

Anchoring the Story

July 2026

Traditional and Social Media on Lived Experience in a Housing Shortage

Advice on complex housing questions is happening online—but a significant portion is built on inaccurate information. To upgrade the quality and solve problems, we need to reshape how we engage.

Between January 2021 and April 2026, 177 Massachusetts cities and towns considered local zoning changes required by transit-oriented, land-use reform state legislation, the MBTA Communities Act.¹ This report looks beyond the housing policy debate into the lion's share—over 91%—of the housing conversation during our study period- the daily challenges in finding and keeping a home in a tight, expensive market. It is the companion to *Constructing the Story: Traditional and Social Media on Housing Policy*.

The rise of social media platforms for information seeking and sharing is well-documented. Reddit in particular has become a go-to, real-time resource for advice on everything from which refrigerator to buy to whether others are experiencing a cell service outage.² Digging into housing-related content revealed what issues predominate and how people seek information to address everyday, yet

potentially life-changing issues, from finding an affordable apartment in one of the most expensive markets in the U.S., to disputes with landlords, to roommate conflict. Because our analysis found information was often inaccurate, it also raised the question of how we might leverage this active, in-real-time conversation to spread better information.

Below, we provide background on the content, our main takeaways, and recommendations on how to activate our findings.

“It’s getting to the point where only the rich can live in Boston. I make a decent salary but being single... I can’t afford to live anywhere in Boston or the suburbs.”

— r/boston, 4,872 upvotes

Key Takeaways

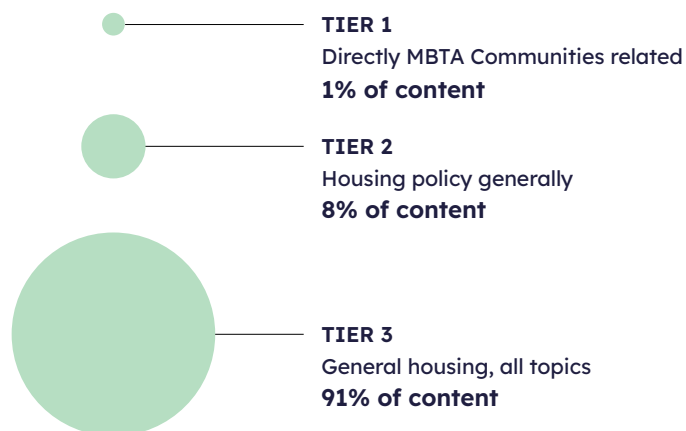
- 1 Rent and affordability rank first among topics.
- 2 The housing conversation is broad, deep, and varied in terms of topics and participants.
- 3 An audit of online housing advice found 21% of responses were inaccurate or incomplete.
- 4 Citations to external sources are infrequent; however, citations that do appear are to appropriate resources.

