

Out of Order

Housing Profile

1999

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This brief presents findings from the 1999 American Housing Survey. The Census Bureau conducts this survey for the Department of Housing and Urban Development with the occupants of 47,000 housing units across the United States. Although Americans expect their homes to be warm and dry, and the power, water, and sewage systems to work when needed, breakdowns and other problems occur.

Types of problems: Blown fuses and water leaking into their homes were some of the troubles Americans encountered.

Of the country's 103 million occupied housing units in 1999, about one in eight (12 percent) had water leak into their home from the outside within the past 12 months. This proportion was slightly more than had power failures — fuses blown or circuit breakers tripped in the past 3 months — at 11 percent. Water leaks (in the past 12 months) from sources inside the unit, such as pipes, occurred in slightly fewer homes — nearly 10 percent. Less frequent problems were: uncomfortably cold home temperatures during the last winter (7 percent); or within the last 3 months, water supply stoppages (4 percent), toilet breakdowns for all toilets in the home

(3 percent), and sewer or septic tank breakdowns (2 percent).

Overall, one in three American households encountered a recent breakdown of the sort mentioned above. But, only a few households (slightly more than one in ten) had two or more different types of these problems. Some homes did suffer from the same problem over and over. Over one in four (27 percent) of the units with power failures reported that this breakdown had happened three or more times in the last 3 months.

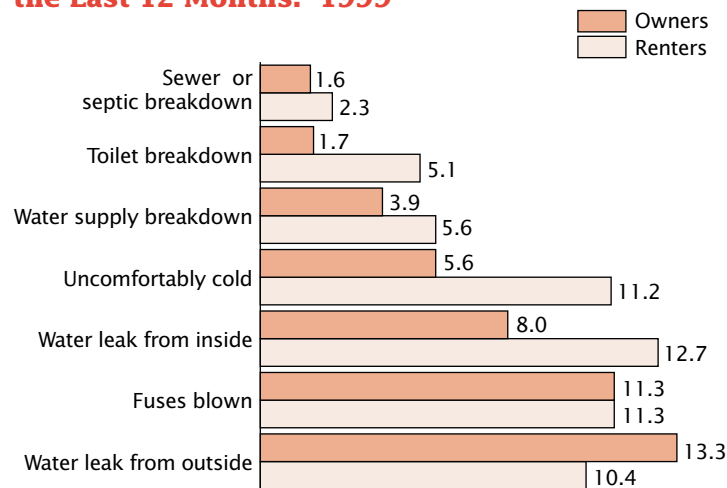
Tenure: Homeowners were more likely than renters to have water leaking into their homes.

Thirteen percent of homeowners and 10 percent of renters had water seeping (or gushing) into their homes. However,

American Housing Brief

Figure.

Percent of Households With Breakdowns in the Last 12 Months: 1999



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Housing Survey: 1999.



Table 1.

Occurrence of Selected Housing Breakdowns in the Last 12 Months, by Year Structure Was Built

Selected housing breakdowns	Before	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s
	1920								
Sewer or septic breakdown.....	2%	2%	3%	3%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%
All toilets not working.....	3%	3%	3%	4%	3%	3%	3%	2%	2%
Water supply breakdown.....	4%	3%	4%	4%	4%	4%	5%	5%	5%
Uncomfortably cold last winter.....	11%	9%	9%	8%	8%	7%	6%	5%	6%
Water leak from inside.....	10%	12%	11%	10%	9%	10%	10%	10%	7%
Fuses blown/breakers tripped.....	14%	14%	14%	13%	12%	10%	10%	10%	9%
Water leak from outside.....	20%	18%	17%	15%	13%	11%	10%	10%	9%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Housing Survey: 1999.

renters were generally more likely than owners to suffer breakdowns in their homes. Owners and renters were equally likely — 11 percent — to report blown fuses. The figure compares the proportions of owners and renters experiencing each type of breakdown.

Structure's age: Aging homes were more likely to have breakdowns, but even newer units had some problems.

Newer was better for some of the types of breakdowns. Units built in the last 10 years (1990-99) were about half as likely, as those built 60 or more years ago (before 1940), to have had water leak in recently from the outdoors — 9 percent compared with 19 percent. Power failures were also less common in newer than older homes — 9 percent compared with 14 percent. However, not all breakdowns were concentrated in the older buildings. The likelihood of sewer and of toilet breakdowns showed only small differences across all ages of homes (see Table 1). Water supply interruptions were somewhat more common in homes built in the 1970s than in those from the 1920s.

Maintenance: Homeowners with more kinds of breakdowns also spent more on routine maintenance.

Twenty-one percent of homeowners with no problems or with only one type of breakdown reported they spent nothing on routine maintenance in a typical year. About 14 percent of those with two or more different breakdowns spent nothing. Among owners who estimated any spending on maintenance, those with two or more sorts of problems paid a median cost of \$505 (the remainder paid a median of \$370). The higher figures for homes with problems may partly reflect the cost of fixing the breakdowns.

Accuracy of the Estimates

Statistics from surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and meet the U.S. Census Bureau's standards for statistical significance. Nonsampling errors in surveys may be attributed to a variety of sources, such as how the survey was designed, how respondents interpret questions, how able and willing

respondents are to provide correct answers, and how accurately the answers are coded and classified. The Census Bureau employs quality control procedures throughout the production process — including the overall design of surveys, the wording of questions, review of the work of interviewers and coders, and statistical review of reports. However, because of methodological differences, use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources.

For information on the source of data and the accuracy of estimates, including the use and computation of standard errors, see the statement from the 1999 American Housing Survey, "Appendix D— Errors" at www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/ahs/meth.html

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Detailed tabulations can be found on the AHS section of the U.S. Census Bureau's Web site at www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/ahs/pubs.html