

Analyzing the impact of college gameday homes in the American south

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Absentee property ownership in many small college football towns has a negative impact on permanent residents of those communities, according to a study by a Georgia State University geosciences researcher.

The research is the first known attempt to quantify and map local geographies of gameday home investments.

Each weekend in the fall tens of thousands of [football fans](#) flood into college towns to watch their favorite teams kick off against rival schools. Many of them stay in gameday homes, investment properties that sit vacant for much of the year. Taylor Shelton, assistant professor of geosciences and the study's author, examined data from more than a dozen college towns in the South where schools in the Southeastern Conference attract large fan followings. He compared cities like Athens, Ga., Gainesville, Fla., and Auburn, Ala., and developed a study of Starkville, Miss., [home](#) of the Mississippi State Bulldogs.

"The city of Starkville only has 25,000 people, and Mississippi State students make up nearly another 20,000," said Shelton. "But the football stadium holds over 60,000 fans, so the population of the city doubles or triples on gameday weekends, meaning the entire nature of the town is transformed."

The study, published in *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning*, analyzed local property ownership records, construction permits and U.S. Census data. Shelton found that between five and 10 percent of all housing units in Starkville are likely gameday homes, and much of the town's net growth in housing units over the last 15 years is made up of vacant properties that are suspected to be gameday homes. In some neighborhoods, more than 75 percent of [housing units](#) are used as gameday homes.

According to Shelton, these properties—which have grown significantly in the Southeast in recent years—are owned by wealthy alumni, fans and investors who rarely occupy the homes, resulting in a net-negative for permanent residents.

"Having so much of the activity in the housing market focused on these limited-use, largely vacant properties drive up housing prices for the people who actually live and work in the area," said Shelton. "A lot of these smaller towns are now seeing rapid growth, but it really cuts into the kind of vibrancy and energy that you expect from a college town."

Changes to zoning and tax laws could ease some of the impacts, according to the study, but Shelton said implementation of these changes has been slow because gameday homes confer financial benefits for state and local governments.

"Bigger cities have implemented vacancy taxes on properties to discourage people from buying homes for speculative or temporary uses," Shelton said. "Being able to access some of that money and then reinvest it directly into affordable housing is a really simple step. But smaller cities are hesitant to do too much because they like the property tax revenue and they don't have the simultaneous burden of providing municipal services to year-round residents."

Cities like Starkville are often hamstrung by state laws that preempt localities from enacting stricter regulations on landlords or developers beyond what's prescribed at the state level, according to Shelton, which means things are likely to get worse over time.

One of the main goals of the study was to develop a reproducible method to identify gameday homes that can be applied in any [city](#) or college town across the U.S., helping researchers and policymakers make sense of what's driving this phenomenon.

"I hope this research can provide some legitimacy to efforts to create a more just and equitable [housing](#) in these smaller cities," said Shelton. "We should place the focus on what residents actually want and need to make their lives better, rather than having places that cater towards

wealthy out-of-town alumni and fans."

More information: Taylor Shelton, Gameday homes: Mapping emerging geographies of housing speculation and absentee ownership in the American South, *Cities* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cities.2021.103230](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103230)

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