

A More Connected Harlem

Changing the Narrative of Youth Opportunity, Public Space and Safety at Wagner Houses



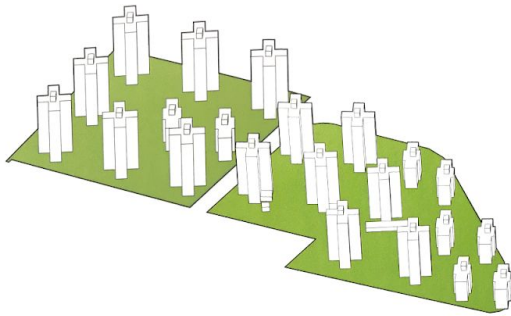
Wagner Houses

A. Background

On August 3, 1958, the first family moved from a cold-water flat into Wagner Houses, located in the East Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan. The Wagner Houses spans 27 acres and consists of 22 buildings, fourteen 16-story and eight 7-story buildings; it is home to 4,913 residents, who live within 2,810 apartments. Wagner residents identify as Latino (45%), Black/African American (30%), White (15%), Asian (8%) and other (2%). Forty-five percent of residents are under the age of 25. The median household income is \$17,298 and the average monthly rent for an apartment is \$523. Nearly 60 percent of the households in Wagner Houses earn less than \$20,000 annually, and 26 percent earn less than \$10,000 annually. Sixty-three percent of Wagner residents are women, and roughly 20 percent of families with children under 18 are headed by a

single parent. Approximately, 41 percent of households report one or more members with a disability.

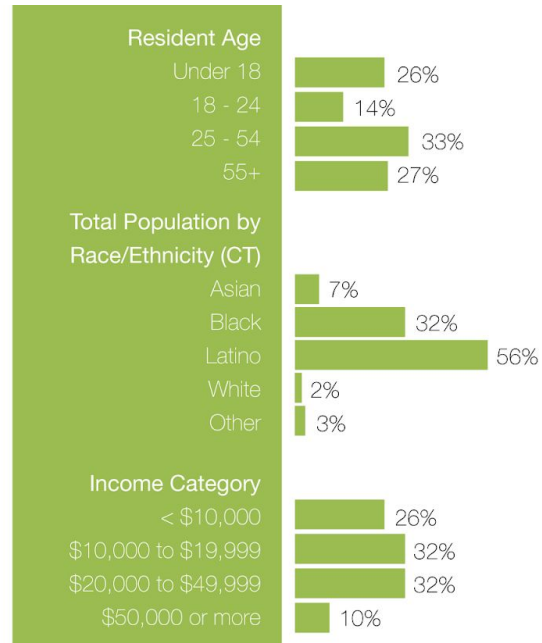
Wagner Houses



Year Built: 1957
 # of Buildings: 22
 # of Floors: 7-16
 Total Units: 2,810
 Population: 4,913

County: New York
 Community District: 11
 Census Tract: 192
 Neighborhood: East Harlem

