

## 8 “The Bronx Was the Last Place”

### REFLECTIONS ON DISPLACEMENT AND GENTRIFICATION

Years ago at the Point, people talked about gentrification and I saw it as very far away. Now, in the last few years, for economic reasons, the Bronx is seen as the last frontier. I hope we are prepared for it. People are working to have it happen in a way that we are not damaged by it, so that we still are who we are. So that people are not pushed out.

Elena Martínez, cofounder, the Bronx Music Heritage Center

One of the challenges now is to stop the brain drain, young people leaving the community. Hunts Point is on a precipice of gentrification. It could become gentrified quickly. Our mission is for people to build the neighborhood they want and to hang on to it. The people who worked so hard for the parks shouldn't be pushed out. The issue is what is affordable. We define it differently than does the City. Affordable is not affordable if the teachers in local schools couldn't afford to live here.

Maria Torres, president of the Point Community Development

I took the subway to Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem, walked up the stairs, and thought I must have taken the wrong train. Women with baby carriages going into coffee shops. I didn't see a black figure. They say we are eliminating poverty. How? By driving people out. I am against people moving in and reinventing the neighborhood. I have seen it in other places. One person moves in

and they fit into the community. Other upper-middle-class people move in and they form their own group. Soon they dominate the area. We have Mexicans, Central Americans, West Africans, struggling to make ends meet, struggling to open small businesses. They become strangers in their own neighborhood.

Bill Aguado, now executive director of En Foco

People in the Bronx have been struggling for years with the rent affordability gap. CAB documented this as far back as 1986 by publishing a report, “Tenants of the West Bronx on Their Way Out, but No Place to Go.” Now the situation is worse. A 2017 study by the Regional Plan Association showed that residents of the Bronx are at a higher risk of displacement than anywhere else in the metropolitan region. Factors include households paying over 30 percent of their income in rent (56 percent of households in the Bronx) and households having income under \$25,000 a year and not receiving a rent subsidy such as Section 8 or public housing (36 percent of Bronx households). Many families pay over half of their income in rent.<sup>1</sup> An additional risk factor is that 75 percent of South Bronx residents lack savings that could be used to pay rent in case of a short-term emergency.<sup>2</sup> According to the Regional Plan study, characteristics that make an area desirable and thus ripe for gentrification include walkable neighborhoods, good transportation, access to jobs, good housing stock, and a comparatively low crime rate.<sup>3</sup> These attributes describe much of the South Bronx. No wonder people are worried.

In gentrifying areas, as rents increase and become out of reach for working families, apartments are likely to be rented jointly to several young adults in their twenties. For example, a working family cannot afford to pay \$3,000 a month but three young people can each chip in \$1,000 to cover the rent. Single and young, they are less likely to become involved in the neighborhood, shop locally, attend local churches, use local schools. They are less likely to stay long term and contribute to the community.

GENTRIFICATION VIA LARGE-SCALE  
DEVELOPMENT IN MOTT HAVEN

Over twenty-five hundred wealthy individuals partied lavishly on October 29, 2015, to celebrate the purchase of land where luxury housing will be built in Mott Haven along the Harlem River waterfront. Neighborhood residents were insulted when they learned that the party's decorations featured fires burning in trash cans and wrecked cars riddled with bullet holes. They were further offended when the developers tried to rebrand the area as the "piano district." Others loudly voiced fears of gentrification and displacement.<sup>4</sup> Photojournalist Ricky Flores shares the community reaction:

The bussing in of an elite group of people that held the party seemed to mock the South Bronx of the fire years. The event included an abandoned car installation, fires in oil drum cans, and the promise that they would be bringing the Bronx back, ignoring a vibrant community that already lives there. It was a tone-deaf event that attempted to ridicule the history of the South Bronx and dismiss what has been built since the fire years.<sup>5</sup>

The developers, Joseph Chetrit and Keith Rubenstein, planned for thirteen hundred market-rate apartments for two sites along the Harlem River. The twenty-five-story buildings on a six-story base would include pools, gyms, pet-care facilities, a cafe, a library, and a screening room. Apartments would rent for around \$3,500 per month. The developers expected to borrow \$500 million of the \$600 million projected cost—significantly more than had ever been borrowed for a project in the Bronx. There are no other buildings like this in the Bronx, and they certainly would quickly change the area. The *Village Voice* newspaper dubbed it "the South Bronx's 1,300-unit gentrification Death Star."<sup>6</sup> In 2018, the developers sold the property, for which they had paid \$58 million, to another developer, Brookfield Property Partners, for \$165 million.<sup>7</sup>

A walking tour of the most southern tip of the Mott Haven neighborhood in May 2017, led by Mychal Johnson and Monxo López of South Bronx Unite, poignantly illustrated the difficult situations current residents face. Daily, a hundred thousand vehicles speed through the highways and bridges. A waste transfer station that handles one-quarter of

Manhattan's garbage draws a steady stream of garbage trucks. Trucks coming from upstate New York exit the Major Deegan Expressway and travel three miles on local streets to Hunts Point Produce Market. Despite strong community opposition, FreshDirect opened an eight-hundred-thousand-square-foot headquarters in Mott Haven, adding another thousand trucks a day.<sup>8</sup> The air pollution from black carbon emitted by the diesel trucks is the major contributor to the very high asthma rates in the area. Pregnant women's exposure to air pollution has been linked to low birth weights of babies.<sup>9</sup> The area's few parks lie alongside the highways, making exercising an unhealthy endeavor. Residents have virtually no access to the Harlem River that borders the area, even though much of the land along the riverbank is publicly owned.

Yet despite all the existing problems Mott Haven residents face—the severe air pollution, poor health, lack of parks, low-performing schools, lack of waterfront access, and a median income of under \$20,000—the biggest challenge is the impending gentrification. About two thousand units of market-rate, luxury housing spread throughout nine buildings are planned for the immediate area.<sup>10</sup> South Bronx Unite has been working for years to get waterfront access for the community. Indications are that improvements will be made to public spaces, such as constructing a park along the river, but the timing is suspicious. Are the improvements coming because of the community's efforts to improve the area or are the improvements for the newcomers?

For years, the area has been home to a number of artists from the Bronx and artists who have been priced out of other areas. The cost of studio space has been relatively manageable. There are now three galleries in the area. Artists are often seen as harbingers of gentrification, but they can also be victims of gentrification.

