

How to beat a slumlord at his own game | The Avvo NakedLaw Blog

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Real Estate, Tips & How-To

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The word “slumlord” evokes images of miserly, ill-mannered brutes with cheap cigars hanging out of their mouths, and broken-down, rat-trap hovels from some Depression-era urban hellscape. But while apartments in the early twenty-first century may have plumbing and Internet, modern-day tenants who [don't know their rights](#) are just as much at risk of being victimized by unscrupulous landlords as they were back in the New Deal days.

Most of us have experienced crummy apartments. But waiting months for a landlord to fix a leaky faucet isn't enough to qualify you as the [victim of a slumlord](#). So, what exactly is a slumlord, and what should you do if you are paying rent to one?

Slumlords, by definition

Generally speaking, a slumlord is defined by the condition of the properties they own. Most landlords are long-term investors who don't want to spend more than they have to on repairs, but they do want to maintain the value of their property.

Slumlords, by contrast, are profiteers who often take advantage of tenants' inability to qualify for or afford legitimate housing. Many continue collecting rents until buildings are condemned, then sell the property to developers. Unfortunately, the image of an absentee landlord who owns numerous derelict properties is often true.

In New York, a city famous for slums and tenements, the [warranty of habitability](#) protects tenants from having to live in conditions which are dangerous, hazardous, or detrimental to their lives, health, or safety. Legal definitions vary by state and by city, but the principle of establishing a baseline for living conditions is behind all tenant protection laws.

How to identify slum conditions

Around the country, the most commonly listed [slum conditions](#) are already infractions of local building or safety codes:

- Structural damage that goes unrepaired: Sagging porches, holes in the roof, and rotten or missing siding are common in slum properties.
- Illegal subdivisions or repurposing of spaces: Two-bedroom apartments housing a dozen people, individual units sharing bathrooms down the hall, and outbuildings or garages converted—without required permits—into living space are all illegal in their own right and are common strategies used by slumlords to maximize rents through overcrowding.
- Failure to provide basic repairs: Unreliable heat, broken pipes, lack of potable water, and substandard or exposed wiring are more than inconvenient—they are illegal.
- Mold, pest infestation, and uncollected garbage are health hazards that are in violation of codes established by multiple city agencies.

Cities are responsible for enforcement

In most cases, once a property has deteriorated into a legally-defined slum, enforcement will fall to the city, often through the department that handles building permits. Some cities maintain hotline numbers for complaints, while other cities manage tenant/landlord issues through a Neighborhood Services Department or the Department of Planning and Development. City agencies can fine landlords for code violations and, in a process that often takes years, eventually condemn decrepit buildings.

A law passed in 2005 in Washington State, often referred to as the Slumlord Accountability Act, guarantees [relocation assistance for renters](#) whose properties are shut down by local officials due to the landlord's negligence. The relocation assistance is \$2,000 or three times the rent, whichever is greater. But tenants do not have to wait for their homes to be condemned to improve their situation.

How to deal with a slumlord

Dealing with a slumlord is essentially no different from dealing with any landlord, albeit a lot more hassle. Before you act, check to see if there is a tenants' union in your community. A tenants' union can serve as a valuable resource for information about local rights and regulations, and should be able to provide guidance on processes for dealing with slumlords.

Typically, your first step is to attempt to get your [landlord to make the necessary repairs](#). If this doesn't work, you might [consider breaking your lease](#). Although this doesn't address the fact that the slumlord has a derelict property, it does get you out of the situation. If moving out isn't an option for you, it might make sense to [take legal action](#). Making slumlords accountable for the property they own isn't easy, but is the right thing to do for you and any future residents.

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