

Safety Solutions for the Polo Grounds Towers

A focus on youth development, families and public space revitalization



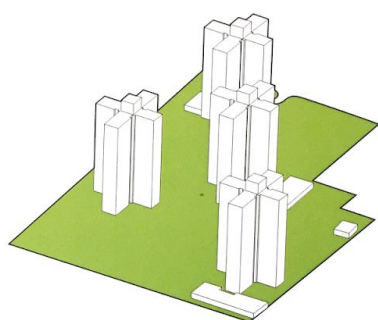
Polo Grounds Towers

A. Background

Built in 1968, the Polo Grounds Towers is a densely populated housing complex occupying over 15 acres of land, with four residential buildings each 30 storeys high. The Polo Grounds Towers contain 3,942 residents on lease living across 1,614 apartment units. Located on Frederick Douglass Boulevard on the border between Harlem and Washington Heights, the campus sits across from the legendary Holcombe Rucker Park. The Polo Grounds Towers and the surrounding neighborhood faces serious challenges, including overcrowding. Residents living within Polo Grounds Towers identify as Black/African American (51%), Hispanic/Latino (47%) residents and other (3%). Polo Grounds is a considerably youthful population, with 31 percent of residents under the age of 18 and 14 percent of residents between the ages of 18 and 24. According to NYCHA, the median individual household income is \$23,635. 57 percent of

households have a household income below \$20,000, and the average monthly rent is \$412. Within the census tract that contains Polo Grounds Towers, 50 percent of residents live at or below the federal poverty level, a rate that is double the rate for New York City. 61 percent of all households are lead by women. 35 percent of all households with a child under the age of 18 are headed by a single parent or a kinship caregiver. Additionally, within the census tract where Polo Grounds Towers is located, nearly one out of every 19 residents was incarcerated on April 1, 2010, the date of the 2010 US Census; when considering black residents only, the incarceration rate increases -- one of out of every 13 black residents was incarceration on April 1, 2010.

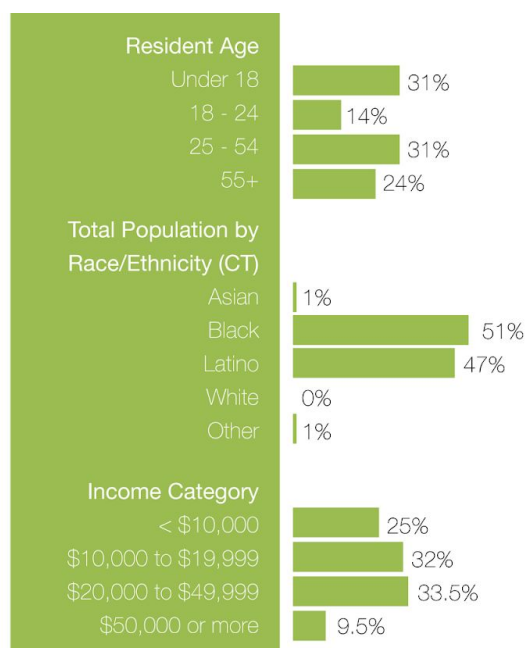
Polo Grounds Towers



Year Built: 1968
of Buildings: 8
of Floors: 30
Total Units: 1,614
Population: 3,950

County: New York
Community District: 10
Census Tract: 243.02
Neighborhood: Central Harlem

