

Plex Housing

Understanding Sonoma County's Plex Homes and Residents

September 2021



The housing affordability crisis in California has prompted interest in zoning reform to unlock higher density residential development. Much of the energy in the last decade has focused on increasing density near transit and job-rich areas. Most recently, greater focus has shed light on the potential promise of legalizing plexes within existing single-family only residential zoned neighborhoods. Single-family zoning accounts for the majority of residential land in Sonoma County with some cities like Healdsburg and Windsor having 90 percent of their neighborhoods zoned for only single-family homes.

Plexes in this brief are defined as building types with 2 to 9 units, which can include duplexes, triplexes, and multiplexes, also known as small apartments. These housing types are commonly labeled “missing middle housing” as they include home types that cover a segment between single family homes and mid-rise/high-rise apartments.¹ This brief examines the local housing stock with a focus on comparing single-family, both detached and attached, and plexes across a range of indicators. **The brief finds compelling evidence that plexes offer a more affordable housing type to renters, prospective homebuyers, and as an equity issue to create more inclusive neighborhoods.** Advancing innovative housing policies that support the creation of plexes could be an important tool for local cities to provide more housing that is affordable to residents.

Plexes in Sonoma County

In summarizing the number of housing units in Sonoma County by building type, the vast majority of homes are single-family detached homes, which comprise 78% of homes smaller than 10 units. The single-family attached homes as a type are on the rise as townhomes have become an increasingly population option in Sonoma County.² About 10 percent of homes under 10 units

Table 1: Households by Building Type

Type	Households	Percent
Plex	19,821	12%
SFH Attached	15,482	10%
SFH Detached	126,274	78%

Note: Does not reflect all households since buildings larger than 9 units not included.

Source: 2018 5-year Sample American Community Survey via Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

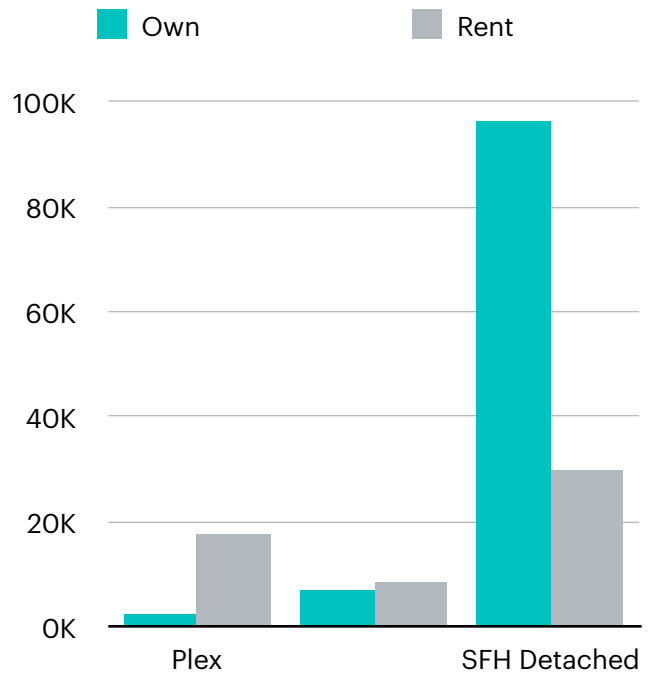
¹ To learn more visit Missing Middle Housing, <https://missingmiddlehousing.com/types>

² Bill Swindell, “Townhome boom emerges in Santa Rosa as needed affordable option,” Press Democrat, November 13, 2020, <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/business/townhome-boom-emerges-in-santa-rosa-as-a-needed-option-for-affordable-housi/>

are considered single-family attached in Sonoma County. Plexes, homes in buildings with 2-9 units, account for 12 percent of all homes below 10 units as they house about 12,410 households in Sonoma County.

Figure 1 shows the split between owner-occupied and renter-occupied homes in Sonoma County. The data shows that single-family detached homes are overwhelmingly owner-occupied with over 96,300. Single-family attached homes are fairly evenly split between owner- and renter-occupied homes between 7,000 and 8,600 respectively. Plexes have a heavier rental skew compared to other housing types. There are over 17,500 renter-occupied plexes and only 2,200 owner-occupied plexes.

Figure 1: Households by Building Type and Tenure



Source: 2018 5-year Sample American Community Survey via Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

Table 2 shows a breakdown for median gross rents, ownership costs, and median home values. Median gross rents and ownership costs are significantly lower for plexes as compared to single-family attached and detached homes.³ The median rents for plexes are 29 percent lower than single-family detached homes while ownership costs are 29 percent lower. Home values are also lower 51 percent lower for plexes when compared to single family detached homes. **The lower rents and ownership costs for plexes suggests that these housing types could offer a more affordable home for residents.** The median home values for plexes and single-family attached homes, over a third lower than detached dwelling, offers more homeownership opportunities.

