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# The Dynamics of Family Homelessness in Brownsville

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A Neighborhood Profile



Institute for Children,  
Poverty & Homelessness

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## A Neighborhood Profile

The community of Brownsville, Brooklyn offers an opportunity to examine how [shelter](#), [neighborhood](#), and [family](#) dynamics intertwine to increase a family's vulnerability to housing instability and homelessness. There are many factors contributing to persistently high rates of family homelessness in Brownsville. Deeply entrenched socio-economic factors such as high levels of poverty and unemployment, an insufficient and unaffordable housing market, and high rates of domestic violence and incarceration converge to create an environment where Brownsville families have one of the highest shelter entry rates of all neighborhoods in Brooklyn and New York City.

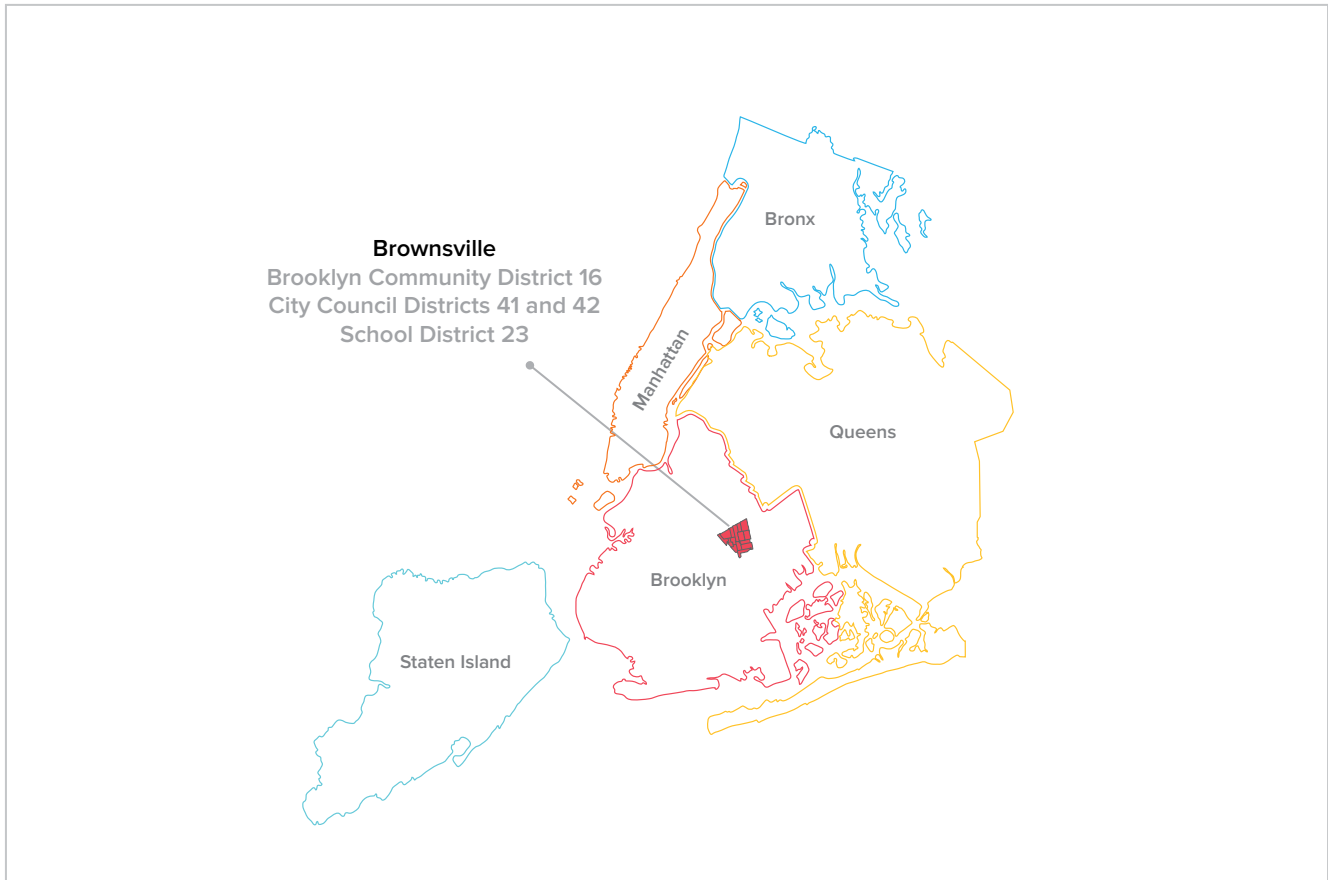
This Neighborhood Profile on Brownsville, Brooklyn examines the prevalence of family homelessness, the reasons why families enter the shelter system, and the growth in student homelessness in this community. It explores risk factors that often push families into housing instability, such as poverty, unemployment, and low wages. Next, it discusses changes in the housing market and provides a geographic look at eviction rates, the condition of the neighborhood's housing stock, as well as other factors that can affect housing stability. Finally, the Profile explores recent efforts by Brownsville residents and the City to bring resources and opportunity to the neighborhood.

