhere much cheaper, that solution was off the table.

"It would be foolish for me to do that, because I would be struggling," she said. "Not financially. But I would be struggling with my daughter. Who's going to babysit? And I'm a single mom."

She envisioned the situation from Jaiya's perspective. "My daughter would hate it," she said.

Ms. Mack grew up the youngest in a close-knit family of five sisters in the Ingleside neighborhood on the southern edge of San Francisco. Family members still live near one another and see each other almost daily. Jaiya goes to school with her cousins. Ms. Mack takes her to the same park where she played as a child.

People who struggle financially often have valuable social networks — family to help with child care, acquaintances who know of jobs. The prospect of dropping into, say, Oklahoma or Georgia would mean doing without the good income *and* the social support. Those intangible connections that keep people in places with bad economies also keep people in booming regions where the rent is too high.

For Ms. Mack, her mother's home was overcrowded but happy. She did not have a bedroom door to close for privacy, but she had enough that she and her daughter could afford to keep waiting for their own home.

“A lot of people don't have family they can call and say, ‘Excuse me, can I live there for a year?’” Ms. Mack said. “I count my blessings all the time because I do have somewhere to go.”

*Emily Badger writes about cities and urban policy for The Upshot from the San Francisco bureau. She's particularly interested in housing, transportation and inequality — and how they're all connected. She joined the Times in 2016 from The Washington Post. [@emilymbadger](https://twitter.com/emilymbadger)*