Proponents of development argue that since existing housing is not being torn down to make way for these luxury buildings, how could there be displacement and job loss? But this has happened before in other parts of the city. New businesses open to take advantage of an affluent customer base moving into the area. Sensing the changing market, commercial landlords raise rents significantly, driving out the mom-and-pop businesses that, collectively, are currently the second-largest employer in the Bronx (next to the health-care industry), employing over forty-four thousand

people who earn an average of \$2,600 a month.<sup>11</sup> New upscale businesses are less likely to hire community residents, preferring salespeople and wait staff that are more closely aligned to their customer base. With the new luxury housing and stores, neighboring residential properties also become more valuable. Owners spruce up their buildings and rent to higher-income tenants. The change can happen quickly, in the span of just a few years. People who have lived in the neighborhood for twenty or thirty years disappear—some turn to the City’s shelter system, some double and triple up with their families, and others go to God knows where.

Jeniffer Montaña, the young woman quoted in chapter 7 who graduated from BronxWorks’ transfer school and is now a teacher, shares her thoughts on what is happening to her Mott Haven community:

Honestly, when you drive up the highway, towards 161st Street, it is so different. I was driving through it my whole life, since I was three. I have never seen all those huge stores. They get built but it takes forever for streets to get repaired.

No one ever wanted to come to the Bronx. People wouldn’t even want to walk around here. They took over Harlem and Brooklyn. Now we have to deal with our land, our homes being taken over. If you are a person of color, no one cares about you. People live in apartments with rats and roaches. Many apartments would be much better if just some work was done on them, if the holes were patched and with a new paint job. But that doesn’t happen. So many people struggling, students just struggling to survive. Where will we go? You can’t live in Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, it is too expensive. The Bronx was the last place. Now families are losing their homes here. People want to take over our culture now too.<sup>12</sup>

#### DISPLACEMENT FROM PREDATORY INVESTMENT ON THE GRAND CONCOURSE AND OTHER AREAS

In addition to Mott Haven, another geographic area of concern for displacement in the South Bronx is along the Grand Concourse and neighboring streets in the West Bronx and in other areas. The cause is not new luxury development as on the Mott Haven waterfront, but landlords buying buildings to take advantage of a tight housing market to maximize

profits. Advertised rents in 2018 range from \$1,800 to \$2,600 for a two-bedroom apartment. At 30 percent of income for rent, a family needs an annual income of \$64,000 to \$100,000 to afford these rents.<sup>13</sup> The average income in Community Boards 4 and 5 is \$31,500 and \$26,000, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

New York City has regulations designed to prevent rapid rent increases in multiple dwellings as a way of protecting tenants in a tight housing market. These rent stabilization regulations determine how much landlords can increase rents in most apartments that rent for less than \$2,700. Management firms are becoming proficient at manipulating the system to increase rents as much as possible. Kenisa, a young woman with a small child, lives in a desirable building on the Grand Concourse and worries about the changes happening in her building:

I grew up in this building. I have lived here for almost twenty years. Throughout the years, all the tenants used to be very close to each other. Everyone knew each other, we all grew up together. We were very close to the people who worked in the building.

Ever since this new company took over, about four years ago, everything changed. The first thing they did, they took all the employees out and brought in different people, management, the door man. Then they started going after the tenants, those whose apartments were not in their names. They kicked a lot of people out.

The lease on Kenisa's apartment was in her mother's name, but Kenisa had a background in tenants' rights and was able to fight to maintain her tenancy. Many others were less fortunate.

Landlords buy buildings at prices that current rent-rolls cannot support, with a plan to change the economics of the building by forcing out long-term tenants and bringing in higher-income renters. The investors who finance the purchase, both major banks and private equity firms, are complicit in this plan. Each time the owners turn over an apartment and re-rent it, they can raise the rent. The owners also make major capital improvements in the building that allow them to raise rents significantly. The rent increases from major capital improvements do not end when the cost of the work has been covered but stay as part of the rent indefinitely. It is not uncommon, in a building that has stable tenants for many years,

to have a 50 percent turnover within a few years of the building being sold. Kenisa continues:

Many of the new tenants are strangers. Most are doctors at the local hospital. You have to make more than \$80,000 to rent here now. I have a friend who earns good money, she earns about \$50,000. She didn't qualify for an apartment. A lot of the old tenants were evicted. Others decided to go because of the pressure. Management has been coming up with "rules." They started taking people to court for anything but not everyone is willing to fight.<sup>15</sup>

In some buildings, unscrupulous landlords harass long-term tenants by withholding services to force them to leave, so they can raise rents. This takes the form of refusing to make essential repairs, such as fixing leaks that cause ceilings to fall or patching holes in walls or ceilings. Landlords add unwarranted extra charges to rent bills that tenants, after futilely trying to contact the landlord, refuse to pay—and then are taken to housing court by the owner. Housing court can be an unnerving, intimidating experience for tenants, as virtually all landlords are represented by lawyers.<sup>16</sup> Historically, less than 10 percent of tenants have had lawyers. Tenants often feel coerced to sign agreements that are unfair to them, which can have disastrous results, perhaps even ending up in their eviction.

A 2018 report by the Regional Plan Association looks at the effect that bad landlords have on both the city as a whole and on their tenants. Bad landlords bring twice as many eviction cases as other landlords, and their buildings get issued at least ten new code violations a year, with an average of sixty-three recorded violations per building. The report states that bad landlords, although a small percentage of all landlords, cost the City over \$300 million for Legal Aid, housing court, shelters, emergency repairs, and code enforcement expenses. The tenants suffer from lack of heat, mold, roach and rodent infestation, and harassment. For the tenant, the results are often disastrous, with out-of-pocket costs in excess of \$1,000, lost days from work, children's health problems, eviction proceedings, and higher rates of homelessness. Tenants in the Bronx are twice as likely to have a bad landlord as those who live in other parts of the city, and low-income tenants are, of course, more likely to have a bad landlord than other tenants.<sup>17</sup>

THREAT OF DISPLACEMENT FROM PUBLIC POLICY  
INITIATIVES ALONG JEROME AVENUE

A third example of how displacement can occur is through well-intended government initiatives. The lack of affordable housing is an issue citywide, not just in the Bronx. It is more acute in the Bronx because of residents' low income. As one of his major initiatives, Mayor Bill de Blasio promised to build or preserve two hundred thousand units of affordable housing at a cost of \$4 billion, and he is making progress toward that goal.<sup>18</sup> Large areas are being rezoned to allow the construction of the taller buildings and denser neighborhoods. Mandatory Inclusionary Housing (MIH) requires developers to include a percentage of permanently affordable housing units in any building constructed in an area that is rezoned. The City believes that besides fostering economic integration, rezoning and MIH will help ease the chronic housing shortage.<sup>19</sup> MIH is a tool to force developers to build some low- and moderate-income housing, but in a global city like New York, it remains to be seen if building more housing will bring down rent levels. The mayor argues that rezoning gives the City some measure of control over new development. At least not all of the new housing will be market rate. He states that the City does not have the funds for the level of subsidies that deeply affordable units require.