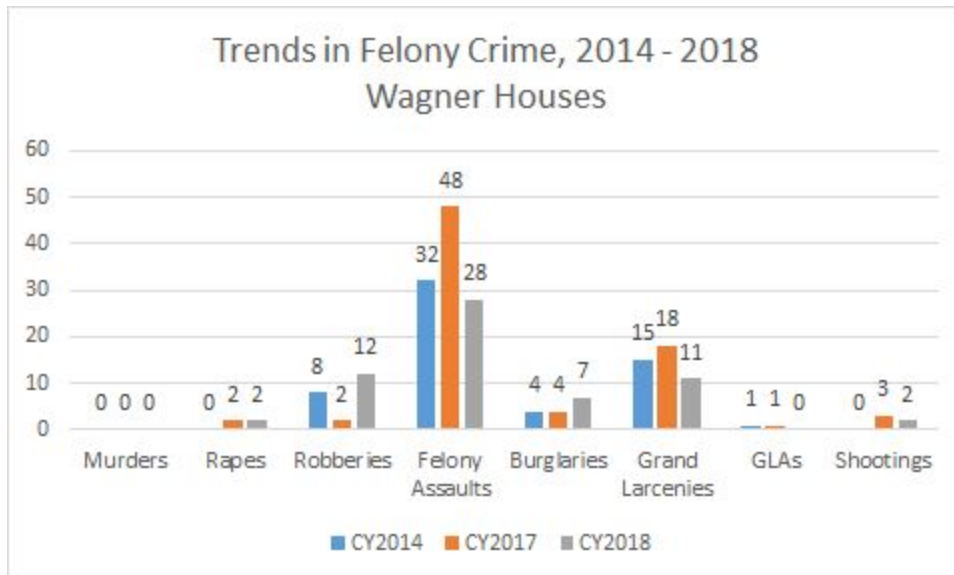
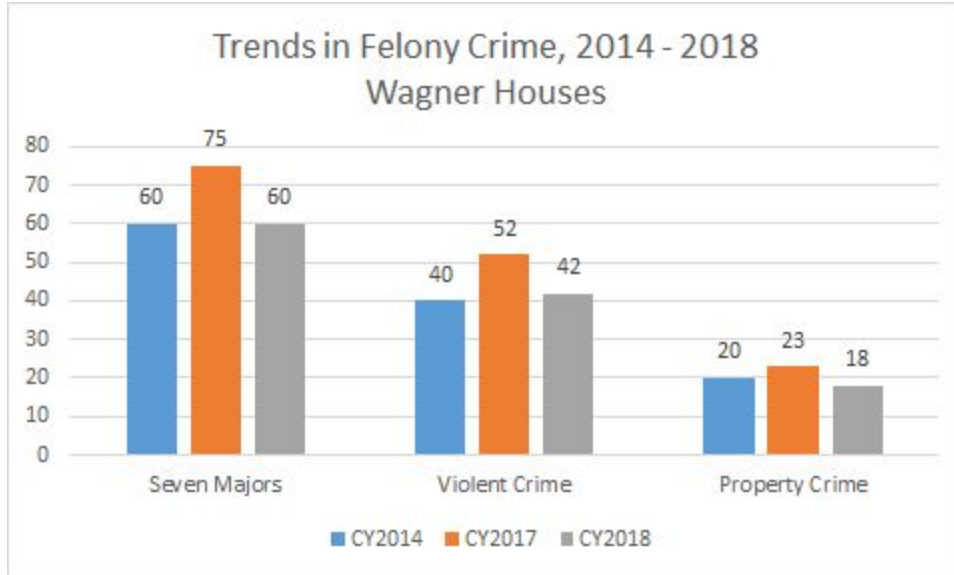
Illustration: NYCHAPEDIA



B. Crime Overview | Trust | Justice

Wagner Houses experienced a substantial crime spike in Calendar Year (CY) 2017, driven by an increase in the number of felony assaults. However, by the end of CY 2018, crime returned to CY 2014 levels. Compared to the previous year, index crime in CY 2018 decreased (-15), violent felony crime decreased (-10), and property felony crime decreased (-5).¹ These crime declines in CY 2018 were driven by sharp declines in felony assault (-20) and grand larceny (-7), though robberies (+10) as burglaries (+3) both rose.

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



C. Priority Identification | Design | Stewardship and Maintenance

Wagner Houses residents report that quality of life is a major concern for them. Residents describe trash and rodents as persistent problems that make them feel neglected and disrespected. Poorly maintained public spaces and the general lack of campus cleanliness were identified as important issues for residents. Current conditions diminish resident pride in the development and community. The excessive presence of garbage, litter, and soiled commons creates unsanitary conditions that contribute to a sizeable rat infestation. Residents are unsure how to dispose of medium- to bulk-sized items, a problem that has been created by confusing trash disposal signs, misplaced garbage containers, blocked garbage chutes, inconsistent waste management

guidelines and practices, and lack of enforcement for disposal violations. Garbage cans are often placed in unsanctioned areas creating further confusion around disposal practices and garbage is improperly discarded throughout the development. Improper trash disposal contributes to the persistence of the existing rat infestation. Additionally, locks and doors are frequently broken and repairs are customarily delayed, negatively impacting resident feelings of safety and quality of life. Residents report doors that are broken for months leading to issues of loitering, strangers entering the building and homeless individuals sleeping in the stairwells. Broken doors can become jammed preventing residents from entering or exiting their building.

Furthermore, with recreational and green spaces in disrepair, residents avoid spending time outside and individuals become isolated. Evidence indicates that lack of access to well-maintained and designed public spaces can lead to widespread social isolation and depression, particularly among older populations. Investment in infrastructure, continued maintenance, and resident stewardship models are key to improving perceptions of safety and wellbeing. Public spaces within the development, such as the basketball courts and playgrounds, have been poorly maintained and remain underutilized. Walking paths are inadequately lit and cracked, which can be hazardous for the elderly and disabled. The combination of inadequate maintenance and underutilization of public spaces has increased the likelihood that these spaces be used for antisocial purposes, like drug use or gang activity.

