

In the Wake of Tragedy

How residents are leading public safety in Boulevard Houses

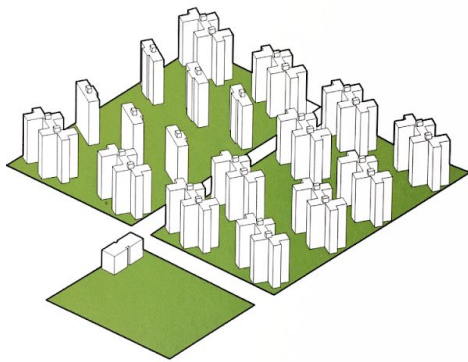


Boulevard Houses

A. Background

Located in the heart of the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn, Boulevard Houses is home to approximately 2,852 residents living in 1,441 apartments. 61% of Boulevard residents are female and more than one third of households with children are headed by single women. Young adults between the ages of 15 and 29 account for approximately one-fifth of Boulevard residents. At Boulevard Houses, the median household income is \$16,450 and approximately 34% of residents have a household income under \$10,000. Nearly three-quarters (75%) of Boulevard residents are African American and one quarter (25%) are Hispanic/Latino ¹. In sum, many Boulevard households are under-resourced and headed by mostly black and Latino single mothers (or grandparents) raising children and teens.

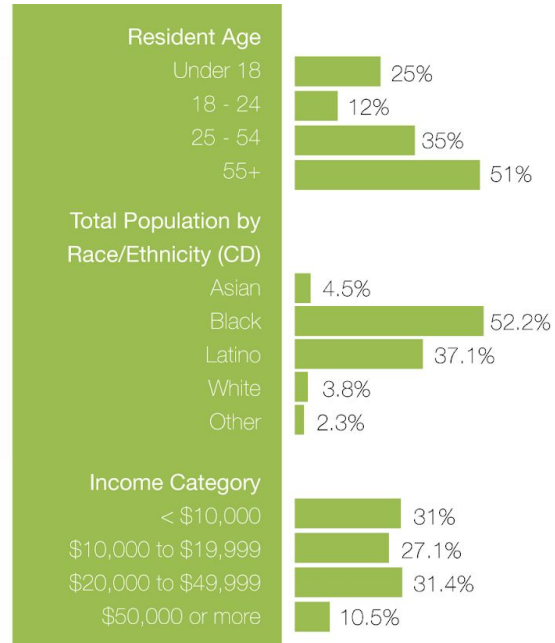
Boulevard Houses



Year Built: 1951
 # of Buildings: 18
 # of Floors: 6-14
 Total Units: 1,441
 Population: 2,852

County: Kings
 Community District (CD): 5
 Neighborhood: East New York

Illustration: NYCHAPEDIA



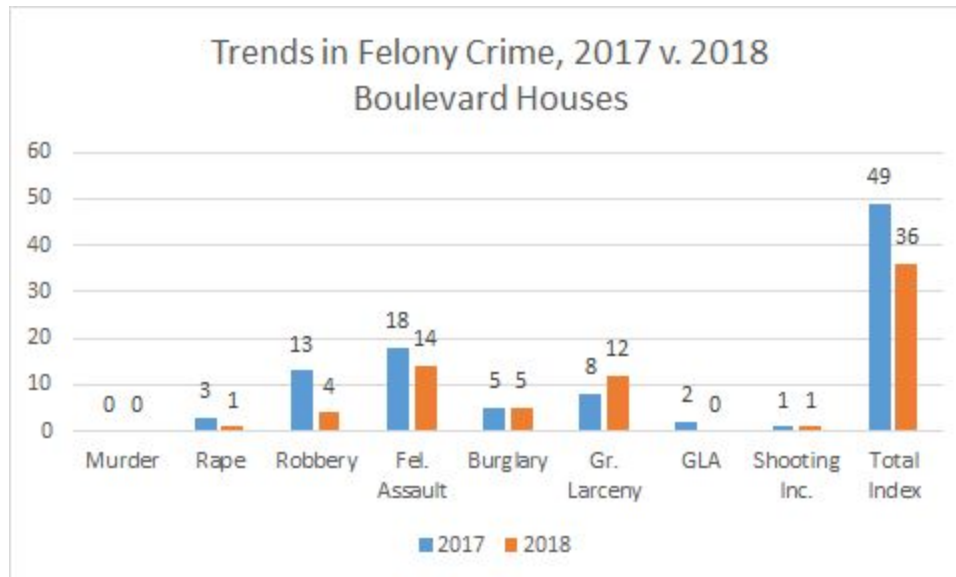
In June 2014, Mikayla Capers, 7 years old, and Prince Joshua Avitto, 6 years old, were stabbed multiple times within an elevator at Boulevard Houses. Prince, affectionately known as PJ, did not survive. Mikayla healed from life threatening injuries and today stands a survivor. The Prince Joshua Avitto Community Center was dedicated in PJ’s honor to support collective healing and neighborhood safety. Residents honor PJ’s memory through annual memorials and ongoing community service work. This tragic crime was also an important catalyst for the establishment of the Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety.