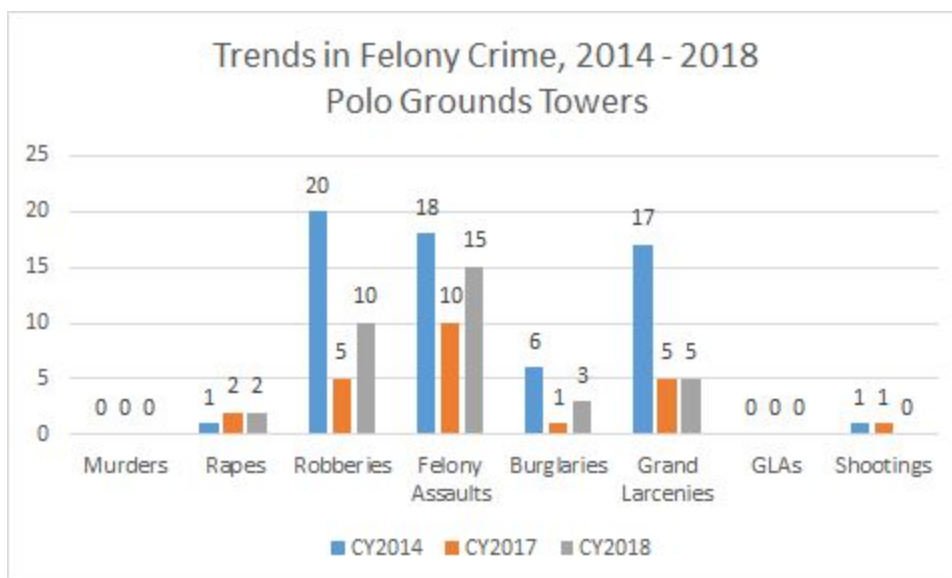
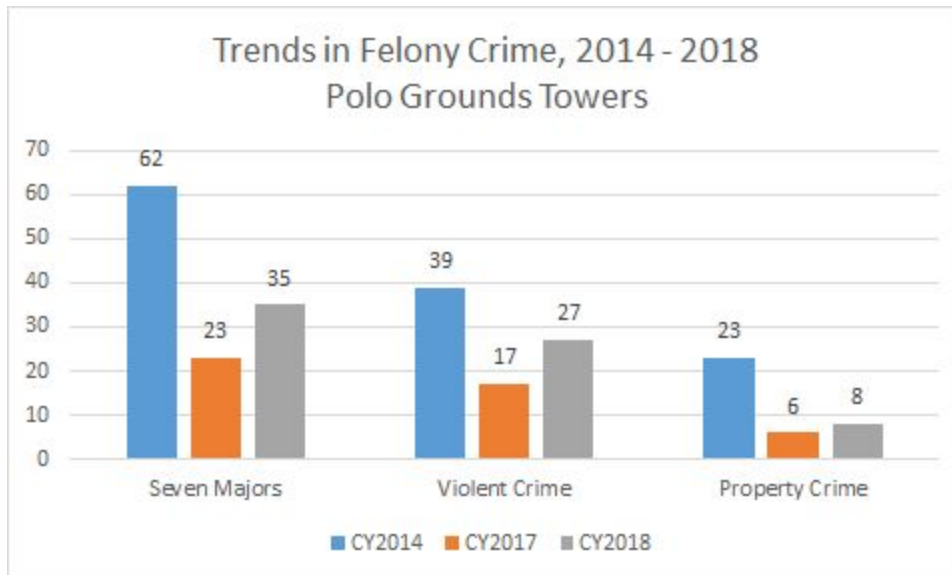
Illustration: NYCHAPEDIA



B. Crime Overview | [Trust](#) | Justice

In Calendar Year (CY) 2018, crime at Polo Grounds Towers was substantially lower than in CY 2014 the year MAP began. Polo Grounds Towers has seen remarkable crime decline in recent years, despite the fact that crime was higher in CY 2018 than it was in CY 2017. As of March 3, 2019, Polo Grounds Towers had been without a shooting for 109 weeks, which is the longest period of shooting cessation across the MAP sites.

Increases in CY 2018 from CY 2017 were driven by rape (+1), robbery (+5), felony assault (+5), and burglary (+2). Compared to CY 2014, CY 2018 had substantial crime declines in the following categories: robbery (-10), felony assault (-3), burglary (-3), and grand larceny (-12).