Background

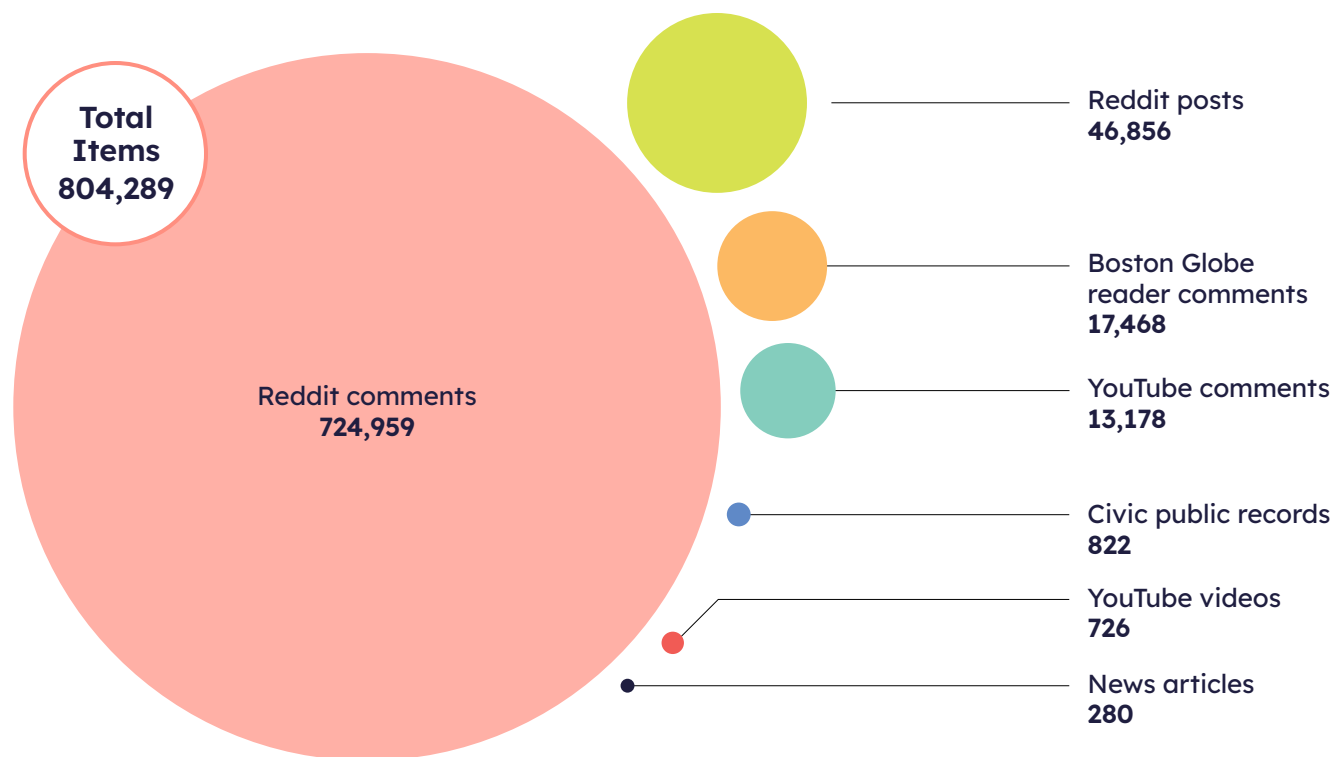
Our analysis included over 800,000 pieces of content from more than 90,000 individual content creators on social media via a scan of Massachusetts housing content from January 1, 2021, to April 30, 2026.³

This report focuses on the active, wide-ranging dialogue grouped for our analysis as Tier 3 (General Housing). Its companion report *Constructing the Story* covers Tiers 1 and 2. While occasionally referred to in both reports, our methodology is discussed at length [here](#) by January Advisors, consultants to this project.