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## Key Findings

- The rate at which families in Brownsville entered shelter (8.5 for every 1,000 households) was more than twice as high as the averages across Brooklyn and New York City (3.6 and 3.8 per 1,000 households, respectively). Evictions and domestic violence were the primary reported reasons for entering shelter.
- Nearly one in five Brownsville students (19%) was homeless in SY 2016–17. This was twice the rate for homeless students in Brooklyn (9%) and NYC (10%). The number of students experiencing homelessness in Brownsville has increased by 31% since SY 2011–12.
- In Brownsville, 65% of homeless students reside in shelter, and 28% lived doubled up, staying in someone else’s home in temporary and often overcrowded arrangements. This trend is contrary to those in Brooklyn and NYC, where one-quarter (26%) to one-third (33%) of homeless students resided in shelter, and as many as 61% lived doubled up.
- Two in five (40%) Brownsville families live in poverty, compared with 25% of families in Brooklyn and 23% of families across New York City.
- Brownsville has a very limited rental housing market, with a vacancy rate of 4%. Among vacant housing units just 35% are available for rent, with the balance being for sale, rented or sold but not occupied, reserved for seasonal use, and other reasons. Additionally, half of all private rental units had a housing code violation in 2018—20% of which were serious and required immediate correction for habitation.
- Of all households with children in Brownsville, 73% were single female-headed households. Of those, half (51%) lived in poverty. With just one income on which to raise a family, single mothers living in poverty are at high risk of becoming homeless. While data are not available for single female-headed families entering shelter in Brownsville, nationally it is estimated that about 84% of homeless families are female-headed.

## Introduction to Brownsville



Located in eastern Brooklyn, Brownsville is just over one square mile in area but is home to approximately 57,000 people, 12 homeless shelters, several domestic violence shelters, and over 7,600 NYCHA units housing almost 18,000 residents. For decades, Brownsville has seen high rates of concentrated poverty. Over two in five (43%) residents are living in poverty, 28% of whom are children. Furthermore, the home ownership rate in Brownsville (13%) is significantly lower than the averages across Brooklyn (30%) and New York City (33%).

Given Brownsville's small footprint of just 1.2 square miles, it has an extremely high concentration of public housing units (over 7,600) and more than its fair share of shelters—there are more family shelter units in Brownsville than there are families becoming homeless in Brownsville. Still, in FY 2015 alone (the most recent year for which data are available), 432 families from Brownsville entered the New York City shelter system, comprising one in eight families (12%) entering shelter from Brooklyn. The number of families entering shelter from Brownsville increased by 43% from FY 2012–FY 2015. Brownsville had the third highest entry to shelters in Brooklyn in FY 2015. It is unknown whether the majority of families becoming homeless in Brownsville are being placed in Brownsville shelters, or if they are being placed in shelters across the City.

