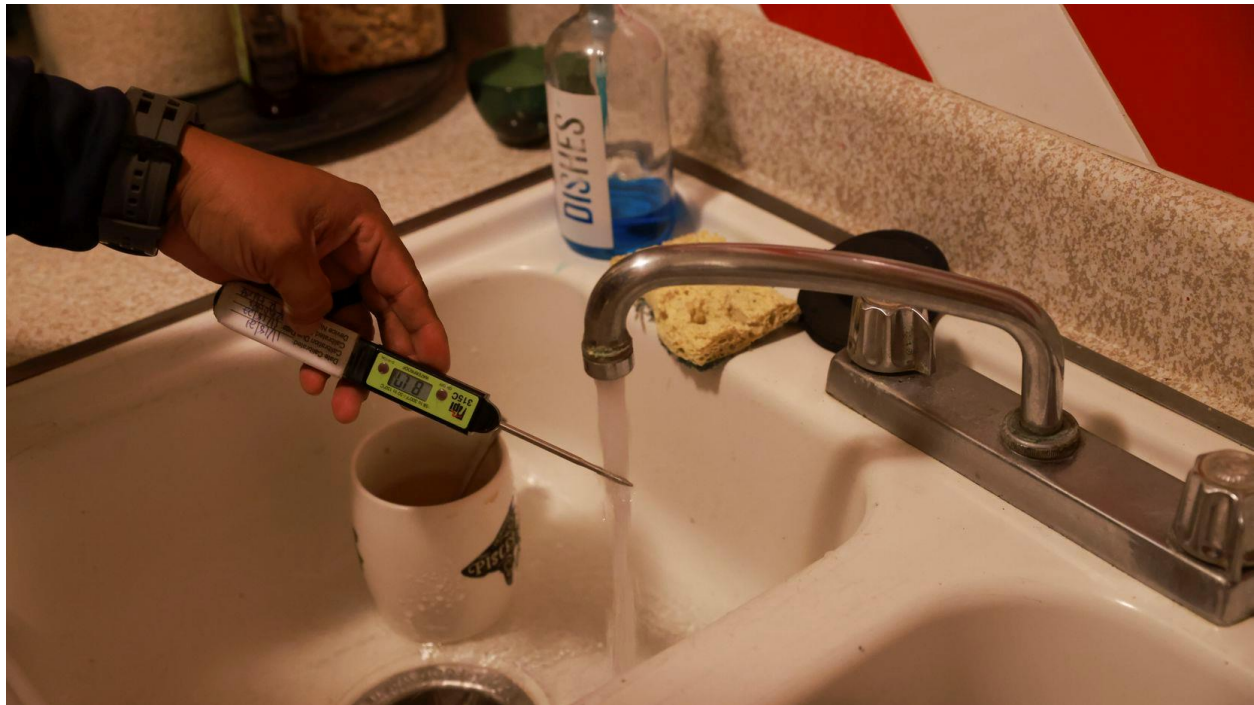


Some say Dallas landlords use this city policy to game the system

The city says that keeping older information is not relevant because what matters is the current status of properties.



Dallas retains property inspection records for apartment complexes for only three years. Here a code inspector for the City of Dallas checks the water temperature inside an apartment July 22, 2022, at a complex in Dallas.(Rebecca Slezak / Staff Photographer)

By [María Ramos Pacheco](#)

6:01 AM on Jun 9, 2023

Dallas retains property [inspection records for apartment complexes for only three years](#), and that has some urban policy experts, elected officials and community leaders concerned that tenants may be suffering from a lack of data needed to properly police rentals.

Discarding inspection reports that determine whether multifamily housing is dangerous or below minimum standards leaves tenants without needed leverage to force repairs and improvements, the leaders and experts say.

“It absolutely disadvantages tenants because they’re unable to look up the address and they’re unable to see what happened in that place, what the state of the building is like in terms of code

violations from previous years,” said Robin Bartram, author of the book [*Stacked Decks: Building Inspectors and the Reproduction of Urban Inequality*](#).

Bartram, an assistant sociology professor [at Tulane University](#), spent years studying the impact of the decisions and actions of code officers in Chicago, and how this affects housing inequality among the most vulnerable populations.

“It amazes me that in a big city like Dallas, they don’t keep longer this kind of information and also that information isn’t, or at least aspects of it aren’t publicly accessible because that’s kind of the norm in other places,” Bartram said.