How we can work together to improve stewardship and maintenance:

The NeighborhoodStat team has taken the first steps toward identifying ways for residents to partner with the City and community-based organizations to support resident stewardship and improve maintenance at the Wagner Houses. Here are some initial ways we can improve stewardship and, subsequently, maintenance and quality of life in Wagner Houses' communal spaces.

1. Waste Management and Rat Reduction

Challenge: Infrequent sanitation pick-up and/or trash compactor issues exacerbate the presence of garbage on the grounds. The aforementioned waste management problems contribute to more extreme waste management practices, as well. For example, residents of the NeighborhoodStat stakeholder team report that litter is thrown from apartment buildings onto the grounds below. The high presence of garbage and litter is unsanitary and furthermore promotes improper trash disposal practices that violate social norms. Residents also indicate that infrequent trash collection from the Department of Sanitation (DSNY), alongside waste disposal coordination issues from NYCHA have contributed to trash build-up on campus. Rats and other vermin have been increasingly observed infecting common areas. While the residents believe NYCHA deserves credit for their efforts, they would like more community support for educational

campaigns and trainings that improve waste management and sustain healthier community hygiene.

Suggested Next Steps:

- **Identify and implement process changes that reduce the incidence of litter and trash pile-ups.** To the extent possible, consider whether it is possible to install additional garbage cans in common spaces, increase the size of the trash chute doors, and improve coordination with DSNY to increase frequency of garbage pick ups. Signage that instructs residents on appropriate garbage disposal in common languages would also be beneficial.
- **Expand best practices and interventions from the Rat Reduction Plan to Wagner Houses.** Determine whether scalable solutions are viable and transferrable to other developments, including Wagner Houses.
- **Provide opportunities to encourage proper waste disposal and stewardship.** Training and support for residents to facilitate workshops would be beneficial to encourage proper waste management techniques. The NeighborhoodStat team is already working with GrowNYC to train residents as Environmental Ambassadors at Wagner. Continued partnership with GrowNYC to train more residents as Environmental Ambassadors can improve educational efforts and outreach to residents. Implement a social entrepreneurship program focused on sustainability for intergenerational residents that will offer a door-to-door recycling pickup service and incentivize residents to increase their participation in recycling opportunities through peer-to-peer education.

2. Entrance Security

Challenge: Wagner residents also report frequent door breakages. This issue particularly affects 2370 First Avenue, 2370 Second Avenue, 50 Paladino, 2369 First Avenue and 2390 Second Avenue. At these locations, doors have been broken for months. NYCHA reports that damaged doors cannot be repaired quickly because there is a single vendor available to construct replacement parts. These broken doors cause a variety of problems. Sometimes residents are unable to exit or enter through them at all. Some doors can be bypassed easily without a key, leading to trespassing or loitering, which results in street homeless individuals entering these buildings through non-secure entrances and sleeping in stairwells. Non-residents have also been able to easily gain entrance to these buildings without keys.

Suggested Next Steps:

- **Prioritize broken locks and doors for maintenance.** Ensure the current vendor has the capacity to repair broken doors in a timely fashion. Investigate the possibility of contracting additional vendors or partner with local trades groups or CBOs as a workforce opportunity to prioritize these repairs.
- **Explore alternative mechanisms and processes for spare keys.** Consider providing effective signage to instruct residents how to respond when broken doors are identified. NYCHA should consider any process improvements to support spare key issuance or other fixes that might ensure that building residents are able to easily access their buildings.

3. Community Space Activation

Challenge: Urban design has long touted the important relationship between quality public space and resident perceptions of safety and space utilization. To reduce major crimes, research encourages interaction among community members within public spaces for community events.² While city maintenance efforts are essential to the upkeep of sanitary conditions in the development, residents also note that resident stewardship is critical to the safety and cleanliness of Wagner Houses.³

Studies show that rates of violence are lower in neighborhoods that have strong *collective efficacy*, which refers to the ability of members of a community to control the behaviors of individuals and groups in the community. Among other activities, collective efficacy involves residents monitoring children and confronting individuals who exploit or disturb public spaces, which allows community residents to create a safe and orderly environment. The NeighborhoodStat team and residents have surfaced a need for accessible communal spaces that promote intergenerational interactions and support greater social cohesion. When public programs are added to spaces with growing or high collective efficacy, public spaces can become sustained community assets that address underlying drivers of crime.