C. Priority Identification | **Opportunity** | Youth Development

In total, nearly two-thirds of Polo Grounds residents are under the age of 24.¹ The sizeable youth and young adult population at Polo Grounds faces various challenges. Rates of teen unemployment in Central Harlem are the highest in the city, with 32 percent of job seekers between 16 and 19 unemployed. Similarly, Central Harlem ranks tenth citywide for rates of

¹ 37 percent of Polo Grounds residents are under the age of 18 and 25 percent between the ages of 18 and 24.

youth disconnection with 20 percent -- one out of five -- youth and young adults in Central Harlem out of school and out of work.²

According to data from the New York City Police Department (NYPD), 16 and 24 year olds at Polo Grounds Towers are more likely to be arrested and to be victims of crime. In 2015, Central Harlem ranked sixth citywide for juvenile detention admission rates. Additionally, educational attainment in Central Harlem is low, with 40 percent of residents without any post-secondary school education. One out of 10 Central Harlem residents will not complete high school.

Polo Grounds youth face serious economic, educational and systemic issues that make residents especially vulnerable to antisocial behavior and negative socioeconomic outcomes. Many young people living in Polo Grounds Towers find the path from education to employment and economic security in adulthood inaccessible. Helping young people prepare to engage in work and life as productive adults is a central challenge for any society. The lack of access to high-quality youth development opportunities often leads to lower rates of high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion. Eventually, low educational attainment leads to decreased employment and economic opportunities. For these reasons, it is critical to invest in the resources that incentive and teach prosocial behaviors, while encouraging job experience and educational attainment for young people living within NYCHA communities.

Young people at the Polo Grounds need to develop marketable skills, a sense of ethics, and pride in their heritage and culture. Programming that positions young people as the leaders and problem-solvers in their own community are most impactful. The NeighborhoodStat Stakeholder Team sees great potential in partnerships with existing agencies and organizations such as the PAL Cornerstone, STRIVE, SUNY Attain Lab, Harlem NEoN (arts and culture programming) and the Madison Square Boys & Girls Club, slated to open nearby in 2019.

How we can work together to improve youth development:

1. Youth and Young Adult Employment and Programming

Challenge: According to the NeighborhoodStat stakeholder team, there is a large pool of adolescent and young adult residents at the Polo Grounds Towers who are in need of deeper engagement through workforce development programs, preventive services like legal consultation and reentry support, and social and recreational programs that incentive prosocial behavior. Young people from low-income and less-educated families have lower rates of high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion. Moreover, once they enter the labor market, they have lower employment rates and wages.

For residents of Polo Grounds Towers, enhancing youth and young adult programs -- including workforce development programs -- is of critical importance. The Summer Youth Employment

² “Youth disconnection” is defined as youth between 16 and 24 who are out of school and out of work.

Program (SYEP), provides one such opportunity for resident youth to gain work experience and earn money during the summer months.³ However, at Polo Grounds, only 22 percent of eligible residents applied to participate in the program. The NeighborhoodStat team believes that successful interventions and programmatic support will provide youth and young adults from Polo Grounds with opportunities for character-building, leadership and career-readiness training, and life-skills development.

Educational and workforce programming has been shown to have profound impacts on the future earnings and success of young people. For example, a longitudinal study conducted by the Brookings Institution concluded that:

- Participating in cooperative education, internship, apprenticeship, or mentorship programs in high school is related to higher subsequent job quality.
- Teenagers who work well-paying jobs by their 23rd birthday often gain access to higher job quality in adulthood. Periods of unemployment in one's 20s are associated with lower job quality. In other words, early good jobs (as measured by wages) lead to later good jobs.
- Those with high school diplomas and post-secondary degrees have higher job quality at age 29, as do those who participated in a job training program between the ages of 24 and 27. Completing a post-secondary degree (two-year, four-year, or graduate) is the strongest predictor of a high-quality job among all factors considered in this report.

