The State of the Forgotten Home

An evidence review of fragmented home information, deferred decisions, and the case for continuous home records

Industry research report

United States

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Prepared for professionals across residential real estate, home services, insurance, inspection, property technology, and housing policy.

Executive Summary

The American home is extensively measured yet poorly remembered. Public agencies record transactions, assessments, permits, hazards, and selected housing conditions. Contractors retain estimates, photographs, invoices, and warranty details. Manufacturers retain model information. Owners keep some combination of paper files, inboxes, spreadsheets, cloud folders, and memory. These systems are useful, but they do not form a continuous operating record that follows the home across projects, professionals, and ownership changes.

This report calls the accumulated consequence home information debt: the uncertainty created when decisions, evidence, obligations, and system history are missing, scattered, inaccessible, or detached from the physical home. It is an analytical term, not a nationally measured statistic. The available evidence establishes the conditions that create the debt, but no current national dataset directly measures its full prevalence or economic cost.

The evidence supports five conclusions:

1. The financial exposure is large. The national housing stock is older than ever, upkeep is substantial, and unexpected repairs are common.
2. Recordkeeping duties already exist, but responsibility is pushed onto individual homeowners across tax, insurance, warranty, safety, and maintenance contexts.
3. The data environment is fragmented by design. Transaction records, public records, contractor documentation, equipment information, and lived observations sit in separate systems with different owners and retention practices.
4. Consumers compensate with improvised systems. Reddit discussions repeatedly describe binders, boxes, spreadsheets, email accounts, cloud drives, handwritten dates, and reconstructed histories.
5. A continuous home record is a plausible missing layer. International digital-building-logbook work demonstrates that lifecycle repositories are already treated as infrastructure elsewhere, although U.S. consumer use requires different governance and privacy choices.

The central industry opportunity is not merely digitizing paperwork. It is preserving context: what was observed, what was decided, what work was authorized, what changed, what evidence remains, and what should happen next. A durable home record could reduce repeated investigation, strengthen closeout, improve maintenance planning, preserve warranties and tax evidence, and make ownership transitions less dependent on memory.

Evidence at a Glance

Signal	Finding	What it establishes
Housing age	Median age of owner-occupied and rental housing continues to rise; Harvard reported a 44-year median for the U.S. stock in 2023.	More components are moving deeper into repair and replacement cycles.
Older-home spending	For pre-1950 owned homes, Census reported median annual upkeep of $1,800; recent buyers spent a median $3,900 per year.	New ownership often triggers discovery and catch-up work.
Project uncertainty	Angi reported 92% of recent professional hirers finished at or above budget; 43% exceeded the original estimate.	Incomplete knowledge and changing conditions carry material planning risk.
Emergency exposure	HomeServe reported three-quarters of respondents experienced a repair emergency; 41% had under $500 reserved.	Household resilience is thin when unplanned work arrives.
Recordkeeping response	Federal and insurance guidance recommends retaining improvement evidence and documenting property.	Records have recognized tax, claim, safety, and recovery value.

Research Scope and Method

This report synthesizes four classes of evidence: federal housing and consumer guidance; independent and academic work; commercial surveys and market research; and purposively selected public forum discussions. Sources were reviewed for date, population, methodology, directness, and potential commercial incentives.

Official evidence carries the most weight for housing characteristics, spending definitions, tax recordkeeping, and disaster preparation. Industry surveys add current behavioral and sentiment signals but often use screened online samples and are produced by companies that sell home services or insurance. Their findings are treated as directional unless independently replicated. Reddit material is used only to identify recurring experiences, workarounds, and language. It cannot estimate prevalence.

Evidence class	Best use	Primary limitation
Government surveys and guidance	National conditions, defined expenditures, recognized record needs	Usually measures pieces of the problem rather than continuity itself
Academic and standards work	Lifecycle-information theory, interoperability, maintenance knowledge	Often focused on commercial or public buildings
Industry surveys	Recent homeowner behavior, budget pressure, repair experience	Commercial sponsorship and varying sample design
Public forums	Lived problems, improvised systems, transfer failures	Self-selection, unverifiable accounts, no population estimates

Research boundary. No national survey located for this review asks whether a homeowner possesses a complete, transferable, longitudinal record of systems, maintenance, projects, decisions, warranties, and recommendations. The absence of that measure is itself a research gap, not proof that every home lacks records.

