

# Rent Control

By Walter Block

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New York State legislators defend the War Emergency Tenant Protection Act—also known as rent control—as a way of protecting tenants from war-related **HOUSING** shortages. The war referred to in the law is not the 2003 war in Iraq, however, or the Vietnam War; it is World War II. That is when rent control started in New York City. Of course, war has very little to do with apartment shortages. On the contrary, the shortage is created by rent control, the supposed solution. Gotham is far from the only city to have embraced rent control. Many others across the United States have succumbed to the blandishments of this legislative “fix.”

Rent control, like all other government-mandated **PRICE CONTROLS**, is a law placing a maximum price, or a “rent ceiling,” on what landlords may charge tenants. If it is to have any effect, the rent level must be set at a rate below that which would otherwise have prevailed. (An enactment prohibiting apartment rents from exceeding, say, \$100,000 per month would have no effect since no one would pay that amount in any case.) But if rents are established at less than their equilibrium levels, the quantity demanded will necessarily exceed the amount supplied, and rent control will lead to a shortage of dwelling spaces. In a competitive market and absent controls on prices, if the amount of a commodity or service demanded is larger than the amount supplied, prices rise to eliminate the shortage (by both bringing forth new **SUPPLY** and by reducing the amount demanded). But controls prevent rents from attaining market-clearing levels and shortages result.

With shortages in the controlled sector, this excess **DEMAND** spills over onto the noncontrolled sector (typically, new upper-bracket rental units or condominiums). But this noncontrolled segment of the market is likely to be smaller than it would be without controls because property owners

fear that controls may one day be placed on them. The high demand in the noncontrolled segment along with the small quantity supplied, both caused by rent control, boost prices in that segment. Paradoxically, then, even though rents may be lower in the controlled sector, they rise greatly for uncontrolled units and may be higher for rental housing as a whole.

As in the case of other price ceilings, rent control causes shortages, diminution in the quality of the product, and queues. But rent control differs from other such schemes. With price controls on gasoline, the waiting lines worked on a first-come-first-served basis. With rent control, because the law places sitting tenants first in the queue, many of them benefit.

## The Effects of Rent Control

Economists are virtually unanimous in concluding that rent controls are destructive. In a 1990 poll of 464 economists published in the May 1992 issue of the *American Economic Review*, 93 percent of U.S. respondents agreed, either completely or with provisos, that “a ceiling on rents reduces the quantity and quality of housing available.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, another study reported that more than 95 percent of the Canadian economists polled agreed with the statement.<sup>2</sup> The agreement cuts across the usual political spectrum, ranging all the way from Nobel Prize winners **MILTON FRIEDMAN** and **FRIEDRICH HAYEK** on the “right” to their fellow Nobel laureate **GUNNAR MYRDAL**, an important architect of the Swedish Labor Party’s **WELFARE** state, on the “left.” Myrdal stated, “Rent control has in certain Western countries constituted, maybe, the worst example of poor planning by governments lacking courage and vision.”<sup>3</sup> His fellow Swedish economist (and socialist) Assar Lindbeck asserted, “In many cases rent control appears to be the most efficient technique presently known to destroy a city—except for bombing.”<sup>4</sup> That cities like New York have clearly not been destroyed by rent control is due to the fact that rent control has been relaxed over the years.<sup>5</sup> Rent stabilization, for example, which took the place of rent control for newer buildings, is less restrictive than the old rent control. Also, the decades-long boom in the New York City housing market is not in rent-controlled or rent-stabilized units, but in condominiums and cooperative housing. But these two forms of

housing ownership grew important as a way of getting around rent control.

Economists have shown that rent control diverts new **INVESTMENT**, which would otherwise have gone to rental housing, toward greener pastures—greener in terms of consumer need. They have demonstrated that it leads to housing deterioration, fewer repairs, and less maintenance. For example, Paul Niebanck found that 29 percent of rent-controlled housing in the United States was deteriorated, but only 8 percent of the uncontrolled units were in such a state of disrepair. Joel Brenner and Herbert Franklin cited similar statistics for England and France.