Despite reported declines in total counts of major crime, Boulevard Houses residents are concerned about hot spots, which are small hubs of illegal and anti-social activity, as well as the impact of long standing feuds with neighboring NYCHA developments.

B. Crime Overview | Trust | Justice

Boulevard Houses has experienced a decrease in index crime in Calendar Year (CY) 2018 compared to CY 2017.¹ Crime declines in CY 2018 were driven by reductions in violent crime categories. Specifically, there were fewer rapes (-2), fewer robberies (-9), and fewer felony assaults (-4). Crime increased in only one major crime category in CY 2018: grand larceny (+4). Index crime has decreased substantially (-11) from 2014 when MAP began.

¹ Index crime, also known as “major crime” consists of the following crime categories: burglary, felony assault, grand larceny auto, grand larceny, murder, rape, and robbery.



C. Priority Identification | Opportunity | Youth Development

Youth between the ages of 14 and 24 are the most victimized and most arrested population at Boulevard Houses. Youth involvement in structured recreational and professional development activities, including employment, reduces the likelihood of justice system involvement. When not in school, not in work, and not given an opportunity to participate in engaging programming, youth and young adults become vulnerable to problematic behavior. To prevent young adults from perpetrating or being impacted by violence or criminal behavior, the NeighborhoodStat team has identified opportunities for young people at Boulevard Houses who are not in school and out of work.

Boulevard Houses youth have access to substantial resources via the two community centers in the immediate vicinity of the development. Between both centers, programs in arts and culture, education, and job training serve all age demographics and are offered six days per week until 9 pm. However, despite the existence of these two community centers, residents and community center staff report that the youth programming at the community centers does not attract the community youth. In addition, youth from Boulevard Houses are guaranteed enrollment in the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), as long as they submit the required paperwork and application materials in time. The community centers and the SYEP program both have the potential to provide Boulevard Houses youth with opportunities to stay engaged in either interesting social/educational programming or to gain valuable employment experience.

Lastly, the NeighborhoodStat team believes that a critical component of youth engagement includes supporting the civic development and engagement of young people. A high-quality civics education, alongside opportunities to participate civically in the community, are both critical components for young adults whose voices are typically left out of political conversation about their neighborhood and its resources.

How we can work together to increase youth engagement:

The NeighborhoodStat team has taken the first steps toward identifying ways for residents to partner with the City to support youth development at the Boulevard Houses. Here are some initial ways we can decrease youth disengagement and, subsequently, youth victimization and arrests.

1. Community Center Information and Outreach

Challenge: Despite the existence of the two community centers near Boulevard Houses, residents and community center staff report that youth attendance rates are low, possibly because they are not attracted to available programming. Low youth and young adult attendance has been recorded at both community centers. Some residents report that they do not know how to enroll in programs at the Prince Joshua Avitto Community Center and request improved communication and welcoming practices in the lobby area. Both community centers express a willingness to explore ways to diversify the offered programming to meet the interests of young people.

Suggested Next Steps

- Increase utilization of the centers' programming by Boulevard youth by improving awareness and accessibility to both centers.
- Conduct outreach to youth where and when they hang out to learn more about the kind of programming that might interest them.
- Host program activities in shared and accessible public spaces to build relationships between center staff and young people.
- Routinely and widely distribute updated information about existing young adult programs and enrollment requirements.
- Integrate youth culture into programs, including in the text and design of outreach materials, and improve user experiences in center welcome areas.

- Expand access to a free public WiFi connection that hosts community center splash pages to help to spread information about programming opportunities and engage more youth and young adults.

