

Changing the Narrative

Improving public safety and quality of life for Brownsville Residents



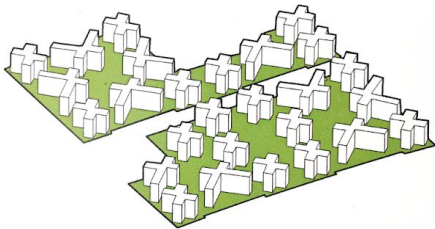
Brownsville Houses

A. Background

Brownsville has the largest concentration of public housing in the nation. Within Brownsville's 1.2 square miles, there are 18 NYCHA public housing developments. The Brownsville Houses are located in the heart of Brownsville and consist of 27 buildings, each standing six or seven stories tall. Brownsville Houses is home to approximately 3,291 residents living in 1,338 apartments. Children and youth account for over a third of residents with 29% of residents under the age of 18 and 15% of residents are between the ages 18-24. About 29% of residents have a household income under \$10,000. Approximately, 74% percent of residents are Black/African American and 21% are Hispanic/Latino. In summary, Brownsville residents, many of whom are

living as single caregiving families with children and young people, live in an area of highly concentrated poverty and limited resources.

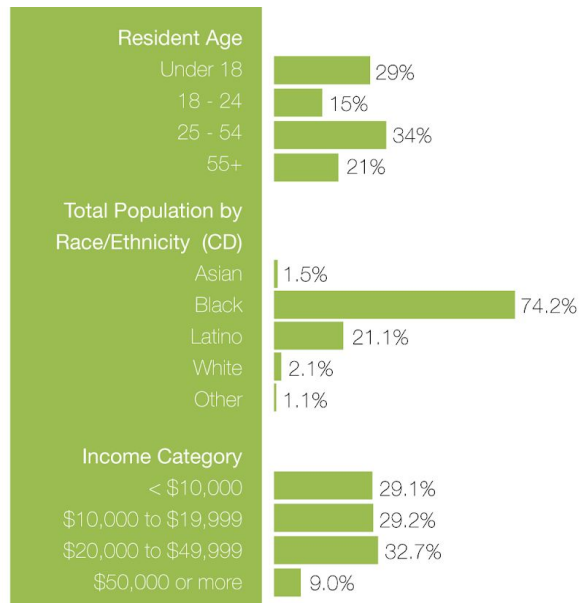
Brownsville Houses



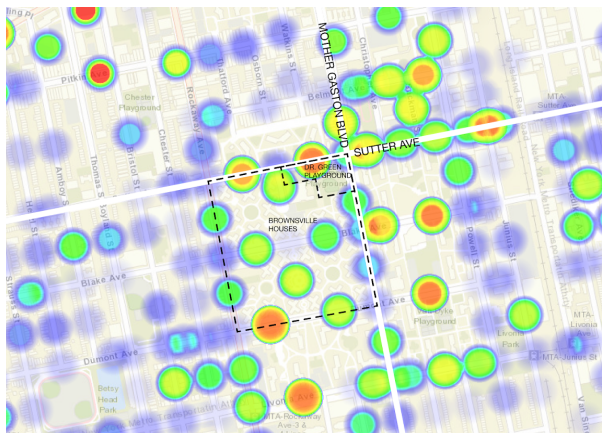
Year Built: 1948
of Buildings: 27
of Floors: 6-7
Total Units: 1,338
Population: 3,291