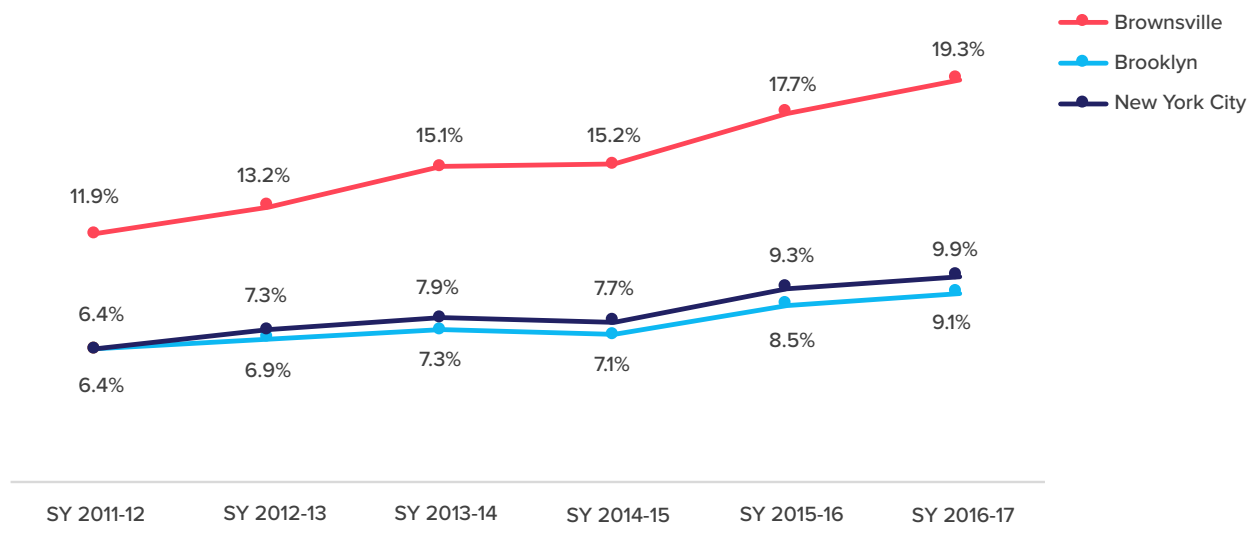
## A Community Destabilized

Families in Brownsville experience persistently high rates of homelessness. In FY 2015, the most recent year for which data are available, 8.5 families for every 1,000 households in Brownsville entered shelter—far greater than the average rates for Brooklyn (3.6) and NYC (3.8).

The most common reason families in Brownsville cited for entering shelter in FY 2015 was eviction (24%). This was followed closely by domestic violence and overcrowding (23% and 18% of families, respectively).

Not only does Brownsville have a high shelter entry rate, but the neighborhood also shelters many of the City’s homeless families. Brownsville has the 3rd-highest family shelter capacity in New York City, with about 720 family shelter units. Approximately 90% of the families in Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelters in Brownsville are housed in Family [Tier II](#) shelters, while the rest are [in cluster sites and hotels](#). Brownsville is home to the highest number of Tier II shelter units in the City. Its 641 Tier II units account for 10% of all Tier II capacity in New York City.