Suggested Next Steps:

- **Expand work-based learning opportunities within schools or community-based programs.** Work-based learning experiences such as internships, apprenticeships, and mentoring enable adults to provide young people with developmentally appropriate and incremental guidance that helps them develop the skills that employers seek in new hires.
- **Expand investment in social and recreational programs that incentive prosocial behaviors.** Increase opportunities for youth and young adults to engage program that incentive good behavior through trips, awards and stipends.
- **Increase completion rates of post-secondary degrees with an explicit focus on quality and equity.** Consider working with the Department of Education to provide special assistance to support Polo Grounds residents onsite or after-school, and thru scholarships, including services such as tutoring and proactive advising.

³ Residents from all MAP sites, including Polo Grounds, are guaranteed enrollment in SYEP as long as the necessary paperwork is completed by expected deadlines.

- **Increase engagement in the Summer Youth Employment Program.** Residents of Polo Grounds Towers who follow necessary protocols will be guaranteed enrollment in the SYEP program. If the program effectively connects to local employers that surround the development, young people can take advantage of this entry point into employment and gain the many benefits described above.
- **Improve on-ramps to employment for young adults,** particularly for those without post-secondary credentials. These on-ramps to employment can take many forms, including work-based learning programs, internships, and mentorships. Well-designed programs will align training with local employer needs and look for employment opportunities for potential advancement.

D. Priority Identification | **Design** | **Infrastructure and Maintenance**

At Polo Grounds Towers, dimly lit public spaces and sparse, illegible signage prevent visitors and residents from finding their destinations quickly and safely. Day and night, wayfinding conditions send visitors wandering through the housing complex, feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable. Many building signs are barely visible from 50 feet during the day and are even less visible at night. In some circumstances, foliage further obscures wayfinding on the Polo Grounds campus.



Surveys conducted by the Polo Grounds NeighborhoodStat team indicate that middle-aged and senior residents (a combined 42 percent of the total Polo Grounds population) indicated that improved signage would be of benefit to them. Additionally, the existence of so-called “entrapment areas”, which are pathways that turn into dead ends without any forewarning, create even more concern. Enclosed by fencing, these dead ends are not identifiable upon entrance and can feel unsafe.

Furthermore, reports of insufficient site maintenance at Polo Grounds have been an additional source of concern. Litter around the campus, walkways in disrepair, and elevators in frequent need of service cause residents to feel embarrassed, disheartened, and angry. The physical space conditions in the development detract from community pride and relationship-building, making it less likely for residents to come together for social or productive reasons. Additionally, residents

report feeling unsafe and are reluctant to invite friends to their homes because they are embarrassed by the piles of garbage stacked throughout the development.

How we can work together to improve physical space:

1. Wayfinding

Challenge: Inadequate signage at the Polo Grounds Towers compounds safety concerns. Building numbers are too small or dull to read from even short distances or at night. There are no maps, diagrams, or sign posts in central locations to help people identify key areas of interest like residential buildings, the senior center, the property management office, community garden, amphitheater, or community center. Finally, existing signage does not cater to the needs of the non-English-speaking residents of the Polo Grounds.



Suggested Next Steps:

- **Make Polo Grounds easier to navigate by creating a legible wayfinding system.** Wayfinding systems create clear and attractive pathways that are easy to understand and navigate, encourage people to explore new areas, and foster a sense of place. Install adequate signs and maps (in multiple languages), and legible building numbers.
- **Use innovative technology wherever possible to help address wayfinding.** Using interactive real-time wayfinding fixtures across the campus can provide updated and relevant information for residents throughout the day and night.⁴ As interactive wayfinding tools support improved navigation they can also promote community based services and programs in real time. To encourage the creation of safe routes on the campus technology can be used to provide updated information and support safe connections to public transportation.⁵