The proposed up-zoning in the West Bronx is for ninety-two blocks of Jerome Avenue and the surrounding area. Jerome is a commercial street that runs parallel to the Grand Concourse a few short blocks to the west. It has a subway too, but unlike the Grand Concourse, whose subway is below ground, Jerome's is elevated. The elevated train makes the street dark and noisy, and its metal supporting columns impede the flow of traffic. The dominant businesses have been modest auto repair shops. Hawkers stand in the middle of the street under the elevated subway, attempting to wave customers in. Inexpensive stores and restaurants serving local workers and residents mingle with the auto repair shops.

The rezoning allows the construction of forty-six hundred units of new housing. To make space for all these units, the rezoning permits taller buildings.<sup>20</sup> The majority of the auto repair shops will be rezoned out, and the other small businesses will be priced out. Land values increase as developers offer to buy one-story business properties to knock them down



to build large, multiple-dwelling buildings. Many developers are likely to choose to build 100 percent “affordable” housing so that they can take advantage of available subsidies and tax benefits.

The proposed construction of thousands of units of “affordable” housing caused alarm among many residents. Through an organization called Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA) and a related group, Bronx Coalition for Community Vision, tenants organized for two years around the planned rezoning of the ninety-two-block Jerome Avenue corridor. Residents of the area, with an average median family income of \$25,000, posed the key question about “affordable” housing: The new apartments will be affordable for whom? They knew from the City’s original proposal that only 10 percent of the new apartments would rent to families in their income level. If new housing is going to be built in their neighborhood, why shouldn’t they be able to rent it? They felt they held the area together during bad times, and they should be able to benefit, not be hurt, if new housing is built.

There are multiple factors used to determine income levels and rents in newly constructed “affordable” housing, including the type of subsidy or tax breaks the developer used and the program the building falls under. In some developments, households earning up to \$111,000 may qualify for affordable housing. For the housing program that will likely be used in the Jerome Avenue area, families with incomes up to \$56,000 would qualify. This figure is still more than double the median income of current residents of the area.<sup>21</sup> The City’s plan calling for only 10 percent of new apartments actually being affordable for current residents was seen as very unfair. And there is concern that those truly affordable apartments may be mostly studios and one-bedroom units, inadequate for families.

Fitzroy Christian, who became involved in housing issues as a result of long-term repair problems in his building, says:

What we have is a mixture of cultures and ethnicities that is unique. If we are not careful, the up-zoning could lead to wholesale gentrification, which would drive away many people.<sup>22</sup>

Vivian Vázquez understands the issue. She now works with three schools and a community center at the New Settlement Apartments (NSA) Community Campus building:



With the rezoning of the Jerome Avenue corridor, most of the auto repair businesses will be demolished and the sites used for housing and stores. CASA pushed for an expansion of the area that would allow the existing businesses to remain. The auto businesses are a major source of employment for many immigrants in the area. Note the elevated subway overhead. Photo by author.

With the proposed rezoning of the Jerome Avenue area, what will happen to the African Americans, the Dominicans and Mexicans, especially the undocumented, who live there? It seems like the same pattern as the '60s and '70s, when people living in the area that is now Lincoln Center and Columbia University in Manhattan were displaced and had to find some sort of housing in the Bronx. The Dominicans and Mexicans in our area will be displaced, but to where? And now the private-sector money is in control, not government money, like in the '80s.<sup>23</sup>

Residents are also genuinely concerned about the fate of the businesses and workers on Jerome Avenue. The minority- and/or women-owned businesses employ mainly middle-aged skilled immigrants who are able to make a good living working on Jerome. A beautiful book of photographs

documenting the workers and their livelihood has been published by the Bronx Photo League of the Bronx Documentary Center. Besides pictures of autoworkers who can fix a flat in five minutes or replace a cracked windshield, there are photos of women selling food and frozen carbonated beverages; men selling bottles of water and peeled oranges; workers in hair and nail salons, “99 cent” stores, and small restaurants; and an auto shop that is converted to a church in the evenings.<sup>24</sup> Some of the businesses are light manufacturing. All the workers take pride in their work, and all have very limited options when they are forced out.

Residents believe that as property values rise, landlords of existing residential buildings on blocks near the rezoned area will try to raise rents and bring in higher-income tenants. Residents fear they will lose their homes. Similarly, they fear that the rezoning will cause commercial rents to rise and existing businesses to close. Soon after the rezoning plan was announced, residential rents started to increase significantly,<sup>25</sup> and some businesses have been torn down to make way for high-rise buildings. Jack Doyle, the executive director of NSA and the major sponsor of CASA, has been witnessing the speculation that the hot real estate market, fueled by the rezoning of the Jerome Avenue corridor, is causing:

The Bronx has been seen as the only place with reasonably affordable land. I get lots of calls from real estate people. A lot near here recently sold for \$3.5 million and is back on the market for \$6 million.<sup>26</sup>

Maria Rivera, BronxWorks’ director of senior services, told me that shortly after news of the rezoning became public, local homeowners were offered large sums to sell their houses. These would become building lots for large apartment buildings. Land speculation happens quickly. Thankfully, BronxWorks bought the property with the old funeral home for its administrative and homeless outreach office when it did, before speculation in the rezoning area drove prices sky high.

The changes that caused the destruction of so much of the South Bronx in the 1970s and ’80s, the fleeing of the middle class, and the reduction of basic services described earlier in this book happened very rapidly. Some neighborhoods changed within a few years. People who were poor, primarily people of color, were the ones who were left to live in extremely difficult conditions. The toll it took on families cannot be overstated. Most

survived, suffering through the fires and the twin epidemics of drugs and AIDS, and helped create the new South Bronx.

The rezoning ushers in another period of very rapid, and some feel risky, change for a stated good cause: creating more “affordable” housing, urgently needed in NYC. But the rezoning primarily targets low-income areas, and residents wonder why poor areas are the ones forced to take things that other areas resist, like waste treatment plants, highways, and now rezoning. Despite the City’s pledge to protect tenants with anti-eviction and anti-harassment services, the rezoning may unleash market forces that will upend neighborhoods like the Jerome Avenue corridor. Rezoning is now being proposed for an even larger area in the South Bronx around Southern Boulevard in Longwood.