Content Analyzed by Subject



Content Analyzed by Source



Findings

1 Rent and affordability rank first among topics.

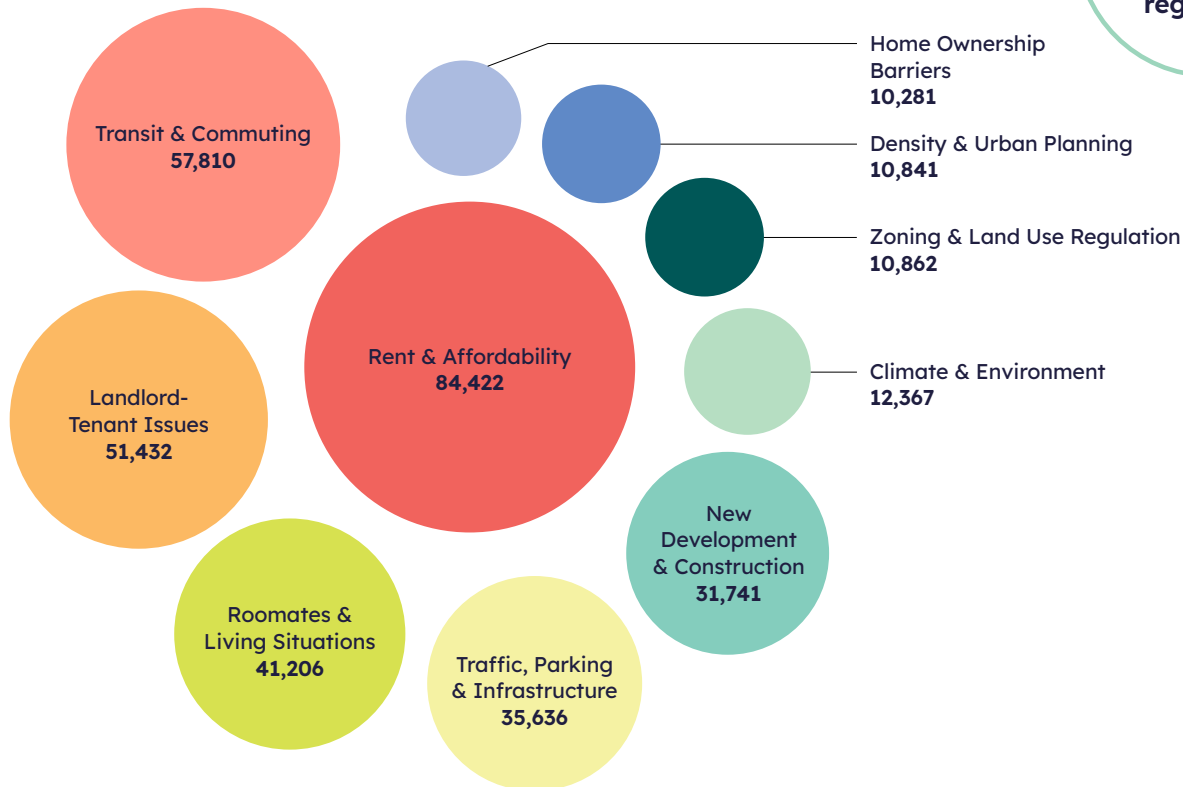
Grouped by theme, content about rent and affordability dominated the conversation, appearing 1.5 times more often than the next most common content theme, Transit and Commuting. (Individual posts may appear in more than one theme.) While our topic grouping is high-level, the chart below reflects what people actually talk about when they talk about housing. All top five topics are day-to-day challenges. By the seventh most popular topic, Climate & Environment, the frequency drops off while the conversation starts to link to broader policy and urban planning issues.

“My landlord is not returning my security deposit. He is a private landlord and not responding to my messages. Could someone please tell [me] what can I do to get my deposit back?” — r/lowellma, 24 upvotes

“Landlord just sent me an email informing me of a rent increase ‘effective 10/23/2025’... I thought he needed to provide a 30-day notice. Can he do this?” — r/bostonhousing, 28 upvotes

Top 10 Housing Topics Ranked by Frequency

Rent affordability is 8x the size of zoning and regulation



2 The housing conversation is broad, deep, and varied in terms of topics and participants.

Digging into individual posts and threads, it is clear that an anonymous, “crowd-sourcing” opportunity provides a frequently judgment-free avenue to resolving questions, gathering input, and getting confirmation/ support that others are experiencing the same challenges. Both posters and commenters come from a variety of backgrounds, describing themselves as renters, landlords, service providers, and friends and family of people in difficult housing situations. There are many voices. The median author wrote 1–2 items. In addition, 73.5% of posters and 44.5% of commenters appeared exactly once in 5+ years.

Posted questions may be specific. For example, there are threads on questions like “Would a person be eligible for CHA Housing Choice Voucher

(Section 8) Program if she/he earned \$57,101/year?” At times, people are trying to avoid violating complex rules around housing and housing subsidies, which they know exist but are unsure how to apply to their situation. Similarly, threads about next steps for people who have just received vouchers, laws around security deposits, and how to respond to lease renewal rent increases are common.

The conversation is far-ranging. Landlords use the platform to crowdsource questions about how to plan for or respond to an inspection. Additionally, both tenants and landlords seek data points and advice. People searching for housing ask what rents to expect to pay and what resources for rental assistance exist. Landlords (and potential landlords) ask what rent they might be able to charge. Daunted by an expensive market, posters look for empathy and often ask if they should just leave the area.

“We have nowhere to go but my mom’s in MA, but she is on Section 8 housing. How does that work? Will we be able to move in with her and pay our portion of her rent, or will she lose housing? I’m so sick about this. She is disabled and I don’t want her to put her housing in jeopardy, but also have nothing to even pay for a deposit or anything like that...”

— r/massachusetts, 51 upvotes

“Does anyone have any leads on any 3 bedrooms in the Lowell area that accept Section 8?”