2. Recreational and Workforce Activities and Programming

Challenge: The sports and fitness programs that are currently available at the Boulevard Houses Community Center are not appealing to community youth. Programs are limited, with only Shape Up available and attended mostly by seniors. CAMBA staff would like to expand programming to meet the community needs and interest, but CAMBA does not have a license agreement in place with NYCHA to program outdoor space or funding to expand activities to include more desirable activities like a media lab, skateboarding and general fitness training. In addition, programs that are presently available at the community centers fail to attract young people from Boulevard Houses because they do not provide access to the desired hands-on workforce development experience and are not oriented to budding professional fields like technology, graphic design, sports management, music and media production, and entrepreneurship, that are most interesting to Boulevard youth. Instead, the available programming across both center tends to depend on traditional “Ready to Work” curriculums, which do not effectively intertwine professional interests with soft skills training like resume writing.

Suggested Next Steps

- Make targeted investments in the CAMBA Community Center to maintain spaces, subcontract experts, acquire program supplies and equipment.
- Develop partnerships with existing CBOs and city agencies to prototype and demonstrate success of new programming, and start to seek and attract additional private and public funding.
- To resolve any constraints imposed by space limitations within the community center, work with the NeighborhoodStat team and partners to provide engaging programs in open outdoor spaces.
- Provide access to a more diverse set of workforce training opportunities that meets the needs of resident youth.

- Develop relationships and ways to engage with workforce development programs that specialize in the areas desired by the residents and are willing to host programs onsite at Boulevard.
- Connect residents with resources that provide individual mentoring and opportunities to gain professional experience.
- Discuss successes and lessons learned from Good Shepherd’s implementation of “The Business Lab,” a pilot program to support young adults who may be at risk for gun use in developing the professional and behavioral skills to choose alternatives to violence and pursue pathways to financial stability. Based on lessons learned, develop sustainability plan for Boulevard young adults.

3. Youth Employment

Challenge: Despite guaranteed placement in the program, Boulevard youth do not submit applications to participate in SYEP at high rates. Of the approximately 476 Boulevard residents between the ages of 14 and 24 who are eligible for SYEP, there were only 134 SYEP enrollments at Boulevard Houses in FY19. That is 28% of of the eligible population. In addition, it is important to point out that SYEP programs have many positive outcomes on participants, including reduced likelihood of justice system involvement. The low rates of application and enrollment in SYEP can be improved through concerted efforts to make information about the program available. Noted enrollment obstacles for SYEP include: difficulty acquiring required application documents; insufficient knowledge of guaranteed program placement for MAP residents; insufficient knowledge of application deadlines; inaccurate concern that SYEP income will adversely affect public benefit eligibility; prior negative experience with SYEP program administration; and prior negative experience with workforce placements.

Suggested Next Steps

- Establish and maintain onsite SYEP application assistance stations that offer application support, including explanation of qualification requirements, assistance with document collection, and assistance with completing the application.
- Provide consistent flyering using well designed, high impact materials.
- Incentivize peer-to-peer recruitment.

4. Civic Engagement

Challenge: Young adults voices are left out of political and civic conversation when they do not have access to resources to investigate information and surface questions. Given the tremendous amount of information now available through social media and other networks, many people struggle to differentiate actual news from disinformation. The large concentration of media sources, some laden with inaccuracies, creates problematic circumstances for young people in particular, who are still forming their understanding of the world. Without training in and access to opportunities for civic participation and engagement, young people struggle to discern valuable information from misleading and inaccurate information.

Suggested Next Steps

- Provide residents with access to a high-quality civics education, which is not widely available to either residents or students within the New York City Department of Education.
- Identify opportunities for young people to engage in activities that model what democratic processes look like, as well as opportunities to participate in the civic life of their communities and learn from this participation.
- Build community leadership and grassroots organizers by providing access to additional civics programs and political education. Youth-centered civics and political education programs that use restorative and creative discussion-based curriculums (i.e., panels, movie reviews, art) can help dispel myths, cultivate critical thinking and leadership skills, and build self-esteem and community.

D. Priority Identification | Design | Activation and Maintenance

In Boulevard Houses, hotspots and ongoing feuds with residents from neighboring NYCHA developments have adversely impacted resident perceptions of neighborhood safety. Within the past six months, there have been at least six reported heroin overdose deaths on campus or in the immediate vicinity of the campus.

Hotspots are disruptive for neighborhood safety and threaten community cohesion. The existence of these neighborhood hotspots is especially problematic for youth, because some of the hotspots

at Boulevard were originally purposed as communal recreational spaces. For example, the use of the basketball and handball courts for loitering and drug use or sale makes the utilization of the space for its intended recreational purpose impossible or undesirable.