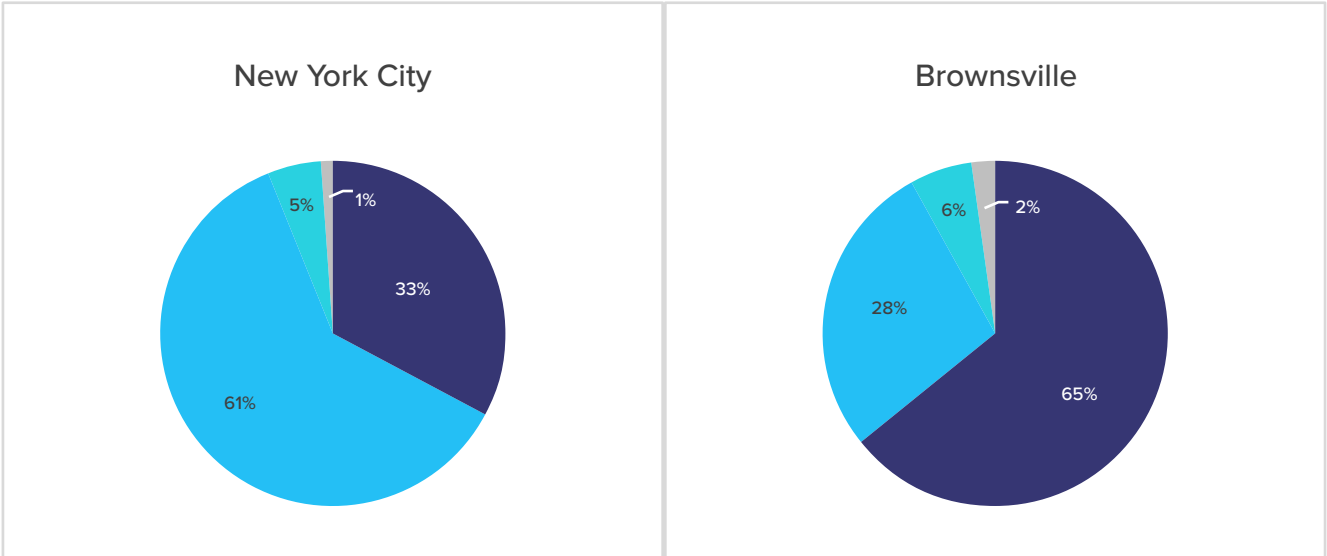
### Homeless Students Enrollment, by Geography SY 2011–12 to SY 2016–17



Approximately **one in five students** (19%) in Brownsville experienced homelessness in SY 2016–17. This represents a 31% increase from SY 2011–12, when roughly 12% of Brownsville’s students lived in temporary housing. The average age of homeless students in Brownsville was 10 years old in SY 2016–17. Although Brownsville (School District 23) has no zoned schools and students can attend any school within the district, some schools still have far higher concentrations of homeless students than others. In two of the District’s 15 elementary schools, at least one in three students were homeless (32%–39%), while at other elementary schools, fewer than one in six were homeless (11%–16%).

**Homeless Students in Brownsville and New York City, by Primary Night-Time Residence SY 2016–17**

■ Sheltered 
 ■ Doubled Up 
 ■ Unsheltered 
 ■ Other Homeless



- Sheltered:** Students who lived in emergency or transitional shelter.
- Doubled Up:** Students who have found temporary accommodations with another family or other person due to loss of housing or economic hardship.
- Unsheltered:** Students living in a place not meant for human habitation, such as a car or a park.
- Other Homeless:** Students who are paying out of pocket to stay in a hotel or motel, or who are awaiting foster care placement.

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Approximately 65% of homeless students in the neighborhood were sheltered in SY 2016–17, while 28% lived doubled-up, and 6% lived in some other temporary situation. This runs counter to the citywide trend, where 61% of students lived doubled up and only 33% were in shelter.

Additionally, just 24% of students in Brownsville who were ever homeless in high school from the class of 2017 graduated within four years—less than half the graduation rate of homeless students across the City (56%). This is the lowest graduation rate among homeless students in New York City. Learn more about student homelessness in New York City [here](#).