— r/bostonhousing, 1 upvote

“As the title suggests, I’m looking to become a landlord in Boston. I own a condo near the Mattapan Library, a 2-bedroom, 1-bathroom unit. I’m trying to figure out a realistic rent price. I’m a Boston native and want to avoid overcharging, but I also hope to earn a bit of profit.”

— r/boston, zero upvotes

“**TL;DR: Which is better if I’m looking for a decent, air-conditioned place to live long-term on my own, as a disabled low-income individual on SSDI: Section 8 or CHAMP?***”

— r/massachusetts, 1 upvote

“Hello everybody. I’m writing this to find more info about affordable housing in northampton. live here since i was 15 and im 31...and I feel like the housing market is f***ed right now. I want to know more info, I apply everywhere live 55 and the lumber yard and stuff. I been on the waitlist for a long time maybe couple of years and i just want to know if people are experiencing the same thing. thank you”
— r/northampton, 17 upvotes

3 An audit of online housing advice found 21% of responses were inaccurate or incomplete

Given the active use of social media to seek answers to everyday questions, we wondered about the accuracy of responses. The accuracy of social media has even deeper implications in the age of AI. Large language models powering AI increasingly use social media sources like Reddit as a foundation. Thus, correct and incorrect responses may be amplified, appearing as truth in AI-generated content or search results, whether or not they are valid.⁴

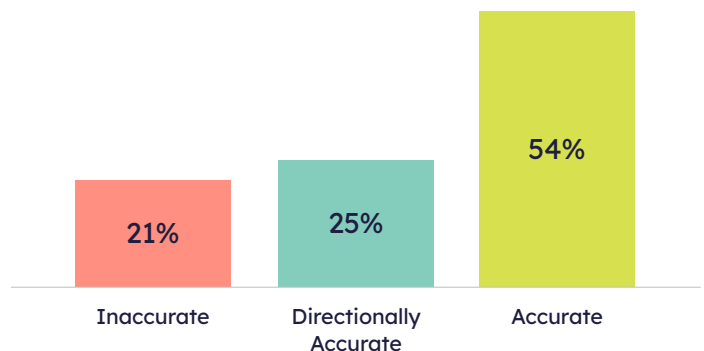
To assess this question, we performed an audit of conversations regarding vouchers. Both federal rental assistance (Housing Choice Vouchers, often called Section 8) and state rental assistance (the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program or MRVP) come with complicated rules that can be difficult to navigate and interpret on the ground.

“All the low income apartments have 2 year wait lists.”
— r/capecod, 9 upvotes

We pulled a sample of over 100 voucher-related questions posed on Reddit. In some cases, these were specific questions on vouchers while in others, the discussion was nested within a broader conversation on finding affordable housing. We evaluated responses as follows: 1) inaccurate, 2) directionally accurate, pointed in the right direction even if the answer was not complete, and 3) accurate. At times, individual responders offered a different slice of the response. Thus, a score of “3” may mean responses taken as a whole were accurate vs. one single comment fully answered the question.

We found 54% of responses were accurate while 25% were directionally accurate. That left a troubling 21% that were inaccurate, because responses provided incorrect information and/or little or no guidance.

Breakdown of Accuracy—Reddit Advice on Vouchers



Perhaps as interesting as accuracy is where responses veered off-course. In general, “knowable” questions—questions where there is a definitive answer—received accurate or at least directionally accurate responses. For example, posters received accurate information that voucher discrimination was illegal in Massachusetts, were referred to appropriate resources (legal services, informational websites), and were also told, unfortunately accurately, that they might not be able to correct the issue as quickly as they might find another landlord willing to take the voucher.

At the same time, when a subject was “not knowable”—meaning there is not an exact answer or the best answer is “it depends”—commenters jumped in with unsupported and far-ranging claims.

“I have been on the section 8 wait-list for over 5 years. We have a prior eviction. What is my best course of action? There isn't much for subsidized housing currently available nearby. I know there are programs that help with first, last, and security, but we will still need to find a way to cover month to month. We live near Springfield.”

— r/massachusetts, 68 upvotes, post entitled “I need advice (no judgement please)”

“I know people who have moved to Vermont just because the waiting list for affordable housing vouchers is significantly shorter than in Massachusetts. My friend applied for affordable housing when her kid was just a toddler. He has now graduated high school. I'll let you know when she gets it.”