County: Kings
Community District (CD): 16
Neighborhood: Brownsville

Illustration: NYCHAPEDIA



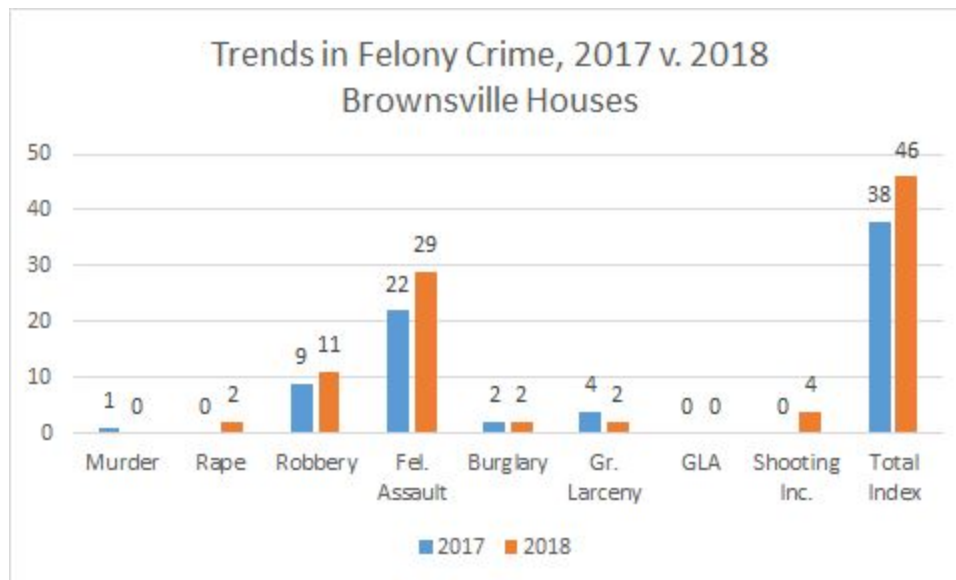
Many Brownsville residents have a low perception of public safety within the development and around the neighborhood as a whole. The intersection of Mother Gaston Boulevard and Sutter Avenue — where P.S. 284, the Brownsville Houses campus, local businesses, and Dr. Green Playground are located — has an infamous history that includes violence and drug use. The troubled intersection's reputation is well-known throughout the neighborhood. Although there is a mixture of commercial businesses north of the intersection and residential and recreation spaces to the south, residents note an abundance of trash, crumbling sidewalks, overgrown trees and shrubbery, and pockets of poor lighting. Many community members describe feeling unsafe in the area and are concerned that they face a higher likelihood of being victimized by crime there. Community members also report that the area contains a high prevalence of illegal or undesirable activities including drug sales, armed robberies, gang violence, poor sanitation, loitering, and physical or verbal altercations.



Concentration of criminal complaints near Brownsville Houses for Calendar Year 2018. (Items in red reflect greatest concentration of complaints)

B. Crime Overview | Trust | Justice

Brownsville Houses has experienced an increase in index crime in Calendar Year (CY) 2018 compared to CY 2017.¹ Crime increases in CY 2018 were driven by more rapes (+2), more robberies (+2), and more felony assaults (+7). Shooting incidents also increased substantially (+4) in CY 2018. However, it is important to note that index crime at Brownsville Houses has decreased substantially (-18) from 2014 when MAP began.



C. Problem Identification | Design | Activation

At Brownsville Houses, many residents report frequent use of drugs and sale of drugs along Mother Gaston Boulevard. The prevalence of drug use and sales there often lends itself to additional criminal activity, which can partially explain the increasing rates of felony crime reported around Brownsville Houses. Index crime, which consists of the seven major felony crimes, increased by 21% in 2018 compared to 2017. Violent crime has increased by 26% over the same period. Domestic violence has increased by 50%. And there have been 4 more shootings this year, compared to last year.

The Brownsville community district also ranks first in the city for non-fatal assault hospitalizations, which is in line with these elevated crime rates. Brownsville has triple the citywide rate of non-fatal assault hospitalizations. Brownsville also ranks fourth citywide for both alcohol and drug-related hospitalizations.

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.

Interdevelopmental tensions are likely factors that drive assault-related crimes. Brownsville Houses residents report that tensions with other housing complexes can limit neighborhood mobility and territoriality can lead to physical altercations. The public sale and use of drugs also impacts resident perceptions of safety. The Mother Gaston Boulevard and Sutter Avenue intersection, with its high incidence of drug sales, also makes it a “hot spot” for assaults and robberies.

Research suggests that urban blight may create physical opportunities for violence by sheltering illegal activity². When spaces are not properly maintained, they can create the conditions for crime to flourish. The area surrounding Mother Gaston Boulevard and Sutter Avenue is often characterized by its abundance of trash, crumbling sidewalks, overgrown trees and shrubbery, and pockets of poor lighting. Additionally, broken sidewalks create even more substantial hazards. The absence of properly maintained public spaces may decrease pedestrian activity at night, reduce usage of parks, diminish productivity of businesses, and negatively affect perceptions of safety and pride.

How we can work together to activate spaces:

The Brownsville Houses NeighborhoodStat team has taken the first steps toward identifying ways for residents to partner with the City to improve public safety at the Brownsville Houses. Here are some initial ways we can improve infrastructure and activate spaces near Brownsville Houses:

1. Social Programs and Resident Engagement

Challenge: Due to its central location, the intersection of Mother Gaston Boulevard and Sutter Avenue is notorious for violent crime, illegal drug sales, armed robbery, and other problematic behavior. The prevalence of open-air drug usage signifies to some that the neighborhood is not cared for or looked after. The intersection also creates a natural physical boundary that separates three distinct public housing developments. Residents report frequent sanitation issues in the area, including littering, insufficient commercial trash removal, and vehicle abandonment. These conditions together adversely impact perceptions of community safety and create a pervasive sense of pessimism about the potential for neighborhood change and improvement.

