

My name is Ari Elias-Bachrach, and I rehab vacant houses. I usually work on extremely dilapidated houses – ones that have no utilities, are boarded up, and are creating a nuisance for the neighborhood. I know I'm improving the neighborhood - the neighbors lose one rat infested crime magnet and replace it with something people are proud to call home.

In the winter of 2025 I bought a house near Druid Hill in Baltimore. It was boarded up, filled with trash, and hadn't been lived in for years. After clearing out the debris, I discovered half the floor joists had rotted away — so I replaced them, reframed everything, and slowly brought the place back to life. Full rehabs are marathons: permits, contractors, inspections, BGE/WSSC bureaucracy, and endless delays. I finally got the final U&O in fall 2025 and was wrapping up the work when someone broke in.

My security alarm went off and called the police. But squatters here know exactly what fake documents to show to keep police from acting. The officers were unable to help. Even after the squatter admitted to climbing in through a window, the officers would not remove them. The squatter changed the locks, moved her kids in, and stayed in the house for almost 3 months.

During that time the squatters could have done almost anything they wanted. They could have trashed the place, sold the appliances, or even burned the house down — and I'm required by law to pay the electric bill and loan while barred from entering my own property. I had to fight just to get a copy of the police report to find out the names of the people living in my house, and they certainly didn't pursue criminal charges.

Ultimately, I did get them evicted after 3 months. The squatters cost me nearly \$13,000 – a high sum considering the relatively low value of the houses in this area in the first place. And I got off easy - I have seen other squatter houses where the squatters broke every light fixture, poured cement down the sink, broke holes in the walls, destroyed the appliances, and left hypodermic needles and debris behind.

Among rehabbers and realtors, squatters are a constant topic of discussion. Everyone has stories. People know they can break into any empty house — show fake paperwork, and live rent-free for months. Some even sell “squatter houses” on social media, complete with the documents needed to avoid arrest. The squatters will sometimes extort the owners demanding cash to leave, threatening damage if you refuse. And there are no repercussions. The police won't arrest them, and the courts move too slowly. Three months for an eviction is considered fast.

Meanwhile, anyone rehabbing or selling in certain neighborhoods faces higher costs to guard against squatters. If we want more vacant homes restored, we can't let criminals take them the moment they're finished.

Squatters are exploiting a loophole in the legal system. With just a fake lease, easily obtained on the internet, they can get the rights of tenants and face almost no repercussions. The system needs to be fixed so that there are consequences to their actions. There is no question in my mind that legislative action is needed to penalize this activity to deter future squatters.