The economic reasons are straightforward. One effect of government oversight is to retard investment in residential rental units. Imagine that you have five million dollars to invest and can place the funds in any industry you wish. In most businesses, governments will place only limited controls and taxes on your enterprise. But if you entrust your money to rental housing, you must pass one additional hurdle: the rent-control authority, with its hearings, red tape, and rent ceilings. Under these conditions is it any wonder that you are less likely to build or purchase rental housing?

This line of reasoning holds not just for you, but for everyone else as well. As a result, the quantity of apartments for rent will be far smaller than otherwise. And not so amazingly, the preceding analysis holds true not only for the case where rent controls are in place, but even where they are only threatened. The mere anticipation of controls is enough to have a chilling effect on such investment. Instead, everything else under the sun in the real estate market has been built: condominiums, office towers, hotels, warehouses, commercial space. Why? Because such investments have never been subject to rent controls, and no one fears that they ever will be. It is no accident that these facilities boast healthy vacancy rates and relatively slowly increasing rental rates, while residential space suffers from a virtual zero vacancy rate in the controlled sector and skyrocketing prices in the uncontrolled sector.

Although many rent-control ordinances specifically exempt new rental units from coverage, investors are too cautious (perhaps too smart) to put their faith in rental housing. In numerous cases housing units supposedly exempt forever from controls were nevertheless brought under the provisions of this law due to some “emergency” or other. New York City’s government, for example, has three times broken its promise to exempt new or vacant units from control. So prevalent is this practice of rent-control authorities that a new term has been invented to describe it: “recapture.”

Rent control has destroyed entire sections of sound housing in New York’s South Bronx and has led to decay and abandonment throughout the entire five boroughs of the city. Although hard statistics on abandonments are not available, William Tucker estimates that about 30,000 New York apartments were abandoned annually from 1972 to 1982, a loss of almost a third of a million units in this eleven-year period. Thanks to rent control, and to potential investors’ all-too-rational fear that rent control will become even more stringent, no sensible investor will build rental housing unsubsidized by government.

## Effects on Tenants

Existing rental units fare poorly under rent control. Even with the best will in the world, the landlord sometimes cannot afford to pay his escalating fuel, labor, and materials bills, to say nothing of refinancing his mortgage, out of the rent increase he can legally charge. And under rent controls he lacks the best will; the incentive he had under free-market conditions to supply tenant services is severely reduced.

The sitting tenant is “protected” by rent control but, in many cases, receives no real rental bargain because of improper maintenance, poor repairs and painting, and grudging provision of services. The enjoyment he can derive out of his dwelling space ultimately tends to be reduced to a level commensurate with his controlled rent. This may take decades, though, and meanwhile he benefits from rent control.

In fact, many tenants, usually rich or middle-class ones who are politically connected or who were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, can gain a lot from rent control. Tenants in some of the nicest neighborhoods in New York City pay a scandalously small fraction of the market price of their apartments. In the early 1980s, for example, former mayor Ed Koch paid \$441.49 for an apartment then worth about \$1,200.00 per month. Some people in this fortunate position use their apartments like hotel rooms, visiting only a few times per year.

Then there is the “old lady effect.” Consider the case of a two-parent, four-child family that has occupied a ten-room rental dwelling. One by one the children grow up, marry, and move elsewhere. The husband dies. Now the lady is left with a gigantic apartment. She uses only two or three of the rooms and, to save on heating and cleaning, closes off the remainder. Without rent control she would move to a smaller accommodation. But rent control makes that option unattractive. Needless to say, these practices further exacerbate the housing crisis. Repeal of rent control would free up thousands of such rooms very quickly, dampening the impetus toward vastly higher rents.

What determines whether or not a tenant benefits from rent control? If the building in which he lives is in a good neighborhood where rents would rise appreciably if rent control were repealed, then the landlord has an incentive to maintain the building against the prospect of that happy day. This incentive is enhanced if there are many decontrolled units in the building (due to “vacancy decontrol” when tenants move out) or privately owned condominiums for which the landlord must provide adequate services. Then the tenant who pays the scandalously low rent may “free ride” on his neighbors. But in the more typical case the quality of housing services tends to reflect rental payments. This, at least, is the situation that will prevail at equilibrium.