Suggested Next Steps

- Improve perception of public safety and reduce the incidence of antisocial activities by activating Mother Gaston Boulevard and Sutter Avenue with prosocial programs.

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5104992/>

- Effectively engage Brownsville residents by coordinating the efforts and resources of interested community based organizations and City agencies in and around Mother Gaston Boulevard and Sutter Avenue.
- Through a strategic partnership with NYC Parks encourage more frequent utilization of neglected spaces like the baseball field in Dr. Green Playground by providing cultural events, sports and recreational programs and opportunities, and family-friendly nighttime events.

2. Drug Use Prevention and Assistance

Challenge: Brownsville ranks fourth citywide for both alcohol and drug-related hospitalizations, an indicator that is reflective of the acute and chronic consequences of substance misuse. Brownsville residents have observed open-air drug use of narcotics as well as the sale of controlled substances along Mother Gaston Boulevard. Some individuals frequent the area to purchase drugs or to receive treatment services at one of the methadone clinics in the neighborhood.

Suggested Next Steps

- Reduce reliance on enforcement activities by treating substance misuse and dependency with clinical treatment services and/or opioid replacement therapy.
- Engage affected populations to help better understand the circumstances behind drug use and to identify viable interventions and disseminate information to neighborhood residents.
- Develop a communications campaign that de-stigmatizes use and encourages support and assistance for drug users.
- Establish a public space initiative that identifies critical hot spots for drug use activity on the campus, public street and adjacent Parks and brings continuous harm reduction services to those spaces in partnership with DOH.
- Optimize available services and develop connections to local medical or mental health treatment. Coordinate and connect drug users to services provided by local CBOs and agencies.

3. Street Lighting

Challenge: Despite heavy police presence in the area, drug sales, assault, and theft are common along the commercial strip of Mother Gaston Boulevard. As a result of these community conditions, businesses there frequently turnover. Residents report that they feel unsafe patronizing the area. A total of 118 criminal complaints were reported near the intersection of Mother Gaston Boulevard and Sutter Avenue in 2018 alone.³ Lighting improvement is a frequent tool used by the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety to improve community public safety conditions; in several studies, improved street lighting has significantly reduced the number of nighttime outdoor felony crimes.

Suggested Next Steps

- Improve street lighting along Mother Gaston Boulevard and Sutter Avenue and improving outdoor park lighting in Dr. Green Playground.
- Develop strategic partnerships with DOT and NYC Parks to create a prioritized process for lighting improvement and maintenance in areas surrounding the NYCHA campus.
- Establish a community creative lighting program that provides training and resources to resident groups to design and implement nimble/temporary lighting solutions that increase visibility for pedestrians, encourage nighttime pedestrian traffic, and enhance visibility for surveillance.
- Support plans of the the Brownsville Houses CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) subcommittee to activate Dr. Green Playground by implementing social programming and a lighting installation project.

4. Physical Space Maintenance

Challenge: Brownsville Houses and its surrounding areas are neglected, in need of repair, and overrun by garbage. Many residents suspect that the agencies responsible for overseeing the area fail to communicate with each other to execute necessary improvements. Residents are not kept informed about the status of repairs. Broken sidewalks, which are prevalent around the development, are an even more substantial hazard to Brownsville Houses residents who are living with a disability.

³ <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Public-Safety/NYPD-Complaint-Map-Year-to-Date-/2fra-mtpn>

Suggested Next Steps

- Develop a strategic partnership between NYCHA and DOT to create a sidewalk improvement program involving both neighborhood assessment and repair.
- Establish a partnership between NYCHA, DSNY, resident groups and community organizations to create a Sanitation Plan for the coordinated collection of trash that reduces the excessive pile up of garbage.
- Work with NYCHA and Resident Association to develop methods to simply and regularly update residents on the progress of planned or in-progress repairs.

D. Problem Identification | Opportunity | Youth Development

Children and youth account for over one-third of Brownsville Houses residents and one-third of Brownsville youth grow up in homes led by a single parent or kinship caregiver. The high number of children being raised in single parent or kinship caregiving homes is remarkable because these homes may be more susceptible to financial instability, residential instability, and stress.

