

ATLANTA IS FACING A SERIOUS SQUATTER PROBLEM

Here's a few recent articles ...

I'd Be Terrified to Rent Out My Home In Atlanta ... Daily Mail Article 13025265 by Isabelle Stanley

Atlanta is battling a squatting crisis as 1,200 homes have been overtaken and landlords have to clear the unwanted residents themselves or wait months for police. The situation has become so dire that some homeowners offer to pay off squatters to get them out of their homes - rather than risk losing months of rent.

One squat in the Georgia city was even being run as illegal secret strip club and had to be cleared out by an entire FBI SWAT team. Matt Urbanski, who runs a home cleaning company in Atlanta and cleans 40 squatted homes a month, told Bloomberg: "I'd be terrified in Atlanta to lease out one of my properties. The large corporations are having a hard time dealing with it. A small individual who would want to use that property to build their long-term wealth and secure their future, it could potentially destroy them."

The National Rental Home Council trade group has now estimated that 1,200 residences across the city are being squatted - more than any other metro area. Evicting squatters can take over six months with backlogs in the courts and overwhelmed police forces. One of Urbanski's employees was even shot while attempting to clear out a house after getting into a fight with the squatter.

CEO of the National Rental Home Council, David Howard told DailyMail.com: "Incidents of illegal trespassing in the Atlanta metro area are disproportionately higher than comparable markets across the country. The sheer volume and consistency of practice in terms of how these incidents happen are clearly indicative of some kind of organized criminal effort." He added: "This is obviously a property rights issue first and foremost, but the impact of this kind of activity extends well beyond the concerns of the individual property owner."

There are serious public safety issues at play here – who is in the home? What is happening in the property? What is the risk to others in the neighborhood? Also, there's a real concern here about the availability of affordably-priced housing. Every incident of illegal occupation means there's one less home available for a family in need of quality, single-family rental housing. As well as individual homeowners, the squatting crisis is making business hard for some of the country's largest single-family-rental businesses. CEO of Tiber Capital Group Simon Frost, reportedly wrote to local authorities begging for help, he said: "Unlawful occupants often brandish weapons and threaten neighbors, including children. This problem is rapidly growing. We are concerned about the impact that this is having on safety and livability of our local neighborhoods."

The problem is being fueled by soaring housing costs in the city, with rent rising 34 percent from pre pandemic prices to \$1,897 a month. Helen Z. Willis, councilwoman for the city of South Fulton, told Bloomberg: "There is a lack of affordable housing, and homelessness has increased during the pandemic." It's also gotten easier for squatters to find homes to move into. Online listings and virtual real estate agents can allow squatters to find vacant addresses and gain access by booking fake appointments. Some people may not even know they are squatters as scam artists can set up fake listings for empty properties and fake lease agreements. Once a squatter is in, it's hard to get them out. It can take three months to get a court hearing for an eviction, and another three months to get a deputy or marshal to clear out the home.

In October, an Atlanta home was taken over by squatters who ran an illegal strip club inside on weekends and kept horses on the property. The FBI had to get involved and arrested four people who had taken up residence at 4951 Wewatta Street in South Fulton without permission. The 4,000 square foot five bed home with three bathrooms was trashed by the squatters. Photos from inside the home after the FBI cleared it out showed the halls eerily empty, save for a cartoonish green lizard painted on one wall. Other walls were covered in dark scuff marks. Trash littered the property with a half-finished water bottle, a crumpled plastic bag and a bottle of Pink Whitney - the popular lemonade-infused vodka - sitting atop a railing. Neighbors said they were running a strip club on the weekend, noisy parties and car races in the street. One neighbor said: "They would get live horses. One day they had live horses." Four young men - DeAnthony Maddox, Jeremy Wheat, Kelvin Hall, and Tarahsjay Forde - were arrested on the premises. All four were booked into Fulton County Jail on multiple charges, including several counts of theft by receiving stolen property.

Deployed soldier's home

Last year, a deployed Lt Colonel Dahlia Daure said she felt 'violated' when she learned a man was squatting in her home while she was away on active service. Daure told local media that Vincent Simon - a man who has been convicted on guns, drugs, and theft charges - was living in her \$500,000 home. The Army officer had been away from her Ellenwood residence for duty in Chicago - and only found out he had moved in as the house was in the process of being sold. "I felt violated. Had I not been serving my country, I would have been in my home," Daure told WSB-TV. The active-duty Army officer was told by police they could not evict Simon and that the issue is considered a 'civil matter.' "I want to go shoot out the windows, turn off the water, cut wires, but I can't. That's a crime. Law-abiding citizens can't do that," she said. The massive 4,300 square-foot estate has five beds and five baths, Zillow states, and is valued around \$495,000. Before listing the home, Daure had been renting it out and had even put in an estimated \$35,000 in renovations.

The squatter initially presented police with a lease that he said showed him having paid \$19,000 to stay in the property for six months. In that time, the convicted criminal installed cameras and put up 'Beware of Dog' signs in addition to covering the windows with cardboard. Daure urged the police to investigate and they discovered the lease was fake. Police discovered the number on the lease did not lead to a real person or listing agent and Simon was served with an intruder affidavit. He was arrested after cops discovered he had suspected ecstasy and a gun, which he is not allowed as a convicted felon.

Georgia state representative says laws unfairly favor home squatters

By Fox 5 Atlanta

ATLANTA - A house squatter versus the homeowner: It was a dramatic scene caught on camera by the Fox 5 I-Team. It highlights how police and the court system are struggling to be on the side of legitimate homeowners - people whose houses are overrun by intruders. Georgia Rep. Kim Schofield, D - Atlanta, was infuriated by what our investigation revealed. "When I saw this story, I said, I have to do something immediately now. It's urgent." This is what Fulton County Representative Kim Schofield saw. Tucker homeowner Ronan McCabe locked out of his own property.