2. Physical Space Maintenance

Challenge: Two years ago, as part of the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety, NYCHA completed a \$4.8 million lighting initiative at the Polo Grounds Towers that resulted in the installation of 315 new light fixtures. Unfortunately, these new lights have been subject to vandalism and outages. When these lighting outages occur, they are not restored quickly. Even with the addition of new lights, there are still some areas that are dimly lit. In fact, NYCHA's

⁴ <https://breakfastny.com/points>

⁵ <http://www.signsystem.com/the-future-of-wayfinding/>

2017 Physical Needs Assessment indicates that there is an immediate need at Polo Grounds for approximately \$3M for corridor lighting and an additional \$670K needed for stairhall lighting.

Residents feel disheartened and frustrated by hazardous walking conditions, unsanitary piles of garbage in front of buildings, and throughout the development, and frequent elevator service outages within 30 story buildings. These concerns are also indicated within the *2017 Physical Needs Assessment*, which states that Polo Grounds Towers are in immediate need of approximately \$4M for paving vehicular and non-vehicular areas. Investment in infrastructure, continued maintenance, and resident stewardship models are key to improving perceptions of safety and well-being.

Lastly, poorly maintained public spaces deter resident usage and inhibit social connection. Evidence suggest that lack of access to clean, well-designed public spaces, which are conducive for culture practice and activities, can lead to widespread social isolation and depression, particularly among older adults and seniors populations. While NYCHA management is doing their best to keep up with trash disposal, residents desire more frequent pickup to prevent overflow and bags of trash being left exposed in piles at entrances and throughout the development. This has a significant impact on residents feelings of neglect and quality of life.

Suggested Next Steps:

- **Increase monitoring and maintenance of elevator service.** Ensure that NYCHA has assessed the capital needs of the elevator system within Polo Grounds Towers. Provide residents with information about planned upgrades and repairs. Provide an effective mechanism for residents to flag elevators in-need of repair and provide service updates regularly.
- **Address lighting deficits and outages.** The NeighborhoodStat team would like to work with NYCHA to ensure that there are plans to communicate lighting outages and to discuss plans to repair lighting deficits.
- **Identify and implement process changes that reduce the incidence of litter and trash pile-ups.** The NeighborhoodStat team also recognizes that NYCHA is currently involved in a process of developing a waste management and sustainability plan. To the extent possible, consider whether it is possible to improve coordination with DSNY and increase frequency of garbage pick ups. The inclusion of signage that instructs residents on appropriate garbage disposal in languages most commonly used by residents would also be beneficial.
- **Identify and assess indoor on-site spaces and opportunities that can support resident socializing activities, organizing/civic activities and information/resource sharing.** The Polo Grounds senior center and PAL community center have time and age

restrictions imposed by DFTA and DYCD, the city agencies that operate them. There are limited “open hours”, when all community residents are welcome to host and access spaces at the centers for social or civic activities. Other available NYCHA spaces on the grounds are being used as storage units by NYCHA. This undermines resident capacity to organize stewardship groups, information hubs and host social gathering.

- **Invest in gardens and, green and communal spaces.** There is a pervasive sense among residents that “no one cares, and nothing will ever change”. Gardens support resident socializing, health and wellness for families, and encourage resident stewardship.
- **Repair cracks in sidewalks.** Dilapidated sidewalks are a risk to the physical safety of Polo Grounds Towers residents. If not done already, assess the extent and process necessary to make these repairs and notify appropriate stakeholder team members of anticipated timelines for repairs. If no repairs have been scheduled, then the causes for the delay should be communicated to the residents.
- **Use innovative technology wherever possible to address building maintenance and repair.** Technology can allow property managers to use historical performance data to understand the pattern of systems failure allowing them to predict when maintenance is necessary for building systems.⁶ Efforts should be made to incorporate technology based solutions to maximize the effectiveness of maintenance.

⁶ <https://www.constructiondive.com/news/5-technologies-that-are-making-smart-buildings-smarter/429582/>