Several outdoor spaces including the basketball court and walking pathways at Wagner Houses are poorly maintained. The neglected condition of these spaces encourages antisocial behavior in and around the development and adversely impacts resident pride and perceptions of safety. Research suggests that maintenance and beautification of vacant and neglected spaces can reduce

² Bellair, Paul E. "Social Interaction and Community Crime: Examining the Importance of Neighbor Networks." 1995

³ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/83937579.pdf>

property and violent crime⁴ and access to green spaces, like gardens and parks, promotes community pride and neighborliness. Green spaces also have been known to reduce symptoms of depression and to reduce the incidence of asthma, obesity, and heart disease.⁵

Suggested Next Steps:

- **Activate recreational and common spaces with programs, workshops, and social opportunities.** The NeighborhoodStat CPTED subcommittee is developing a proposal to transform an underutilized site on campus into a vibrant outdoor community space that includes murals, a temporary stage, lighting, and various social programs.
- **Formalize partnerships between stakeholder team, property management, and grounds keepers.** Regular meetings that include the NeighborhoodStat team, NYCHA maintenance workers, groundskeepers and property management would be useful to discuss the status of planned maintenance and surface persistent maintenance concerns, including the timeliness of repairs.
- **Work with community-based organizations and city organizations to support existing programs and create future programs for sustainability.** The NeighborhoodStat team should engage community-based organizations and city agency partners to determine available resources and to receive commitments to support space activation efforts.
- **Renovate and activate the basketball court.** The NeighborhoodStat CPTED Subcommittee is in the process of renovating and refurbishing the basketball court across from 50 Paladino Avenue, and organizing social programming there.

D. Priority Identification | Opportunity | Youth Development

While crime in New York City has decreased in recent years, a 2017 report prepared by the office of the New York State Comptroller indicated that East Harlem was still facing serious crime control issues. In 2016, there were 16.1 serious crimes per 1,000 residents in East Harlem, which outpaced the city's crime rate (12.2). East Harlem ranked 14th among the City's 59 community districts for rates of crime.⁶ The State Comptroller's report also noted that more than

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<https://www.citylab.com/solutions/2016/04/vacant-lots-green-space-crime-research-statistics/476040/>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0013935118303323>

⁶ Prepared by the Office of the State Deputy Comptroller for the City of New York. 2017. *An Economic Snapshot of the East Harlem Neighborhood*. report, New York: Office of the New York State Comptroller.

9 percent of all citywide crimes in NYCHA facilities occurred in East Harlem.⁷ Gang activity has also been increasing drastically in East Harlem.⁸

East Harlem is at the epicenter of NYCHA-wide crime in part because disconnected youth turn to gangs and drug dealing for support and guidance. In February 2019, the Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance indicted 12 members of “Chico Gang”, which was said to be based in and around Wagner Houses. While significant attempts to address this problem have been made since 2010 (e.g., youth action hubs),⁹ the residents of Wagner Houses have continued to be afflicted by crime and violence. For Wagner residents, gang culture on campus is very real and present. As of 2015, the year of most recent data available, Wagner had five active gangs on campus.¹⁰

How we can work together to improve youth programming:

The NeighborhoodStat team has taken the first steps toward identifying ways for residents to partner with the City to support youth development at the Wagner Houses. Here are some initial ways we can improve youth engagement and develop, and decrease youth gang activity and crime in Wagner Houses.

1. Youth Programming

Challenge: Wagner Houses has been affected recently by an increasing number of shootings on the campus. Additional anti-gun violence resources, like the Cure Violence program model which is utilized by providers like Save Our Streets (SOS) could be instrumental in supporting residents. However, positive youth development that features an array of modalities, including art therapy for victims of trauma, employment and training opportunities, peer support, and mental health services, has been an afterthought for young people in Wagner Houses.