So far, a proportionate share of the large-scale rezoning has not been proposed for higher-income residential areas of New York City, where MIH would bring in low-income tenants. Why not rezone more affluent, primarily white, neighborhoods where good schools, parks, and other infrastructure can more easily sustain new growth? Doing so would expand housing opportunities for people who are low-income rather than contract them. Why not use this opportunity to integrate NYC by bringing people who are poor into affluent areas?<sup>27</sup>

Unlike the waterfront area of Mott Haven, the new construction in the Jerome Avenue area is less likely to cause what is typically thought of as gentrification: high-income white people descending upon a poor area and taking over. If developers decide to accept construction subsidies, the new housing will be categorized as affordable, with upper income limits as to who can qualify. The people who would move in are likely to be predominantly people of color with moderate incomes. However, displacement of current low-income tenants is feared.

The vast scope of the new housing being built in the Bronx is truly impressive. Many of the developments have hundreds of units, and at least one will have over a thousand. With names like Crossroads Plaza, Elton Crossing, La Central, the Peninsula, and Bronx Point, these buildings are changing Bronx neighborhoods. Crossroads Plaza has three buildings, totaling 425 units. Building 3 of the development is for people with incomes 50–100 percent of metropolitan New York’s median income, or between \$45,300 and \$99,600.<sup>28</sup> The area’s median household income is under \$20,000.

Within NYC, the South Bronx has been the area with the most reasonably priced housing. It has been the place to which people who were displaced from other areas moved. As this changes, what housing options will there be for people living in or near poverty—endless waits for public housing or Section 8 vouchers that never materialize, the City’s shelter system (with possibly a subsidy when placed into an apartment), or exiting NYC altogether? What will NYC be like if it loses so many of its poor residents? What if it becomes a less diverse city? What if the energy, talents, and creativity of low-income families are depleted?

#### COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE GOES THROUGH THE ROOF, TOO

Commercial real estate is going upscale as rapidly as residential real estate. The editors of the *Commercial Observer*, an online real estate newsletter, stated in 2015 that they love the Bronx, comparing it to pre-gentrification Brooklyn. Attractive features include good transportation and low land prices. The article goes on to say that “the Bronx is ripe for picking.”<sup>29</sup>

The recent history of the BankNote Building in Hunts Point (described in chapter 6) illustrates how wealthy developers are venturing into the Bronx’s commercial real estate. Occupying a full block, with four hundred thousand square feet of space, this landmarked, huge brick building once printed foreign currencies and stock certificates, and later housed other manufacturing operations. It was owned by a wonderful man, Max Blauner. Welcomed by the Blauners and, after a series of meetings, by many of the neighbors, BronxWorks opened a drop-in center for chronically homeless people in the building in 1997. The Blauners rented to other nonprofits and to a second-chance school. Some long-term tenants were small businesses, manufacturers, and artists like Arthur Aviles and his dance company. In 2007, Taconic Real Estate purchased the building for \$32.5 million<sup>30</sup> and initiated eviction proceedings against CAB, stating that homeless people were not part of their vision for the building. Taconic renovated the building and planned to make it into an art center. The endeavor failed, but Taconic did force out CAB and other long-term tenants and upgraded the building.<sup>31</sup> Luckily for CAB, the Blauners still

owned another building in the area that was suitable for a drop-in center. We were able to hold off the eviction for two years while we raised funds and renovated the new space.

When Taconic found they had over two hundred thousand square feet of unrented space on their hands as the art center concept failed, they rented space to the City to house several welfare and food stamp centers.<sup>32</sup> But LightBox-NY, a studio that films celebrities like Lady Gaga and Mary J. Blige, also has space in the building, illustrating the dynamic between the still prevalent poverty of the Bronx and the prospect of fame and big money. Taconic sold the building in 2014 for \$114 million.<sup>33</sup> They had made tons of money, setting an example of one type of venture that will continue to lure well-heeled developers into the South Bronx.

An interesting footnote: Vivian Vázquez's son was invited to a high school party given by a wealthy family in 2012. The party was held in renovated space in the BankNote Building. Private security lined the perimeter of the building. When neighborhood kids asked what was going on, they were told to "go away, you don't belong here." Sadly, gentrification makes people feel they don't belong in their own neighborhoods.

Further evidence of the desirability of commercial real estate is that two other studios recently moved to the Bronx. Silvercup Studios purchased an old warehouse in Port Morris and converted it into four large studios. The large film and television production facility, which cost \$40 million, opened in 2016. In 2017, York Studios broke ground on a ten-acre, \$100 million facility in the Soundview section of the Bronx that will host eight film stages.<sup>34</sup> Hopefully a large percentage of the employees will be from the Bronx.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT

Bill Aguado, Jeniffer Montaña, Fitzroy Christian, and CASA members base their concern for the South Bronx on what is happening in areas of Brooklyn and Manhattan, such as Harlem. In popular usage, the term *gentrification* is used to describe displacement of low- and moderate-income residents from a geographic area. The people who are displaced

generally are people of color and the displacers higher-income people, usually white people. Areas of the city that have undergone gentrification show an increase in the number of households with incomes over \$100,000 and a decrease in low-income households. This is accompanied by an increase in the percentage of people with a college degree.

A 2016 study by the Furman Center at New York University, called “Focus on Gentrification,” documents the rapid demographic changes that gentrifying areas of Brooklyn are undergoing. The changes show up in descriptions of characteristics of the population over time. The data compare 2014 to 2000, in constant dollars. In the Williamsburg-Greenpoint section, rents went up by 58 percent, income rose by 41 percent, and the percentage of residents with college degrees rose to 44 percent of the population from 18 percent. There was a decrease in the Hispanic population. In Bedford-Stuyvesant, rents increased by 36 percent, income rose by 12 percent, and the percentage of adults with a college degree increased to 25 percent from 11 percent. There was a loss of African Americans, from 75 percent to 60 percent of the population. Citywide during this time, rents rose by 19 percent, there was no increase in income, and college attainment rose to 34 percent from 26 percent.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, there is evidence of a dramatic drop in the number of black-owned businesses in NYC because of gentrification, despite an increase in the number of businesses overall and an increase in black-owned businesses in many other major cities. From 2007 to 2012, the number of black-owned businesses in NYC decreased by 30 percent, according to a study by the NYC comptroller.<sup>36</sup>

For a family, displacement means the loss of their housing, their children’s school, and their social networks, such as family and friends, and loss of support systems such as churches and social service and medical providers. It is a traumatic event. There is no comprehensive study, that I could find, that tracks people after they are displaced.<sup>37</sup> Many may move in with family or friends, but these seriously overcrowded arrangements quickly become untenable. They then apply to the NYC shelter system, an expensive but essential safety net.