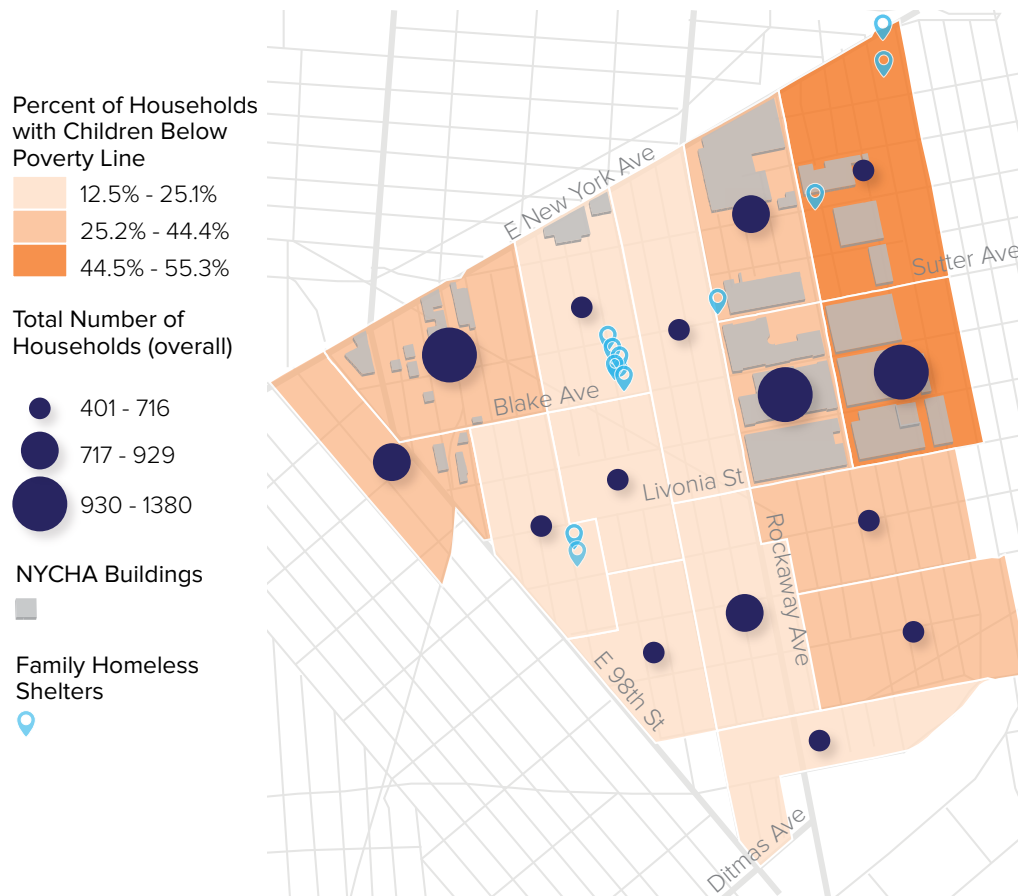
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# Instability Factors Driving Homelessness in Brownsville

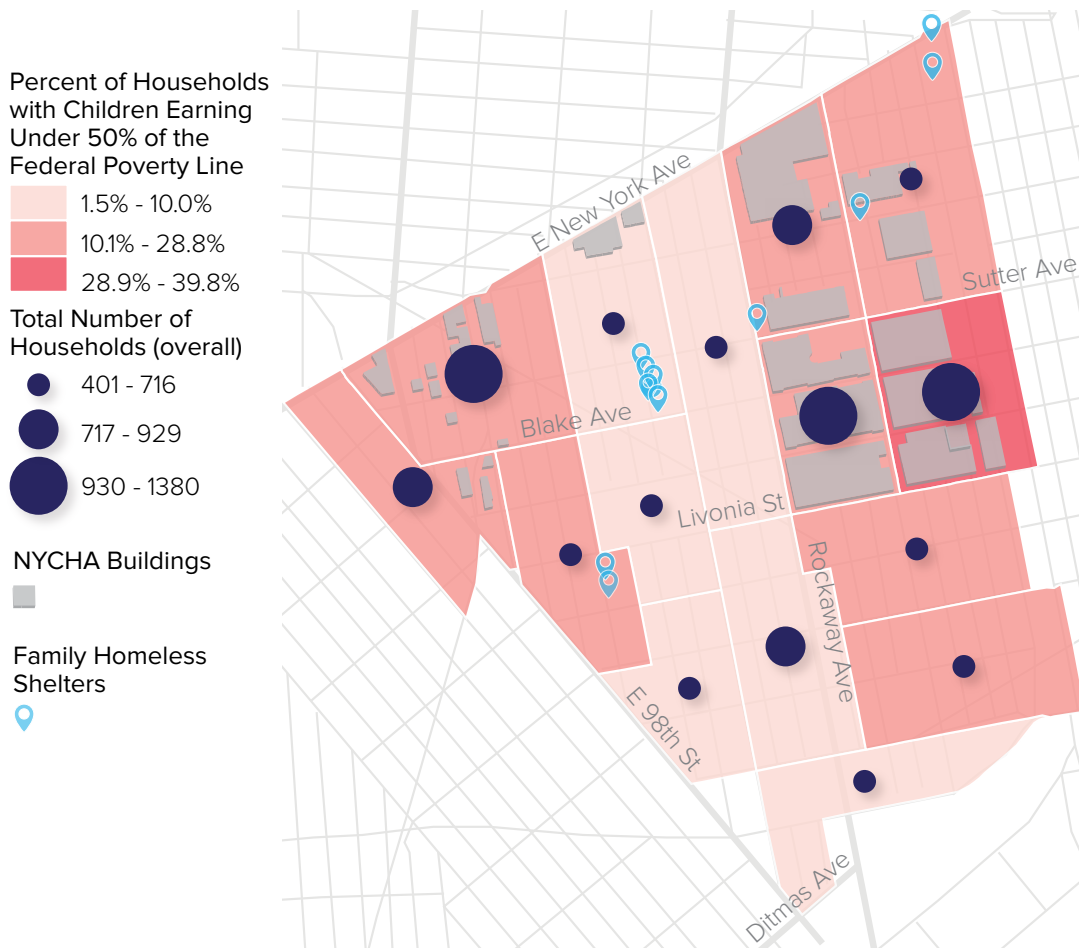
Aside from many families currently struggling with housing instability, Brownsville is also home to a large number of families who are at risk of homelessness. Poverty and a lack of economic opportunity can create a web of destabilizing factors that threaten a family's ability to maintain permanent housing.