— Response to post in r/northampton, 11 upvotes

A good example was the question of how long the wait is for affordable housing, including the wait for a voucher.

For context, like all states, Massachusetts has a variety of affordable housing supports administered in different ways and places. The “wait” varies by type, by building, by geography, etc. Despite that, commenters chimed in with confidence with responses ranging from “the wait is two years” to decades. Commenters answered they had been housed within six months while others knew people who had been on waitlists for over a decade, all of which could be true. However, with no context about where or when, the information is at best muddled. Further, several responses were rendered worse by the fact that they were accompanied by discouraging, misguided advice to not apply at all.

4 Citations to external sources are infrequent; however, citations that do appear are to appropriate resources.

As in our *Constructing the Story* report, commenters rarely cited external sources. Only 4% cited an external online source. While impossible to confirm, commenters often refer to their own expertise from lived experience or a professional role, e.g. “working at a housing authority.”

More exactly, 30,748 pieces of content contain at least one substantive URL (4.31% citation rate), producing 52,493 substantive URL instances across 8,221 unique domains. The most commonly linked-to resource was the Commonwealth's website, [mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov). The top five information sources are listed on the next page. Slightly further down the list, MassLegalHelp was the most cited legal source with 483 citations.

While linking was not frequent, our audit showed comments linked to the best available sources. A good example are the common questions about eviction. Posters are regularly referred to legal services offices, [MassLegalHelp](#), and the Massachusetts Attorney General's Guide to Landlord and Tenant Rights.

Top 5 Most Cited Information Sources

1	mass.gov	3,831
2	mbta.com	2,578
3	zillow.com	1,193
4	Wikipedia.org	1,046
5	boston.gov	779

Recommendations

As a first step, we must acknowledge people increasingly turn to social media platforms for advice, whether it is accurate or not. These platforms offer collective, mutual-aid-like responses for both straightforward and complex housing circumstances. Beyond the convenience, the back-and-forth dialogue is reassuring. Responses are typically empathetic. Commenters often share supportive stories of overcoming similar challenges, and are rarely critical/toxic. For example, a nursing student posted about moving out of her parents' home and was, in addition to housing guidance, offered advice on which degree would most quickly lead to higher-paying employment.

... “Hi, I am looking for anything I can find in Boston . I DO HAVE A HOMESTART voucher where they will pay my rent upfront for 1 year. I also work and go to school. Please point me in the right direction if possible, thank you!”
— r/bostonhousing, 1 upvote

Interestingly, even when they had relevant, reliable information, posters still sought advice online. For example, one poster asked a question about income eligibility for a Housing Choice Voucher in Cambridge. The post included a link to an infographic showing income eligibility details from the city's website which answered the question. Was the person posing the question confused by the infographic? Seeking validation that she/he had read it correctly? Something else? Whichever the case, she/he turned to an online platform for guidance rather than, one assumes, someone at the city itself. There were similar instances of people questioning guidance they had received from case managers.

Given the energy and abundance of conversation, we recommend leveraging social platforms focusing on three opportunities: 1) spreading correct information, 2) getting feedback, and 3) anchoring policy in experience.

Spreading correct information. To meet people where they already are, we should explore these platforms as a low-cost, effective opportunity for disseminating accurate information. As we discovered, while friendly advice is enheartening, crowdsourcing complex housing questions does not yield reliably accurate results. This is especially concerning given that LLMs are generating answers based on social media content.

There are “Ask Me Anything” sessions about housing. Our analysis turned up “Q&A sessions” from pro-housing political candidates and a journalist fielding questions on the then-new Massachusetts law against tenant-paid broker fees.