A disproportionate share of families in NYC’s shelter system come from the Bronx. (But the South Bronx also shelters more homeless people than became homeless in the South Bronx. This is because shelters tend to be put in areas that are poor.)<sup>38</sup> The Bronx has the highest number of evictions of



any borough, even with BronxWorks, Legal Aid, Legal Services, and other groups' often successful efforts to prevent the eviction of their clients.<sup>39</sup> The numbers of people needing help are staggering, and there are not always answers to the question of where the rent money will come from. Despite Herculean prevention efforts, the number of people NYC is sheltering keeps increasing. In December 2017, NYC was providing shelter for over 60,400 people, including 12,800 families with 23,000 children.<sup>40</sup>

Due to frequent moves and high levels of stress, children in families who are homeless suffer significant educational losses. With an absenteeism rate approaching 50 percent, they lag behind their peers in standardized English and math test measures and are twice as likely to be held back or suspended. Some school districts in the Bronx have between four thousand and ten thousand students who are homeless, representing 11–20 percent of the student population! This includes children in families living doubled up with another family as well as in shelters. Many of these children never catch up.<sup>41</sup> These figures demonstrate that the displacement crisis is already here. All possible efforts need to be made to keep it from getting worse.

Some people who are displaced may move out of NYC. The cities and towns of the surrounding areas tend to be segregated. Low-income people are just as unlikely to be able to afford to move into an area with good, affordable housing and schools outside the City as they are in NYC. There is evidence that eviction rates and homelessness are rising significantly in those outlying areas too.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, those towns are less likely to have good transportation or the availability of jobs that NYC has.<sup>43</sup> For example, 47 percent of children in Newburgh, New York, live in poverty.<sup>44</sup> Some buses run every two hours, some hourly—whereas most NYC subways run every ten to fifteen minutes. Some advocates see gentrification as a human rights violation.<sup>45</sup>

When an area gentrifies, some households are able to stay—but those who stay face rapid changes. They are likely to be heavily rent burdened, paying over half their incomes in rent, leaving little money for food and other necessities. They cannot afford to shop at the new stores. The power structure, institutions, and human services adapt to meet the needs of the newer, more influential groups.<sup>46</sup> Some benefits of gentrification that are often cited include more police protection and cleaner streets and parks.



However, increased police presence can have harmful effects on long-term residents, causing more life-altering arrests, often for incidents that previously would not have led to an arrest.<sup>47</sup> Schools generally do not integrate, because the higher-income families send their children to private schools or find ways to get them into high-performing public schools.<sup>48</sup>

#### OTHER THREATS

Besides displacement and gentrification, other significant challenges exist to maintaining housing for people with low and moderate incomes. The Bronx has over forty-four thousand units of public housing spread over eighty-nine developments. Public housing, historically supported significantly by the federal government, has not had sufficient funds to make necessary repairs. It is estimated that \$17 billion in capital funding would be needed to bring NYC's public housing projects up to standards and keep them there. Now NYCHA gets only \$300 million a year from the federal government for capital repairs, a far cry from what it needs.<sup>49</sup> In June 2018, partly as a result of a lead paint scandal, the City agreed to federal oversight and to fund \$1 billion in repairs.<sup>50</sup>

Many of the buildings that were rehabbed in the Bronx in the past fifteen to twenty years used government subsidies as part of the funding package. In exchange, the owners agreed to keep the rents below market for a number of years, most often thirty years. Many of these agreements will expire before 2030. When they do, if other subsidy agreements are not put in place, rents can rise to market rate. This loss of affordable units will decrease the pool of apartments available to families with limited means.<sup>51</sup>

Some experts see the risk to housing stability as coming not from gentrification but from a different direction. They think the likelihood of the South Bronx gentrifying is being oversold to investors and that the result could be another cycle of disinvestment in the upkeep of apartment buildings, such as happened in past decades. Bill Frey of Enterprise Community Partners states:

Investors are seeing the Bronx as the new Brooklyn. They are being unrealistic. Buildings are selling for much more than their value. There is a danger

that if investors overpay and the building cannot support the mortgage and operating expenses, we will go back to the old days. Part of the problem of overpaying is with funds coming from equity investors. The banks at least do appraisals.<sup>52</sup>

Another threat to stability in the South Bronx is the rise of heroin laced with fentanyl, which started showing up in 2015–16. The synthetic painkiller makes heroin cheaper, more profitable, and much more dangerous. The number of overdoses is rapidly increasing. Although naloxone can still prevent deaths from fentanyl, often it is less effective and several doses may be needed. Heroin laced with fentanyl is causing deaths among people living on the streets as well as those in housing. Fortunately, as of 2018, crime had not increased in the Bronx or in New York City as a whole.

Since 2017, the stability of undocumented immigrants and those living under DACA is increasingly threatened with the heightened possibility of deportation. People are still going about their lives, but this kind of intense worry and uncertainty takes a toll on families. Nonprofits and colleges offer workshops that provide advice, and limited legal help is available. Since its inception, BronxWorks has helped low-income people, including immigrants, apply for food stamps, medical assistance, and housing. At the time of this writing, a policy change in Washington is being considered that would cause immigrants who use public benefits, even temporarily, to become ineligible for a path to citizenship. What a terrible choice for families—face hunger, homelessness, and illness or risk never becoming a citizen. How does society benefit if people are malnourished, ill, and/or homeless?

#### LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS

The Bronx is a tipping point for our city: a measure of how we succeed and whose lives we value. If we cannot figure out how to bring in investment in the Southwest Bronx without displacing thousands of tenants, without repeating our past, then we can't do it anywhere. But if we can do it here, we can do it everywhere.