Related: [‘We are not scared anymore’: Dallas tenants counter ‘unbearable’ conditions at apartments](#)

Dallas code officials say they’re following their policy. The City of Dallas says that keeping older information is not relevant because what matters is the current state of properties.

“What truly matters is the current condition of the property. Things change,” Code Compliance Administrator Ariel Garcia said. “If we had a property that we inspected in 2012, 2015, 2017, and 2020 and 2022, and never failed an inspection, but if the property is falling apart now, I’m not really concerned about what scored in 2012. My biggest concern is the current status.”

Garcia said a property could be doing well, but a change of ownership and new management can turn things around, leading to failed inspections or an increase in complaints.

In Texas, the office of the [Texas State Library and Archives Commission](#) is in charge of setting the retention schedules for local government agencies and approving these schedules before they get adopted. But ultimately, each local government can decide how long records are kept if they comply with the minimum time the state requires.

The city’s [retention schedule for public records](#) was last updated in 2020 and allows each city agency to have its own retention policy.

[Chapter 27 of the City of Dallas Code](#) establishes minimum property standards to ensure that all “residential buildings, structures, and premises are safe, sanitary, and fit for tenants.” The code requires that property owners register their property annually and pay \$6 per unit. Graded inspections are performed indoors and outdoors at least once every three years; a [70 or lower score means failing](#). The maximum is 100.

Bartram said that for best practices, cities should keep inspections and any other reports related to the conditions of an apartment for at least five years to get a more comprehensive idea of the status of the building and how management operates. Still, she is aware that laws vary across the country.

In Chicago, [tenants can look up each apartment complex online by address](#), and get a list of code violations and the reports from every inspection dating back to 2006.

Houston conducts multifamily inspections every four years. This city keeps its inspection logs for five years, according to the Houston Multi-family Department.

The city of Arlington conducts multifamily inspections every year and has kept data from graded inspections going back to 2010. It is available for public review upon request. [Records dating back to 2017 are available](#) through the city's online portal.

Related:[Short-term rentals: Dallas City Council to vote on new rules next week](#)

As of now, the city of Dallas' website has the graded inspection data from 2021 available.

Berry Lachman, a [Dallas Area Interfaith](#) leader, was involved in the creation of Chapter 27 in 2016. He said that not having enough data for at least five to 10 years can play against good landlords who are following the rules, but ultimately, the most affected by shorter retention periods are tenants.

"I understand that the present status is absolutely key," he said. "But suppose the city is trying to identify who chronic offenders are and prove their chronicle persistent and they don't have more than three years' worth of data. How can they make a case against these owners and see patterns on certain buildings over long periods?"

Bartram said that with the current market for affordable housing, specifically in big cities like Dallas, property owners are aware of the advantage of the city's not keeping records longer. It opens the door for landlords to game the system by quickly buying and selling properties like apartment complexes that have code violations so they can profit without paying fines or fixing units.

The Apartment Association of Greater Dallas declined to comment.

But Alexandra Alvarado, Director of Marketing and Education at [The American Apartment Owners Association](#), said that this is not always the case since most property owners want to have a good record and keep their properties.

"The whole purpose of the program [multifamily inspections] is to identify repeat offenders. So unless a landlord is going to that extent, I really don't see how it would affect them negatively," Alvarado said. "In general, we are not really concerned about how long these records are kept because most of the property owners want to do the right thing."

Dallas City Council member [Carolyn King Arnold from South Oak Cliff's District 4](#) agrees with Garcia and Bartram. She said rapidly changing ownership makes it harder to bring a landlord in front of a judge.

Tenants are trapped in these environments when their sole purpose is to have a decent place to live, Arnold said. She said that resolving a code complaint can take a very long time due to the system.

“In order for us to address it more aggressively, we end up going through the legal system, and you can’t go to court without data. You can’t go to court without facts,” Arnold said.

Arnold said that having more data from inspections and 311 calls will help to build strong cases when owners are neglectful and not providing the minimum living standards for tenants, but she acknowledges that data is just one component of what the city needs to do to provide better housing conditions.

“We need more solutions for tenants, more funding for code officers and tightening the state laws that allow landlords to make the minimal improvements,” Arnold said.



[María Ramos Pacheco](#), Local government reporter. María Ramos Pacheco is a reporter on the local government team. Before joining The News, María was a reporter at El Paso Matters and attended the University of Texas at El Paso. She is from Chihuahua, Mx, where her love for journalism was formed.

maria.ramos@dallasnews.com [mariaramosnews](#) [mramosnews](#)