If government really had the best interests of tenants at heart and was for some reason determined to employ controls, it would do the very *opposite* of imposing rent restrictions: it would instead control the price of every *other* good and service available, apart from residential suites, in an attempt to divert resources out of all those other

opportunities and into this one field. But that, of course, would bring about full-scale socialism, the very system under which the Eastern Europeans suffered so grimly. If the government wanted to help the poor and was for some reason constrained to keep rent controls, it would do better to tightly control rents on luxury unit rentals and to eliminate rent controls on more modest dwellings—the very opposite of the present practice. Then, builders’ incentives would be turned around. Instead of erecting luxury dwellings, which are now exempt, they would be led, “as if by an invisible hand,” to create housing for the poor and middle classes.

## Solutions

The negative consequences of rent legislation have become so massive and perverse that even many of its former supporters have spoken out against it. Instead of urging a quick termination of controls, however, some pundits would only allow landlords to buy tenants out of their controlled dwellings. That they propose such a solution is understandable. Because tenants outnumber landlords and are usually convinced that rent control is in their best interests, they are likely to invest considerable political energy (see [RENT SEEKING](#)) in maintaining rent control. Having landlords “buy off” these opponents of reform, therefore, could be a politically effective way to end rent control.

But making property owners pay to escape a law that has victimized many of them for years is not an effective way to make them confident that rent controls will be absent in the future. The surest way to encourage private investment is to signal investors that housing will be safe from rent control. And the most effective way to do that is to eliminate the possibility of rent control with an amendment to the state constitution that forbids it. Paradoxically, one of the best ways to help tenants is to protect the [ECONOMIC FREEDOM](#) of landlords.

## Rent Control: It’s Worse Than Bombing

NEW DELHI—A “romantic conception of [SOCIALISM](#)” ... destroyed Vietnam’s economy in the years after the Vietnam war, Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach said Friday.

Addressing a crowded news conference in the Indian capital, Mr. Thach admitted that controls ... had artificially encouraged demand and discouraged supply.... House rents had ... been kept low ... so all the houses in Hanoi had fallen into disrepair, said Mr. Thach.

“The Americans couldn’t destroy Hanoi, but we have destroyed our city by very low rents. We realized it was stupid and that we must change policy,” he said.

—From a news report in *Journal of Commerce*, quoted in Dan Seligman, “Keeping Up,” *Fortune*, February 27, 1989.

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## Further Reading

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## Footnotes

1.

Richard M. Alson, J. R. Kearl, and Michael B. Vaughan, "Is There a Consensus Among Economists in the 1990's?" *American Economic Review* 82, no. 2 (1992): 203–209.

2.

Walter Block and Michael A. Walker, "Entropy in the Canadian Economics Profession: Sampling Consensus on the Major Issues," *Canadian Public Policy* 14, no. 2 (1988): 137–150, online at: <http://141.164.133.3/faculty/Block/Blockarticles/Entropy.htm>.

3.

Gunnar Myrdal, "Opening Address to the Council of International Building Research in Copenhagen," *Dagens Nyheter* (Swedish newspaper), August 25, 1965, p. 12; cited in Sven Rydenfelt, "The Rise, Fall and Revival of Swedish Rent Control," in *Rent Control: Myths and Realities*, Walter Block and Edgar Olsen, eds. (Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1981), p. 224.

4.

Assar Lindbeck, *The Political Economy of the New Left* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); cited in Sven Rydenfelt, "The Rise, Fall and Revival of Swedish Rent Control," in *Rent Control: Myths and Realities*, Walter Block



and Edgar Olsen, eds. (Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1981), pp. 213, 230.

5.

States New York “public advocate” Mark Green: “the number of rent-controlled apartments fell 18.2% between 1991 and 1993 and the new data we have analyzed shows an even greater decline—30%—from 1993 to 1996. Indeed, the total number of rent-controlled apartments has fallen by 75% from its peak of 285,000 in 1981” (<http://www.tenant.net/Alerts/Guide/papers/mgreen1.html>). This is due to the fact that when rents reach a certain level (\$2,000 per month under certain conditions), apartments leave the controlled sector altogether. Inflation plus a “hot” New York City housing market have pushed many units above this level. See on this <http://www.housingnyc.com/html/resources/faq/decontrol.html>. Ken Rosenblum, Mike Golden, and Deborah Poole provided the above cites.