CASA white paper<sup>53</sup>

### *Employment*

The Bronx is diverse in its people and also in residents' views about new development. Many see the massive investment occurring in the Bronx as a good thing. Borough President Rubén Díaz Jr. welcomes businesses moving in for the jobs they bring, as well as new housing for people of varying income levels. Marlene Cintron is president of the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation, an arm of the borough president's office. A lifetime resident who was born on Kelly Street (and a former member of the Young Lords), Marlene has worked for elected officials, in banking, and for nonprofits. She is pleased with the new business and residential development:

When Rubén interviewed me, he gave me a goal of getting the Bronx off the rank of number one as the county in New York State with the highest unemployment rate. To do that, we needed to get 11,000 people employed. At that time, we were at 14.1 percent unemployment, now in 2017 we are at 5.9 percent. No other borough has gone down that much—117,000 more Bronx residents are working today than when Rubén took office in 2009.

Clearly her first priority is jobs:

If a building is a warehouse, it will stay a warehouse. We need the jobs. We have been asked if we would change zoning for affordable housing. Although we support affordable housing, we are going to protect the manufacturing zones. You cannot have affordable housing if the tenant cannot find a place to work.

She values the range of income levels of tenants that the new housing brings:

The affordable housing has bands for income eligibility. There are no poor buildings. They have people of different incomes up to 80 percent of AMI [average median income]. We can encourage the sons and daughters from the Bronx to come back once they graduate from college.

This should be a borough where everyone can afford to live. When people say they don't want gentrification, they mean we don't want any white people. We want a diverse borough that includes everyone. Many of our new immigrant neighbors are in business.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to more availability of jobs from the movie studios and other businesses moving to the Bronx, another positive economic factor is the increase of the minimum wage in NYC to \$15 an hour in 2019. Even with this increase, however, families earning minimum wage, many of which are headed by single women, will still earn an annual income of only \$26,000 to \$27,000. With NYCHA projects having waiting lists of 250,000 families, there is little reason for other families to even apply.<sup>55</sup> If only 10–15 percent of the mayor’s pledged eighty thousand units of new housing are deeply affordable, the low-income housing shortage crisis will likely continue to worsen.

Workforce development programs and higher education have a role to play in increasing wage earners’ ability to afford housing. The workforce development field talks about “career ladders” that create a path for people to move to higher-paying positions. So far, career ladders have met with mixed results. One type of career ladder that has had some success is technology. Public colleges, including community colleges, play an important role in helping low-wage earners advance. A 2017 study on the effects of college education on income, based on millions of tax filings and financial aid forms, showed the value of the City University of New York system. Lehman College ranked fourth nationally, and Hostos Community College and Bronx Community College ranked sixteenth and seventeenth, respectively, on the mobility rate of students moving from the bottom 40 percent of income to the top 40 percent.<sup>56</sup> But even with some people benefiting from youth and workforce development programs, public colleges, and the availability of more jobs, still many people will not be able to afford housing and will need deep subsidies to prevent them from becoming homeless.

### *Preserving Existing Housing for Current Tenants*

Residential real estate speculation threatens the viability of privately owned buildings. Peter Magistro of the Bronx Pro Group, a developer and manager of affordable housing, explains how rampant speculation affected tenants in buildings they were asked to save:

We have been active on the rescue and preservation side of development. We have just completed over five hundred units of distressed properties. These

units were owned by irresponsible firms that purchased at inflated prices, subsequently pushing up rents aggressively and cutting services to cover their bottom lines. This behavior has proven to be very difficult for tenants and the cause of rapid deterioration to these properties. Unbelievable as it may sound, literally there were bathrooms and kitchens that were moments from collapsing, presenting very dangerous conditions to their inhabitants and subsequently to our construction team during renovations.

We had to relocate five hundred families from their apartments in order to do the required renovations. It took an inordinate amount of work, convincing and calming down tenants in order to conduct the renovations. This preservation work makes our new construction projects seem relatively easy.<sup>57</sup>

Also concerned with preserving existing housing for current residents, Jack Doyle has taken proactive steps to make sure that the sixteen buildings NSA owns remain in good condition and affordable for the foreseeable future:

Our biggest accomplishment has been maintaining decent, stable housing for over three thousand people. New financing will maintain the buildings and the affordability for another fifty years. With the \$45 million renovation we are now undergoing, all the apartments are getting new kitchens, bathrooms, and windows. We are replacing the roofs and putting in solar panels.<sup>58</sup>

Another tool to fight displacement is tenant organizing. CASA, NWBCCC, Banana Kelly, and others help form tenant associations when landlords are withholding services, such as heat and essential repairs. CASA has weekly housing clinics to inform tenants of their rights and provides support to many tenant associations. Nancy Biberman of WHEDco notes:

There are two parts to keeping a neighborhood affordable: preserving what is affordable and building for who lives there now. Studies show that you can't build your way out of a lack of affordable housing, you can't build fast enough. For aggressive preservation of housing for poor people, they need to have lawyers. And new construction needs to come with deep subsidies.

NYC took a big step by adding more legal protections for low-income tenants threatened with eviction or harassment by landlords who want them to move out so that rents can be raised. Such harassment can include withholding of services, as described above by Peter Magistro, or threatening tenants with eviction, as described by Kenisa. Nancy describes the

importance of the right to counsel in holdover cases in which the landlord alleges that the tenant is violating aspects of the lease:

It is very significant that the City will now provide lawyers for people in housing court. You need a lawyer for holdovers. To bring an eviction proceeding, the owner can make a million allegations against a tenant that on the face of it could be true. The owner doesn't have to prove it up front. For example, he can state that the apartment is being used for immoral or illegal purposes or that the tenants are a nuisance. Tenants have to be able to defend themselves. Civil cases are subjective. It is not the same level of proof as in criminal cases.<sup>59</sup>

CASA and other groups had been advocating for a right to counsel for tenants in housing court for years. Although nationally there is a right to counsel in criminal cases, there is no right to counsel in civil cases. The vast majority of landlords (98 percent) hire lawyers to represent them in housing court, but in 2013 less than 20 percent and maybe as little as 1 percent of tenants had lawyers.<sup>60</sup> In a *Daily News* article, tenant leaders Carmen Vega Rivera and Fitzroy Christian explain how tenants often don't know their rights and feel coerced into signing stipulations that are not in their best interests.<sup>61</sup> (For thirty years, BronxWorks paralegals helped tenants with housing court cases but could not officially represent them.) City Council Member Vanessa Gibson, whose district covers CASA and many of BronxWorks' offices, cosponsored the right-to-counsel legislation in NYC, which passed in August 2017.<sup>62</sup> CASA is widely credited with spearheading this initiative. Eviction rates have already started to fall. Other major cities and some states may implement a similar housing-court right-to-counsel if it proves successful in reducing homelessness in NYC.<sup>63</sup>

CASA and others also pushed for legislation that would require landlords to obtain a Certificate of No Harassment prior to obtaining City approval for undertaking major work in apartments or entire buildings. This legislation also passed in 2017. A recommendation on harassment in a CASA white paper reads as follows:

*Pass and Implement Citywide "Certificate of No Harassment" Legislation.* Renovations are one of the key tools landlords use to raise rents through Individual Apartment Increases and Major Capital Improvements, and, more generally, are often needed to attract higher-paying tenants.