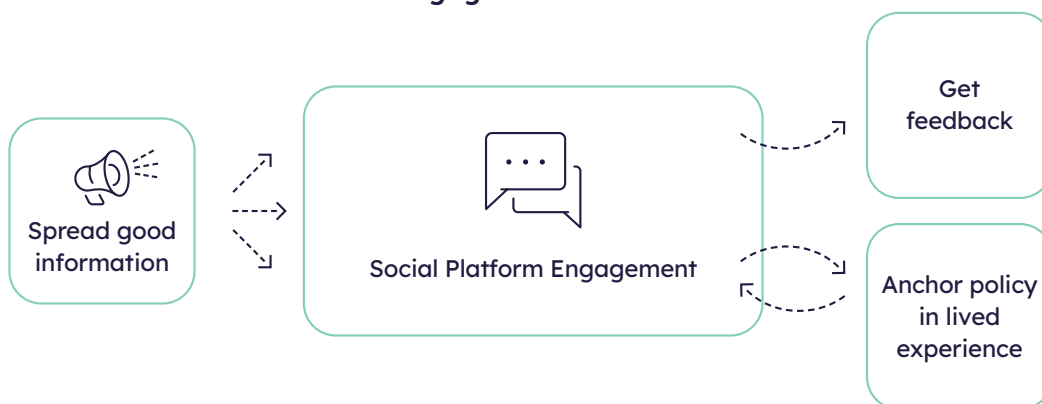
While we do not question that these may have been helpful sessions, they are limited. If anything, they suggest even greater potential for sessions with public or nonprofit sector resources or legal advisors. Based on how often they are cited, these are sources people already trust. One could imagine “Ask Me Anything”-like sessions with expert professional staff. Knowledgeable staff could similarly monitor platforms for questions and jump in with accurate answers.

While it may exist, we found no instances of government or housing search nonprofits actively harnessing these platforms. Currently, online information resources for housing questions often favor self-directed content like an explainer video or FAQ. There is a different, complementary appeal and trust-building via the human support and interaction social platforms provide. They also offer an opportunity to go beyond the questions we think people would ask to answering the questions they do ask.

Getting feedback. We can use social platforms as a rich, readily available and ever-replenished source of user feedback. Where people struggle signals where they are stymied as they try to address their own housing challenges. What people ask indicates where there are informational road-blocks. Our analysis was a first pass on the content. One could imagine a much deeper dive constructed specifically for using social media content to explore program design in response to these pain points as well as to prioritize the content of informational resources.

Anchoring policy in experience. Tying back to this report’s companion piece *Constructing the Story*, the pain points our analysis revealed are natural sources for driving policy and anchoring pro-housing narratives. As noted, rent and affordability rank first. In many cases, more housing production is the long-term solution to housing challenges like affordability and lack of options. Even specific and understandable frustrations about finding affordable options or options geared toward particular needs (e.g. accessible housing, housing for older adults, sober housing) are ultimately about the housing shortage.

Three Opportunities for Social Platform Engagement



In conclusion, social media housing content offers a constantly self-updating window on lived experience. It is also an underutilized information access point. Our efforts to understand and leverage this opportunity should strengthen our strategies to address problems as well as anchor narratives and policy.

“Hey everyone, I’m working on a housing reform bill in Massachusetts called the Massachusetts Housing Freedom Act, and I’m trying to build a broad coalition to push it forward. I’m asking for your support... If you’re sick of \$3,000 one-bedrooms, 10-year waiting lists for affordable units, and politicians pretending to care while doing nothing—this is your fight too.”
— r/massachusetts, 895 upvotes



“Ultimately the combination of more housing and tenant protection is the way forward, but just letting private developers build expensive apartments is not going to solve the problem. We need social housing: affordable housing for everyone, built by the government and rented for low rates.”
— Response to post, 6 upvotes

Endnotes

- 1 M.G.L. Chapter 40A, Section 3A enacted January, 2021, commonly referred to as MBTA Communities Act or 3A. It should be noted that by May 2026, 166 communities complied with the law.
- 2 See for example Kevin Roose, [Reddit’s I.P.O. Is a Content Moderation Success Story](#), New York Times, March 21, 2024.
- 3 It should be noted that many social platforms are “walled gardens” and could not be analyzed for this report.
- 4 See e.g. Luke Harsel, The Most-Cited Domains in AI: A 3-Month Study,” November 10, 2025 <https://www.semrush.com/blog/most-cited-domains-ai/>

Acknowledgments

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- Ask questions that matter
- Deliver rigorous research, partnering with top-notch academics and thinkers
- Activate ideas through CHAPA’s practitioner network
- Move the conversation forward into policies, programs, and systems that sustain a better Massachusetts