The existence of neighborhood hotspots may also have a profound effect on policing tactics, and subsequently, the relationship between the police and community. Many neighborhood youth in Boulevard Houses report that they have experienced unfair police scrutiny while performing innocuous activities like skateboarding, playing music, or socializing with friends. They receive similar police scrutiny when performing activities that are essentially decriminalized, like entering the park after dark or entering an apartment building without ID. The close watch and continuous engagement by the NYPD in these fashions is reported to increase tension between the police and the community.

In addition, the state of disrepair within the buildings and apartments motivates many Boulevard residents to spend time outside, where some then have negative encounters with police. The poor conditions of the buildings, coupled with tense encounters with police, diminishes community pride and reduces resident trust in government. Failure by government agencies to carry out their designated stewardship responsibilities results in evident signs of disrepair, which, according to some theories, may attract problematic behavior.

How we can work together to activate and maintain spaces:

The NeighborhoodStat team has identified ways for residents to partner with the City to activate and maintain public spaces at the Boulevard Houses. The NeighborhoodStat team believes that better community relationships and safe neighborhoods begin with improvements to physical space.

1. Nighttime and Outdoor Public Events

Challenge: The NeighborhoodStat team identified the Boulevard Houses basketball and handball courts, buildings 817 and 881, and the corner store at Schenck and Stanley Avenue as area hotspots where youth loiter and drugs are commonly used or sold. The basketball and handball courts are notably more problematic in terms of drug use and sale. There have been six reported overdose deaths near these areas in the past six months. The utilization of recreational spaces for illegal and illicit activity, alongside an enforcement environment that may presume a level of criminality or wrongdoing from neighborhood youth, leaves Boulevard youth without places to socialize or enjoy outdoor recreation. Boulevard residents, especially young people, state that they now have few to no public spaces to congregate in the place they call home.

Research suggests that people who report high availability of community events are 13% more likely to trust government and 31% more likely to rate their local police as effective, as compared to people who report low availability of community events². In addition, well-designed and utilized public spaces can provide opportunities for contact and socialization with neighbors and strangers and improve positive interactions among diverse groups. Young people, and especially teenage girls can be left out of public spaces - research shows that teens want to be included in public spaces, and they want to see public spaces designed for everyone that welcome their participation³.

Suggested Next Steps

- Develop a coordinated effort of city agencies and services to execute a series of nighttime pop-up events focused on introducing youth-programmed activities. These events could focus on helping residents achieve personal goals, improve community/police relationships, enhance interpersonal relationships, or provide a forum for discussion of issues related to community and social justice.
- Establish a partnership between NYCHA and DYCD to create a process for youth to have a voice in the assessment, upgrading and programming of open spaces.
- To address youth disengagement and need for evening programming, the Van Dyke CPTED (Crime Prevention through Environmental Design) subcommittee of the resident stakeholder team has proposed after-school and evening youth programming on-site in the green space near the central basketball and handball court.

2. Building Maintenance

Challenge: Boulevard residents live with deteriorating buildings and physical conditions that include peeling paint, mold, damaged plaster, rodents, inoperable appliances and malfunctioning smoke detectors. While NYCHA has addressed rodent issues and families originally living with mold issues have been rehoused, certain issues have yet to be resolved. Animal waste in and around the buildings continue to be an issue as owners are not properly taking care of their pets. Broken and defective doors seriously diminish public safety -- for example, building 807 has been noted as having an insecure entranceway -- and the lack of entrance security makes buildings susceptible to non-residents who enter the buildings and utilize the non-secure spaces for problematic activities like drug use, burglary, or loitering. Residents suggest that broken

² Assembly: Research Brief No. 1. Center for Active Design and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, November 2016

³ Bellair, Paul E. "Social Interaction and Community Crime: Examining the Importance of Neighbor Networks." 1995.

intercoms and difficulties obtaining spare or replacement keys can lead to security breaches, like door breakages or doors that are propped open.

Suggested Next Steps

- Create and install signage that encourages residents to clean up after their pets.
- Make bags for pet waste and disposal stations available and obvious in public spaces.
- Prioritize work orders that affect health and safety in the NYCHA Work Order Ticketing process.
- Work with NYCHA and Resident Association to develop method to simply and regularly update residents on the progress of planned or in-progress repairs.
- Work with NYCHA and MOCJ to develop a process to improve entryway access for residents. While the new intercom system allows for entry through residents' phones, this system needs to take into consideration that some residents do not have consistent phone line access.