Renovations also represent a moment in the cycle of displacement where the City has a real ability to intervene because of the need for Department of Buildings permits for most major work in both individual apartments and building-wide.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, if the landlord can't get the certificate, then he can't get approval to make renovations that allow him to increase rents. CASA has started to advocate for ending rent increases for capital repairs, arguing that it is the landlords' responsibility to maintain their buildings. CASA has other recommendations that can be viewed on their website.

Other progressive laws and policies are in place to help the economic situation of low-income families. CASA lobbied for legislation, which passed, to increase construction workers' training and safety. Laws have been passed mandating that employers provide sick leave, raise the minimum wage, pay family leave for employees of private employers, provide protections for LGBT people and immigrants, and require that employers not ask about criminal backgrounds until after a job offer has been made. Fair Fare provides half-price subway MetroCards to low-income New Yorkers. Some City and State policies seek to make the lives of shift workers more predictable. NYC also funds groups to provide easier access to work supplements such as SNAP (food stamps), earned income tax credits, government-subsidized health care, and other benefits. City funding provides immigrants with ESL classes and adults with basic adult education. In July 2018, a waste equity law was passed that reduces the permitting capacity of waste facilities in oversaturated neighborhoods in the South Bronx and other areas. Many of these progressive policies have been lobbied for by community-based organizations. Started under Mayor Bloomberg and expanded under Mayor de Blasio, "Universal Pre-K" for four-year-olds and "3-K for All" for three-year-olds are providing free, full-school-day education to growing numbers of young children.

### *Deeply Subsidized Units in Affordable Housing*

Initially, CASA leaders Fitzroy Christian and Carmen Vega Rivera both became involved with CASA because of their own housing problems. The two have worked hard to make the rezoning benefit and not hurt people in the area. Fitzroy says:



Fitzroy Christian and Carmen Vega Rivera, two long-term, volunteer leaders of CASA, work to prevent displacement of low-income tenants. Serious repair needs in their respective buildings led to their involvement in a broad range of housing stability issues. Photo by author.

We are fighting to make sure housing remains affordable for people to be able to stay in their homes. As an organizer, it is to bring a sense of hope, to show them something else is possible. We are building this community for us. We don't just work here, we are saving the community for us, for me, my family and the next generation behind us.<sup>65</sup>

CASA organized tenants to fight the threatened displacement they fear will come with the rezoning. They pushed for much deeper subsidies so that half of the new units could be rented to people with lower incomes. They wanted 25 percent of the apartments to be available to families with annual incomes under \$27,000 (not the 10 percent the City proposed) and another 25 percent under \$36,000. The remaining 50 percent would rent to families with incomes up to \$56,000. The City's obvious concern was that as the cost goes up with deeper subsidies of rents, the fewer the number of units the City can afford to build. Mayor de Blasio had initially pledged to build or preserve two hundred thousand units of affordable housing, eighty thousand of which would be new construction. He raised





Members of CASA marching down the Grand Concourse to a Rent Guidelines Board public hearing in June 2017. CASA played a key role in the passage of progressive legislation, including the right to counsel for tenants in housing court, which benefits low-income tenants citywide. Photo credit: CASA.

the number to three hundred thousand in 2017. If units are more expensive because of deeper subsidies, the City might not meet his goal. Sophisticated housing and organizing nonprofits such as Banana Kelly, NSA, and NWBCCC lent their expertise to CASA to come up with alternative deep-affordability models, but the City did not accept those models.

CASA's monthly meetings at NSA's Community Center were usually attended by upwards of a hundred people. Used to educate community residents about the issues, the meetings provided updates on the City's response to CASA proposals, strategizing of options, and conversations with potential allies, such as unions, elected officials, and groups in other boroughs. Simultaneous English-to-Spanish and Spanish-to-English translation was provided. Meetings often included a chant, "Whose Bronx? Our Bronx!" and "Nothing about us, without us, is for us."

Thousands of people were involved, speaking out in public hearings and protesting the plan for the Jerome Avenue rezoning. City Council members who have a key vote on the rezoning were publicly asked to commit to supporting CASA's proposals at community forums. CASA developed position papers and a white paper that explained options that would allow for truly affordable housing. These options included a larger role for nonprofit housing developers.

Probably as a result of the critical publicity and pressure from groups such as CASA, the City has made some changes to the term sheet for the affordable housing developments in areas such as Jerome Avenue that will make more units available to those with very low incomes and to the elderly.<sup>66</sup> The funding that many developers will use in the South Bronx will likely require a 10 percent set-aside for families who are homeless. The City has budgeted an additional \$1.9 billion to increase the number of units and to deepen affordability citywide.<sup>67</sup> These changes were still a far cry from what CASA felt was needed. CASA rejected the City's position that it can't afford to give deep subsidies to a significantly larger percentage of apartments to make them available to very low-income people. Let the City build fewer units and give them to people who need them the most, advocates argue.

Although the deal the City Council passed did not include some of CASA's key demands (such as a smaller area subject to rezoning, a larger percentage of deeply subsidized units, and a larger area for auto-related businesses), CASA did influence the outcome for tenants citywide through the right to counsel, the Certificate of No Harassment, and important safety training for new construction workers. Included in the overall agreement will be funding for two new schools, money for parks, and funds for preservation of existing affordable housing. CASA is monitoring the implementation of the rezoning and the community benefits. Bill Frey of Enterprise Community Partners comments:

There are lessons to be learned from the past. Lots of things repeat themselves. I am glad organizing is happening with the NWBCCC and CASA. When Roger Starr [New York City's housing and development commissioner] was talking about planned shrinkage, there was no representation of the people from the community. The housing industry is very strong. Developers and city officials think they know what is best with the

up-zoning, but they are not talking to people in the community. If the rezoning has to happen because the city has to grow, they need to make sure they are listening to and working with people in the affected communities. The United States has done a bad job housing poor people.<sup>68</sup>