The Home as an Aging Operating Asset

The case begins with the physical asset. The U.S. Census Bureau describes the American Housing Survey as the nation's most comprehensive housing survey. Harvard's 2025 remodeling analysis reported that the median age of the housing stock reached 44 years in 2023, increasing demand to replace aging components.[1,3]

Census analysis of 2021 AHS data found that the median age of owned homes was 41 years. Homes built before 1950 represented about 17% of owned homes. Their owners spent a median $1,800 annually on upkeep, while recent buyers of older homes spent a median $3,900, compared with $1,500 for owners who had remained at least ten years. Sixty-one percent of owners of older homes undertook an improvement project between 2019 and 2021.[2]

These figures do not demonstrate that missing records caused the spending. They show why continuity matters: aging systems create more decisions, and ownership transitions concentrate discovery. When roof age, prior leakage, drainage work, electrical changes, warranties, or contractor recommendations are unavailable, the next owner or professional must infer the home's history from condition, permits, seller disclosures, invoices that survived, and physical clues.

Financial Pressure Turns Missing Context Into Risk

Recent commercial research portrays homeowners prioritizing essential work under financial pressure. Angi's July 2026 survey of 1,000 U.S. homeowners who had hired a professional within the prior year reported that 92% completed the project at or above budget and 43% exceeded the original estimate. Of those exceeding budget, slightly more than one-third reported overruns of at least 30%. The screened sample does not represent homeowners who did no recent professional work, but it is directly relevant to active home-service demand.[10]

HomeServe's 2024 State of the Home survey collected 2,353 responses from U.S. adults, 89% of whom were homeowners. It reported that 75% had experienced at least one home-repair emergency in the preceding year, 41% had less than $500 reserved, and one in five had nothing set aside. Because HomeServe sells repair plans, the results deserve commercial-context caution. They nonetheless reinforce a broader point: household financial buffers can be small relative to major system failures.[12]

Harvard reported that 28% of homeowners in the lowest income quintile spent nothing on improvements or maintenance in 2023, twice the 14% share across homeowners overall. Zero spending can reflect constrained resources rather than zero need. Better information does not create money, but it can improve triage: distinguish urgent safety or damage risks from work that can be monitored, bundled, phased, or deferred responsibly.[4]

Recordkeeping Is Already Part of Homeownership

The United States does not impose one universal home-logbook regime, but multiple institutions instruct owners to preserve different records for different purposes.

Institutional need	Information owners may need	Current pattern
Tax basis	Purchase documents, qualifying capital-improvement costs, invoices and proof	Owner maintains evidence across years or decades
Insurance and disaster recovery	Inventory, photographs, descriptions, model numbers, ownership evidence	Owner prepares before loss and retrieves after disruption
Warranty and service	Receipt, installation date, serial number, provider, service history	Scattered across manufacturer, contractor, inbox and paper
Safety and regulated work	Permits, certifications, lead-safe practices, inspection evidence	Split among local government, contractor and owner
Maintenance planning	System age, condition, recurring task, prior observation, next action	Usually recreated by each owner or service provider

IRS Publication 523 provides a framework for calculating adjusted basis when a home is sold, including qualifying improvements. Ready.gov recommends documenting property and retaining descriptive evidence for preparedness. The NAIC provides a home-inventory application because documentation supports insurance loss reporting. DOE's Home Energy Score produces a present-condition assessment and recommended improvements. EPA renovation rules create still another domain of contractor and project documentation, particularly for lead-safe work.[5,6,7,8,9]

The important pattern is not that these programs are inadequate. Each serves its own mandate. The gap appears between them: no common consumer layer automatically connects improvement evidence to the affected system, a warranty to its installation, an inspection finding to its resolution, or a contractor recommendation to a future maintenance decision.