It is also notable that approximately one out of every five Brownsville youth are not in school and not working. Youth disengagement is particularly alarming because of its associations with anti-social activities. Without suitable programming and engaging activities to participate in, Brownsville youth may be more susceptible to problematic behavior that puts them at risk for violence, injury, and justice system involvement.

Youth-on-youth violence, which in some cases is gang-related and results from inter-developmental conflict, may result in lasting or fatal injuries. The seriousness of the threat posed by youth violence in Brownsville is reiterated by Brooklyn Community Board 16 -- of which Brownsville Houses is a part -- in their annual *Statement of Community District Needs*. They state: “Youth violence is a growing concern in our community...Poverty, family instability, and unemployment provide fertile ground for [youth violence to occur].”

How we can work together to engage youth:

The NeighborhoodStat team has taken the first steps toward identifying ways for residents to partner with the City to engage youth at the Brownsville Houses. Suggested next steps to engage youth are as follows:

1. Youth Programming and Civic Participation

Challenge: A large number of Brownsville youth grow up in an environment beset by poverty, low-quality schools, violent crime, social and neighborhood factors that increases the likelihood of disconnection and involvement in the juvenile justice system. The majority of crimes that occur around Brownsville Houses are committed by youth that fall between the ages of 16 and 24. The most common victims of crime are also youth between the ages of 16 and 24. Disengaged youth also have a higher predilection for justice system involvement, and are, on average, the most common perpetrators of criminal activity in and around the MAP developments. In the Brownsville community district, approximately 22%, or one out of every five youth between 16 and 24 are not in school and not in work. These conditions necessitate the provision of engaging programming that can suffice as an alternative to more problematic and risky behaviors.

Suggested Next Steps

- Provide safe, engaging and constructive environments for young people to develop and/or connect to community artists or art programs. If programs already exist, determine who they are serving and who is missing.
- Encourage youth community participation by providing access to existing opportunities that involve youth community planning and decision making. Develop young leaders through service-learning opportunities and leadership training.
- Create new opportunities for youth to participate in community governance. For example, explore implementing a Youth Council within Community Board 16.

2. Mediation and Peacekeeping

Challenge: In neighborhoods like Brownsville, where gang-related assaults can occur, the threat posed by violence is significant. Violence begets violence: being a victim of violence can increase a person's likelihood of committing retaliatory violence. Most behaviors -- including violent behavior -- are acquired or learned and most of this learning is not intentional or classroom-based; rather, learned behaviors come from modeling, observing, imitating or copying. Young men of color experience violence at staggering rates. While the needs of these young men are great, the available services and connections to those services are limited.

Suggested Next Steps

- Teach more young people how to manage conflict by providing access to mediation and peacemaking programs with strong community ties. Work with mediation and other

peacemaking organizations to ensure that community members are aware of existing mediation and peacemaking programs and encourage utilization of the services.

- Invest in group violence interventions like Cure Violence or other peacekeeping programs to provide ample opportunities to mediate conflicts before they escalate.

3. Employment

Challenge: Today's disconnected youth face greater challenges as heightened barriers make current disconnected youth harder to serve. According to a Community Service Society report in 2018, providers cite a higher concentration of young people with low levels of literacy, mental health concerns, histories of trauma, criminal justice involvement, and severe housing instability in their programs today than five years ago. Brownsville has the highest number of youth who are out of work and out of school in Brooklyn. In addition, the labor market for disconnected youth increasingly provides access to only part-time or unstable employment. Youth programs that address these barriers and improve social and social skills, community engagement, job preparedness, and academic aspirations have proven to be effected in reducing crime and incarceration among participants.

Suggested Next Steps

- Develop workforce readiness by maximizing enrollment of Brownsville Houses youth in Summer Youth Employment Program, and explore partnerships to facilitate access to year round quality jobs that offer career advancement possibilities.
- Work with Medgar Evers College, Good Shepherd Services, DYCD, and other community partners to engage and connect more young people from Brownsville Houses to comprehensive supports such as: academic support; college and career readiness; financial literacy training; drug prevention education; violence prevention; and personal development programs. Offer more tailored and youth-designed programming at Brownsville Houses Teen Lounge.
- Work with Medgar Evers College, Good Shepherd Services, DOP, and other community partners to engage and provide specialized programming and services that address the unique needs of disconnected youth at Brownsville Houses to better prepare young adults with high barriers for entry into the current labor market.
- Facilitate employment opportunities, like Green City Force and Center for Employment Opportunities, that offer training, transitional employment, service learning, and

intentional upskilling opportunities for part-time, low-wage workers to create connections to long-term career pathways.