At the time of this writing, in order to address the crisis of sixty thousand people in the city being homeless, a bill was introduced by a City Council member from the Bronx, Ralph Salamanca Jr., that would increase the set-aside for homeless units to 15 percent in any rental housing project that receives government subsidies for new construction or preservation. The mayor is not in favor of the bill, arguing that this approach is more expensive and slower than providing rental assistance.<sup>69</sup> While it is significant that elected officials are actively considering additional steps to provide housing for those most in need, the housing affordability crisis affects a great many more low- and moderate-income families

### *New Housing Models*

Interest in community land trusts as a way to ensure permanently affordable low-income housing and public space is growing in the Bronx. In this model, the government transfers ownership in real property over to a community land trust, which preserves affordability in perpetuity. Either a nonprofit or for-profit developer can develop the property, but they have no ownership. Real estate speculation in areas of rising land values is not a factor in the cost of the project because the land is taken out of the speculative market and leased directly by the land trust. A governing board—often composed of government officials, community members, and tenants—manages the use of the housing or other real property. Studies have shown that subsidies have more impact in the land trust model than in traditional government-subsidized affordable housing. South Bronx Unite, Nos Quedamos, Mary Mitchell Center, and NWBCCC are exploring using a land trust model to create permanently affordable low-income housing. South Bronx Unite hopes to gain ownership of the old Lincoln Hospital detox site through its land trust for use as a community center with a focus on health, education, culture, and the arts in Mott Haven. Mychal Johnson, cofounder of Mott Haven-Port Morris Community Land

Stewards and a leader of South Bronx Unite, describes why the organization decided to use the land trust model:

Our community land trust in the South Bronx was born out of decades of struggle against social, economic, and environmental injustice. Now faced with an unprecedented land grab following a half century of planned shrinkage, our community land trust is one of the most viable avenues of taking our public land out of the speculative real estate market and preserving it for the benefit of the community.<sup>70</sup>

Spofford Juvenile Detention Center was a notorious jail for teens and young adults in Hunts Point. Closed in 2011 in response to community pressure and a widespread realization that this facility was inappropriate for young people, the building will be torn down and the large site used for mixed-use housing: 740 units plus light industrial, commercial, and community facility space. Eighty percent of the housing will be for people who earn less than 60 percent of the area median income. Current community residents will have priority for half of the units. Some units will be set aside for people who are homeless. The community facility space will include a health and wellness center operated by Urban Health Plan, a Head Start center, as well as spaces for arts groups including the Point and the Bronx Academy of Art and Dance. A community bank and a grocery store will occupy commercial space. A bakery, a catering service, and Hunts Point Brewery plan to use the industrial space. It is anticipated that 175 permanent jobs will be created. Five nonprofits are community partners. The goal is to create a community with housing, jobs, recreation, and services. Maria Torres explains why the Point is supporting the project:

What is exciting is that the businesses that are coming to the site are already based here, in Hunts Point or nearby. They are looking to expand. They have been here for years and will hire local people. It is good that local businesses are deepening their commitments to our community.

For us, keeping the housing at 100 percent of affordability was important. We want all the people who live in the area to feel that this is their space too, whether or not they actually live in the new apartments.

What we fear is the speculation that may come with new projects. Already a long-term business has been told his rent will be raised. There are residential buildings across the street. Hopefully these landlords will not take advantage of the situation and displace people.<sup>71</sup>

There is no question that rapid change is coming to the Bronx. The construction of huge new apartment buildings, big box stores, and production studios show that the transformation is well underway. The booming real estate market may present opportunities. But questions remain. Will residents with low incomes share in the wealth being generated? How much will displacement increase? Most New Yorkers would agree that the city should continue to be home to those who are poor as a matter of social justice, as well as for practical reasons. With their energy and entrepreneurial skills, low-income people have an important role to play in the workforce. Their children will be tomorrow's City workers and leaders. Their contributions keep refreshing the culture. The South Bronx has been the place where people who were poor moved when they were forced out of their homes in other boroughs, and it is essential that people of modest means are not priced out of the city. Poor communities need an influx of resources to improve, but not a large influx of high-income people that will displace them. As Jeniffer Montañó said, "The Bronx was the last place."

Will the NYC government take the necessary steps to protect people with low and moderate incomes from the powerful housing industry? To do this, officials need to truly listen to residents and include them as full partners in the planning for the future of their communities. Developments on public land should benefit low-income people and should be truly affordable permanently. Rezoning should not be concentrated in just low-income areas and must come with restrictions requiring that a significant percentage of new apartments be rented to people with very low incomes. To foster economic integration, the City should have affordable housing built in middle- and high-income areas, even if the City has to subsidize the high cost of purchasing the land. Rent stabilization laws and enforcement should be strengthened to prevent apartments falling out of this protection, given that the City will never be able to supplement the rent for all who cannot afford marketplace rents. Historically the federal government played a major role in funding low-income housing through a variety of programs, including Section 8, support of public housing, and a range of funding streams and tax credits for developers. These programs have been steadily reduced, contributing to the rise of homelessness nationally. We should not give up on advocating that decent housing is a human right, as are food and medical care.

Here is my wish. I hope to see the South Bronx emerge from this period of change as a stable home to families who have very low to moderate and middle incomes, with well-managed, truly affordable housing; stable businesses run by local residents; good schools; effective social services for those who need help; employment opportunities that pay a livable wage; quality preschool, after-school, and summer programs for all children; affordable and healthful food; new parks and open space; clean air; a flourishing arts and culture scene; and activist community groups. The South Bronx could be a place that becomes even better at helping low-income people move out of poverty, rather than, as feared, being pushed out of the area. Surely neighborhoods with a high percentage of people who are poor can be more than “not bad”—they can be truly good neighborhoods. Surely children who are poor deserve a fair chance.

We need to ask ourselves what prevents this vision from fully materializing. Is it the same stereotypes that poor people have been facing for centuries—that poor people and poor communities are not really worth investing in? People of the South Bronx are doing a lot of heavy lifting to preserve and improve their communities, but they have been shortchanged for years. Can a consensus arise that low-income communities play an essential role in our social fabric, that discriminatory practices need to be faced head-on, that public education, health care, government-supported housing, and the environment need to be protected and strengthened?

One thing is certain: the future will be one of rapid change, of threats and possibilities. The South Bronx has presented a model for the rest of the world of an amazing comeback from terrible devastation. Can it now develop a model that effectively protects low-income tenants from displacement while large numbers of higher-income people move in? I do know that the people of the South Bronx will seize whatever opportunities exist to continue the work of building strong communities for their families.