The Fragmentation Problem

A home generates information at four different levels. Public records describe the parcel and selected authorized work. Transaction records describe a sale at a moment in time. Private service records describe a specific engagement. Household memory describes lived events that may never reach a formal system. Each layer has value, but none is equivalent to an operating history.

Layer	Typical contents	Why continuity breaks
Public	Assessment, deed, permit, code, flood or hazard data	Local variation, incomplete digitization, permitted work only
Transaction	Disclosure, inspection, appraisal, title, settlement	Snapshot-oriented and often not transferred as an active record
Service provider	Estimate, scope, photos, invoice, technician notes	Controlled by separate firms and software accounts
Product	Manual, serial number, registration, warranty	Organized by manufacturer, not by the home lifecycle
Household	Observations, decisions, paint colors, recurring tasks	Depends on personal habits, storage, and memory

NIST product-lifecycle work has long emphasized interoperable information across systems and people. European Commission work on digital building logbooks defines a common repository for building-related data intended to increase transparency, trust, and informed decision-making. These initiatives are not direct blueprints for American single-family homes, but they validate the underlying infrastructure concept: a building benefits when lifecycle information remains connected to the asset rather than isolated by event or vendor.[15,16]

What Homeowners Say When Institutions Are Absent

Public discussions show homeowners inventing their own home operating systems. In selected Reddit threads, participants describe two-drawer filing cabinets, zippered binders, plastic bins, spreadsheets with many tabs, Dropbox folders, dedicated house email accounts, scanned receipts, labels attached to appliances, and dates written directly on filters or equipment. These are not failures of diligence. They are evidence that motivated owners perceive a need and must assemble the solution themselves.[17,18,19,21]

The forum material also reveals where information loss becomes consequential. Buyers report uncertainty about roof age, conflicting disclosures and permit histories, unpermitted work, unknown HVAC age, and the absence of prior-owner records. One widely resonant question asks why homes do not come with a CARFAX-like history covering maintenance, permits, contractors, and major-system ages.[20,22]

This qualitative evidence cannot tell us how many homeowners experience these conditions. It does identify repeatable research categories: record location, completeness, transferability, trust, reconstruction time, decision delay, and financial consequence.

Defining Home Information Debt

Home information debt is the accumulated uncertainty and future work created when material knowledge about a home is not captured, connected, maintained, or transferred. Like technical debt, it may remain invisible while conditions are stable. It becomes costly when someone needs to make a decision quickly.

The debt grows through omission, fragmentation, context loss, and transfer failure. A receipt without the related system is a weak record. A photograph without date or purpose loses meaning. A recommendation without its underlying observation is difficult to evaluate later. A project closeout stored only in a contractor portal may disappear when the relationship or software changes. A new owner may inherit the physical result but not the reasoning behind it.

Debt mechanism	Example	Likely consequence
Omission	Maintenance or repair was never recorded	Unknown age, scope, provider, or recurrence
Fragmentation	Invoice, photos, warranty, and recommendation live separately	Time spent searching and incomplete decisions
Context loss	Final result survives but original finding and alternatives do not	Repeated diagnosis or contradictory advice
Transfer failure	Knowledge remains with prior owner or contractor	New owner reconstructs the home from scratch
Inaction	Known issue lacks owner, priority, budget, or next date	Deferred decision becomes emergency exposure

The concept should be used carefully. This report does not claim a dollar value for home information debt. Establishing one requires original research linking record completeness to outcomes such as diagnostic time, duplicate visits, budget variance, warranty recovery, claim friction, maintenance compliance, or transaction uncertainty.

A Continuous Home Record

A continuous home record is more than document storage. It connects evidence, people, decisions, and future action to the durable identity of the home. At minimum, it should preserve:

- Core property facts and the provenance of each fact
- Major systems, components, ages, identifiers, condition, and expected lifecycle
- Inspections, observations, photographs, and unresolved findings
- Approved scopes, changes, project closeout, invoices, receipts, and warranties
- Contractors and technicians, with role-appropriate access and attribution
- Maintenance history, recommendations, priorities, budgets, and next actions
- Ownership-transition packets that distinguish verified facts from owner assertions

The record must also preserve uncertainty. An unknown roof age should remain unknown until supported; an inferred installation date should not silently become fact. Source, date, confidence, permission, and correction history are core product requirements, not administrative extras.