Table 2: Rents, Ownership Costs, and Median Home Value by Building Type

Type	Median Gross Rents	Ownership Costs	Median Home Value
Plex	\$1,361	\$1,792	\$325,000
SFH Attached	\$1,619	\$1,963	\$375,000
SFH Detached	\$1,828	\$2,403	\$550,000

Note: Ownership costs include mortgage, taxes, and insurance.

Source: 2018 5-year Sample American Community Survey via Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

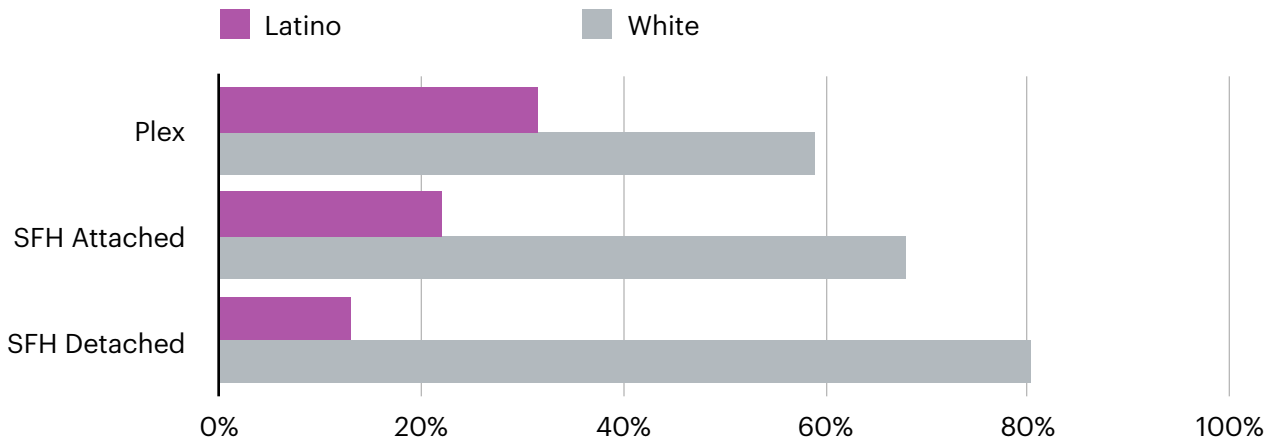
³ Ownership costs include mortgage(s), condo fees, property taxes, and property insurance.

Demographics

Plexes are an important building type that house a far more diverse array of people than single-family detached homes in Sonoma County. Figure 2 shows that Plexes nearly 1 in 3 plexes are occupied by a Latino householder while only about 13 percent live in single-family detached homes, which are largely inhabited by white householders. Roughly 1 in 4 single-family attached homes are inhabited by a Latino householder.

Figure 3 shows household incomes by building type and suggests that plexes are able to

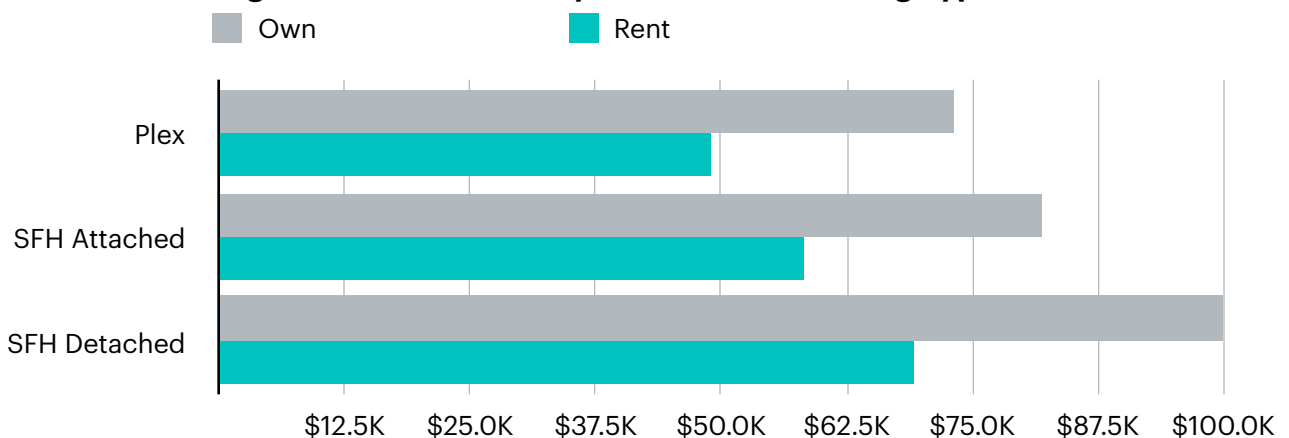
Figure 2: Households by Race/Ethnicity and Building Type



Source: 2018 5-year Sample American Community Survey via Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

house lower-income households for both owner and renter-occupied units. Single-family attached homes are the most expensive type to both own and rent in Sonoma County. Single-family homeowners have household incomes over \$102K as compared to Plex owners who earn \$73K, a 33% difference that offers residents a more affordable option.

Figure 3: Households by Income and Building Type



Source: 2018 5-year Sample American Community Survey via Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)