Currently, there is no existing Cure Violence program providing services directly to residents of Wagner Houses; Stand Against Violence East Harlem (S.A.V.E.), a Cure Violence program, is funded to provide services to the nearby Jefferson and Johnson Houses, only. In the absence of a holistic Cure Violence model, other city agencies and community-based organizations, like NYPD and PAL, have provided support by providing opportunities for recreation and social gathering through basketball tournaments and movie nights. By piloting new youth development

⁷ Ibid.,

⁸ A more comprehensive report was prepared by Digital Network Associates and is available at www.dnainfo.com/crime-safety-report/manhattan/east-harlem/

⁹, Criminal Justice Investment Initiative. 2016. Safer Neighborhood and a Fairer, more Efficient Justice System. Strategic plan , New York: Manhattan District Attorney’s Office.

¹⁰ (Source of Map: New York Daily News Interactive Map “[Gangs of New York](#)” Data provided by NYPD Juvenile Justice Division, updated February 2015)

strategies and expanding successful program models, the NeighborhoodStat team hopes to change the narrative and provide useful programs and services to neighborhood residents and stakeholders.

Suggested Next Steps:

- **Implement anti-gun violence programming.** The inclusion of these programs will give Wagner youth an opportunity to develop transferable skills, such as conflict resolution and anger management, and to receive social and emotional support. In addition, Cure Violence programming, which relies upon credible messengers to influence other community youth, can be a gateway to sustainable employment.
- **Develop connections to new or existing workforce development programs.** By connecting with existing workforce development programs, or developing new programs that meet the specific needs of Wagner youth, residents will receive valuable job training and educational support. Effective programs should consider ways to include older residents, either as mentors or to provide other support, to foster community building and awareness of safety measures that benefit all residents and improve quality of life.
- **Expand the variety of programming options available to youth on campus.** To whatever extent possible, work with the community center to increase the diversity of program activities. Mentorship programs, in particular, can be valuable mechanisms to support resident youth, and programs that support conflict mediation can also provide a critical resource to de-escalate increasing tensions.

E. Priority Identification | Opportunity | Health and Wellbeing

According to the DOHMH Community Health Profile, East Harlem has the highest rates of psychiatric, alcohol and drug-related hospitalizations in the city. Residents and NeighborhoodStat stakeholders have cited an increasing number of mental health concerns on campus. As mentioned, Wagner residents are affected by increasing rates of gun and community violence and the incidence of crime on campus creates significant stress for residents. In addition, many residents have noted that some residents or campus visitors are noticeably in need of mental health services. The NeighborhoodStat team are also concerned about the potential impacts on in-school bullying, which may have contributed to the recent tragic death by suicide of an eleven-year-old resident. In addition, the recent passing of resident stakeholder Catherine Brown impacted community members in a myriad of ways and further speaks to the need of having mental health services available to residents.

How we can work together to improve health and wellbeing:

The NeighborhoodStat team believes that providing on-site and consistent mental health services and trainings can equip residents with the tools necessary to spot and identify health issues.

1. Onsite Mental Health Services

Challenge: There are various mental health services available within the East Harlem neighborhood. However, many residents are reluctant to access mental health services because of associated stigma. When residents have sought services, they have experienced long waiting periods to be seen by a mental health provider either for initial visit or follow-up. In addition, the responses of city agency partners can also be a cause for concern. Residents are often unsure who to call or what to do when they identify people in distress. The NYPD may not intervene, thinking the issue is a medical one, and, where the NYPD does intervene, it may result in a brief 48-hour hold at a psychiatric hospital that often results in an individual returning to the campus after that hold time is up. The lack of suitable long-term mental health care also appears to be a long-standing, systemic problem.

Suggested Next Steps:

- **Continue providing trainings in Mental Health First Aid to residents.** The Wagner NeighborhoodStat team has taken steps to address these concerns by working with Thrive NYC and DOHMH to train the NeighborhoodStat stakeholders and other residents in Mental Health First Aid and other anti-bullying strategies.
- **Work with community-based organizations to expand awareness and access to mental health services.** East Harlem has several medical clinics and community-based organizations that provide mental health services. To the extent possible, the NeighborhoodStat team should work with these organizations to establish community partnerships and protocols that could improve efficiencies and lead to on-campus interventions. Expanding access to creative art/music-based therapies is of particular interest.
- **Institute effective security and prevention measures on-campus.** Such measures may include increasing security on rooftop doors and barring access to other locations that are isolated. Provide information on suicide prevention resources in suitable locations, including building rooftops.
- **Host conversations with NYPD and DOHMH to determine the intersection of resources and interventions for mental health services.** Determine if there any

systemic gaps that prevent positive interventions from taking place and work to develop a process that covers these gaps.