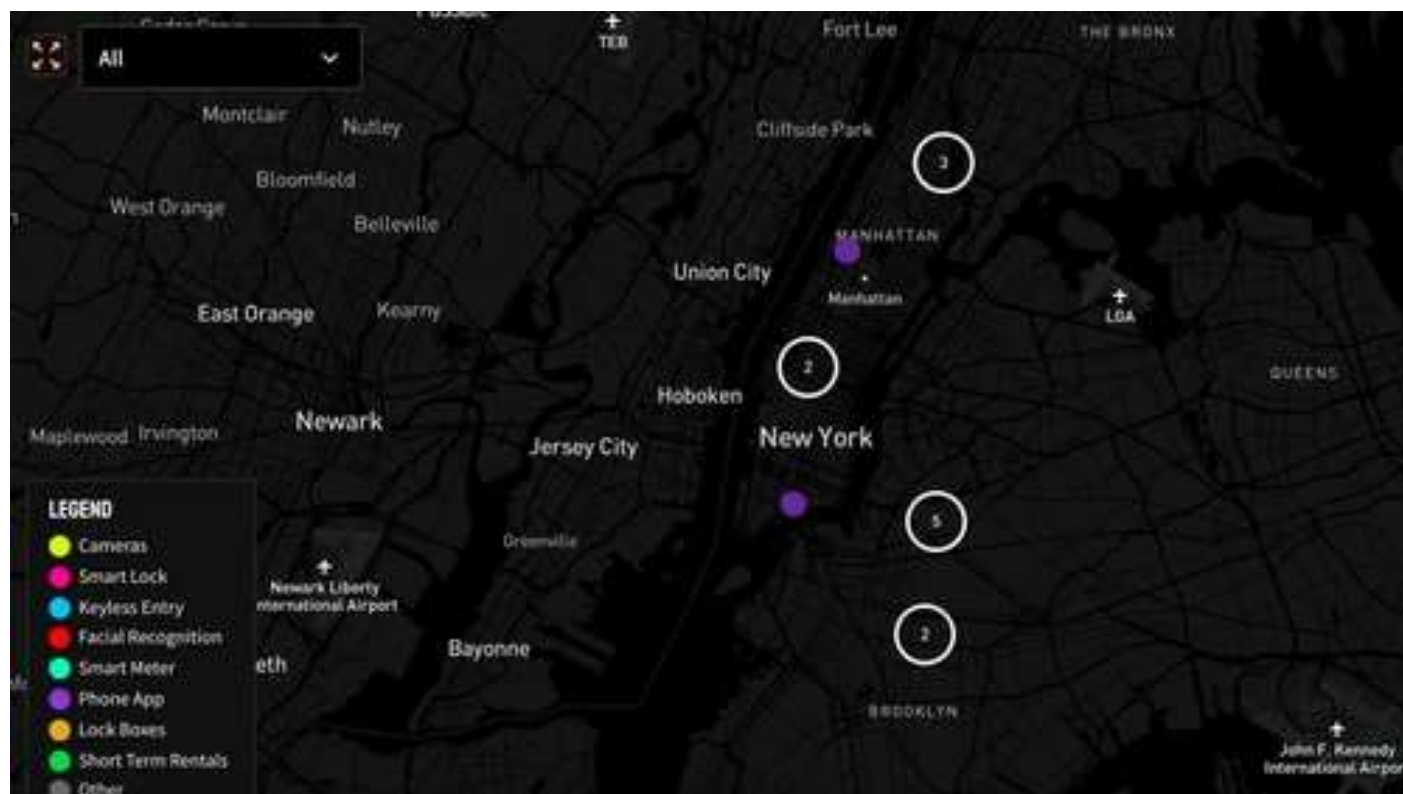# MOTHERBOARD
TECH BY VICE

This Map Lets You Report Landlords Using Tech to Screw Over Tenants

With mass-evictions on the horizon, Landlord Tech Watch is looking to shed light on the tools used by landlords to

By <u>Janus Rose</u>

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IMAGE: <u>LANDLORD TECH WATCH</u>

Now, a group of activists have released Landlord Tech Watch, a site that allows anyone to report where this "landlord tech" is being used and plot it on a map—like a version of Nextdoor that turns the tables to hold property owners and real estate companies accountable.

The project is the effort of technologists and tenants rights advocates, who say they're aiming to use data to shed light on the use of biometric locks, tenant screening systems, and other technology used by landlords to exert power over tenants.

"It just became apparent that these technologies are increasingly being deployed in residential spaces, and there's so little public information about them," Erin McElroy, a postdoctoral researcher at the AI Now Institute and co-founder of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, told Motherboard.

McElroy said the project came together following a prominent tenant dispute at Atlantic Plaza Towers, a rent-stabilized building in Brownsville, Brooklyn. The landlord, Robert Nelson, was trying to replace physical key fobs with a facial recognition system, a technology which has been repeatedly shown to exhibit racial bias. The project was abandoned after 136 tenants rallied in protest, filing a legal complaint with the New York State Department of Housing and Community Renewal.

Property technology, or "PropTech" as it is known among landlords and tech companies, has been around for decades, and has blossomed into a thriving industry with the rise of "AI"-powered decision-making systems and smart devices. The Markup recently estimated that there are over 2,000 companies marketing PropTech solutions, including tenant screening algorithms that often produce

Often, this means that people who have struggled financially in the past, have criminal records, or even complain about past landlords become trapped in a perpetual cycle by these systems, which often don't consider details or context when making their determinations.

"What we're seeing is that tenants who might complain about a negligent landlord might be denied housing in the future because their name is registered as a 'problem tenant,'" said McElroy. "It punishes people who are already targeted by the state and by gentrification."

More recently, the PropTech industry has taken advantage of the housing and unemployment crisis in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, helping landlords as tens of millions find themselves out of a job and unable to pay rent without government assistance. In April, during the height of the pandemic, Naborly, a property management software company that performs risk assessments, sent marketing emails to landlords encouraging them to report "delinquent" tenants in order to build profiles on those who were unable to pay rent.

With 30 million still unemployed and emergency tenant protections expiring, tens of millions of Americans will be at risk of losing their homes in the coming months. The ensuing exodus promises to be the largest wave of mass-evictions in modern history—absent a new pandemic assistance deal from Congress, which just went on recess without renewing the $600 monthly federal stimulus that has been keeping millions of workers afloat since March.

The grim situation has inspired activists to build tools like Justfix.nyc, a site that helps tenants file complaints and organize rent strikes by finding tenants from their landlord's other properties. McElroy hopes Landlord Tech Watch will further aid

"We want to be able to collectively organize tenants from multiple buildings," said McElroy. "That's the ultimate goal—whether it be for direct action or policy reform or both."

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