ORIGINAL STORY: Police no help in removing squatters, sex offender allowed to stay

"This is my home," he told us pointing to his house which he couldn't enter. "And there's somebody in there, an intruder in there, intruders, who I do not know." Squatters took over his corner lot home that he had for sale. The locks were changed. He called police. They came out twice. "Gwinnett County police are saying there

is nothing they can do," he said clearly frustrated. The real homeowner's realtor was taking down the "for sale" sign on the home closing date when he noticed strangers had changed the locks and moved in. Ronan McCabe told us what he told police, "They have no contract. No agreement with me."

They are not renters, but still police said he'd have to take them to court to get them out. The man inside calling himself Raymond Cortez offered this: He'd leave, but for a price. "They want me to pay them to leave my home. That's scandalous," McCabe said. Representative Schofield calls this extortion. "They're trying to tell him, I'll leave but you gotta pay me to leave. Are you kidding me?"

With police unable to help, Ronan McCabe called the Fox 5 I-Team. We met him on the street outside his home. Immediately, texts started coming from inside the Tucker house. McCabe read out loud what the squatters had to say. "I'm calling the cops. I'm with my attorney drawing up a lawsuit." The squatter was so confident that he did call the police on us. But here's where the events took a turn in the real homeowner's favor, surprising him, us, the man in the house, even Gwinnett PD.

The home was being surveilled by US Marshals. The real name of the man inside was Ramon Fuertes III. He's a convicted child sex trafficker. He was wanted for failure to report as a sex offender. He was arrested for that, but not for being a squatter. The woman inside, who told police she was his wife, was finally ordered on the third police visit to leave or be charged with criminal trespass. "But, why did it take three visits from police and an explosive street-side scene for this to happen? I mean, the folks inside couldn't prove they had a lease with Mr. McCabe. The utilities were still in the homeowner's name."

Unlike authorities, the water company was quick to step in and help. While we were there, a utility worker arrived and put a lock on the water meter. But the police? They shifted the responsibility to the backlogged court system. "Dana, these are outdated laws. If you really look at it, that are protecting the wrong group," said the Fulton County Democratic representative. "I mean, this makes no sense."

The Fox 5 I-Team has reached out repeatedly to the Gwinnett Co. Police Department to talk to us about how the law works. We were told "Regretfully, we have other obligations." But Rep. Schofield has plenty to offer. "Why are we empowering scammers and squatters to milk the system," she asked? "Come on, Georgia. We gotta be better than this." She says she is right now trying to help a constituent with a similar situation, but the law simply is not on the homeowner's side. She says it's vague and the system - the police, the courts - are overwhelmed. "The Georgia laws have to get tighter. We have to do a better job of looking at these policies in this legislation which we will be doing in the upcoming session." Ronan McCabe, after making repairs to the home caused by the squatters, was able to sell his house.

College Park homeowner says couple who broke into her home won't leave

By 11 Alive New

COLLEGE PARK, Ga. — A College Park woman is fighting to get squatters out of her home after police told her they couldn't make them leave. The homeowner, who wanted to remain anonymous, said she brought her new renters to the property on Monday night, only to find that someone else was inside. "The two people in there were a man and a woman and they started yelling 'get out of my house, get out of my house' basically as if they were supposed to be in there," she said. The woman said the people inside claimed they had a lease that they showed to responding College Park police officers. The homeowner said she had never seen the lease or met the individuals. She reported the screens on multiple windows of the house were removed and the locks were changed.

“He’s a professional scammer. You could tell he’s done it before,” she added. She said police told her because of an uptick in rental scams, she would need to go through the Fulton County courts to file an eviction notice to get them out. The homeowner has spent hundreds of dollars to remove the intruders.

11Alive went out to the home to check if anyone was still inside. After a few minutes of knocking and no answer, the garage door opened, and a man placed a “No Trespassing” sign in the window. According to a neighbor, people moved into the house over the weekend but haven’t been seen since. “I was scared, and my pistol is laying out on the foot of my bed right now,” she added. As the homeowner continues to fight to get the people out of her home, she said something needs to change so that no one else goes through this. “I’m feeling disgusted. It’s just really sickening that someone can do this and take my house up from under my nose,” she said.

Homeowner arrested after trying to evict squatters from his own property

By New York Post

A homeowner stopped by to check on his suburban Atlanta property — only to be arrested for trespassing. Days after the departure of a previous tenant, Tim Arko pulled into the driveway of his house in desirable Decatur, where he suddenly encountered a stranger waving a gun in his face. “I just jumped the fence and ran. I didn’t know what else to do,” Arko told local channel WSB-TV. “I didn’t walk in on a family eating dinner. I walked in on weapons, a prostitute, a bunch of dogs in the back, my fence broken down,” he told a reporter. After dialing 911 to report the intrusion, Arko was astonished to find himself being arrested and taken into police custody. “They told the police that I was a home invader and that it was their home. And so I ended up being arrested and detained,” Arko said.

Six months later, they are still living in Arko’s home. Two people have died in the residence from overdoses during that time. Code enforcement has even cited Arko for not properly maintaining the house he legally can’t access. After lengthy court delays, an eviction order was finally signed. Arko still awaits marshals, however, to conduct the eviction. Arko said he has been informed by marshals that they are hoping for a September eviction.

“No one likes, you know, being in the court system, but it becomes even worse when it seems broken down,” said John Ernst, Arko’s attorney, told a reporter. “I feel like it’s very heavily weighted towards these trespassers and criminals, not people that got duped,” Arko said.