Industry Implications

Contractors

The strongest entry point is project closeout. A structured completion record can make the contractor's work legible long after payment: original scope, findings, changes, materials, photographs, warranties, recommendations, and maintenance dates. The contractor gains a higher-quality customer experience and a reason for the homeowner to retain the relationship.

Real estate professionals

A home record could improve pre-listing preparation and post-closing continuity without replacing inspection, disclosure, title, or appraisal. The product opportunity is to organize evidence and disclose provenance, not to guarantee completeness or eliminate professional judgment.

Insurers and risk partners

Documentation and preventive action can support preparedness, claims, and mitigation. Any insurance application must be designed around consent, data minimization, and clear boundaries between homeowner assistance and underwriting use.

Property technology

Most residential technology organizes a transaction, marketplace, device, or service workflow. The whitespace is an asset-centered continuity layer that can receive outputs from many systems while remaining intelligible to the homeowner.

Policy and standards

The U.S. does not need to copy Europe's building-logbook model wholesale. It can learn from the goals: common definitions, provenance, interoperability, permissions, portability, and lifecycle persistence.

What the Evidence Does Not Yet Prove

- It does not measure the percentage of U.S. homes lacking a complete operating record.
- It does not establish that missing records cause a particular share of repair emergencies or budget overruns.
- It does not show that a software platform alone changes maintenance behavior.
- It does not establish a universal financial return for homeowners, contractors, insurers, or Realtors.

These limitations strengthen the case for disciplined original research. Potomac Lux should not fill missing evidence with invented precision. It should become the organization that measures the gap.

The National Research Agenda

A defensible State of the Forgotten Home index should combine a nationally balanced homeowner survey, a contractor and inspector survey, structured record audits, and pilot outcomes. The first edition should establish baseline measures rather than attempt a single sensational score.

Research module	Core measure	Recommended minimum

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Homeowner survey	Completeness, location, retrieval time, system knowledge, financial readiness	1,500 U.S. homeowners with demographic and regional weighting
Professional survey	Reconstruction time, repeat diagnosis, closeout practices, information received	300 contractors, inspectors, Realtors, and property professionals
Record audit	Presence and linkage of system facts, photos, invoices, warranties, recommendations	100 consenting homes across age and tenure cohorts
Pilot study	Changes in retrieval time, closeout completion, planned maintenance and confidence	50 homes observed for 6–12 months

Proposed baseline questions

1. Can the owner identify the approximate age and last major service for roof, HVAC, water heater, electrical panel, and primary drainage or sewer infrastructure?
2. Can the owner retrieve a receipt, warranty, or completion record for the last major project within five minutes?
3. Are open recommendations stored with their source, urgency, rationale, expected cost range, and next review date?
4. Did the owner receive records from the previous owner, and would the owner transfer an organized record to the next one?
5. How much professional time is spent reconstructing prior conditions before diagnosis or estimating?
6. How often do incomplete records affect warranty use, tax documentation, insurance claims, project scope, or transaction negotiation?

Conclusion

America's homes are not undocumented. They are discontinuously documented. Information exists, but it is organized around institutions and events rather than the home's continuing life. The owner becomes the integration layer, and the integration often consists of a drawer, an inbox, a spreadsheet, and memory.

The evidence is strongest on the surrounding conditions: an aging housing stock, substantial upkeep, frequent unexpected repairs, thin household reserves, multiple formal reasons to retain records, and a fragmented data environment. The direct size and economic cost of home information debt remain unmeasured.

That creates a legitimate industry opening. The organization that defines the standard, measures the gap, and demonstrates better outcomes can shape a new category of residential infrastructure. The next State of the Forgotten Home should move from evidence synthesis to original measurement.

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