## Poverty Rates Among Families with Children



More than two in five Brownsville residents (42% or about 24,000 people) lived below the federal poverty level (FPL) in 2017, which was \$20,420 for a family of three.

## Extreme Poverty Rates Among Families with Children

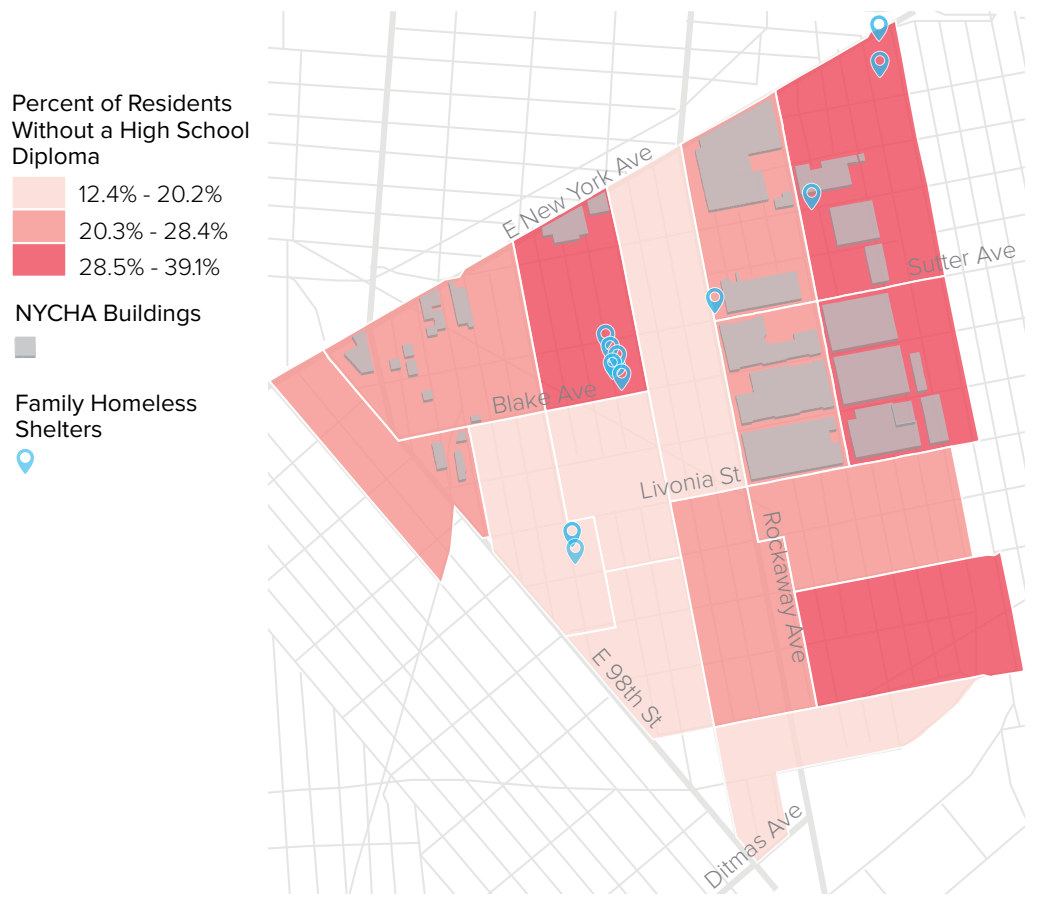


Meanwhile, a subset of one in four residents (25%) lived in extreme poverty, earning less than half the FPL.

## A Closer Look at Family Instability Factors

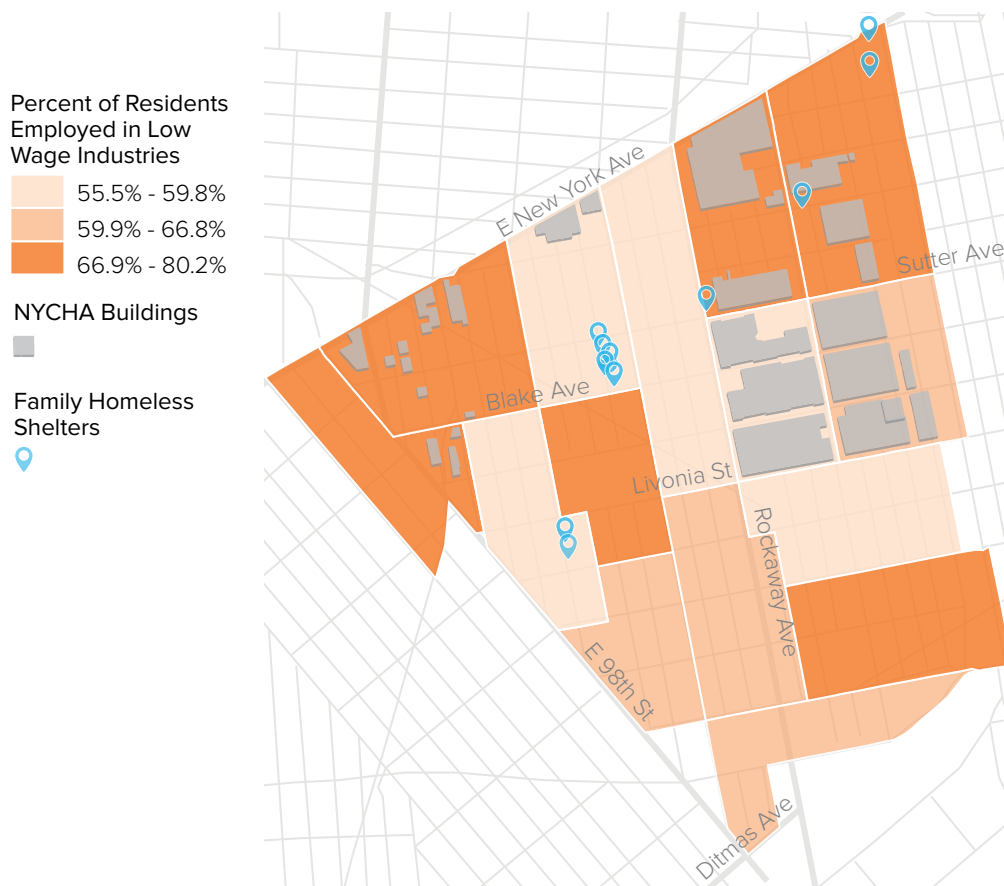
Among all school districts, Brownsville (School District 23) had the second-highest poverty rate, with 90% of students receiving free lunch in SY 2016–17 (Mott Haven in the Bronx, School District 7, had the highest percentage of students receiving free lunch, with 92%). Socio-economic conditions in Brownsville are deeply entrenched, with a combination of low educational attainment and high unemployment pushing families into a cycle of poverty.

### Percent of Residents Without a High School Diploma



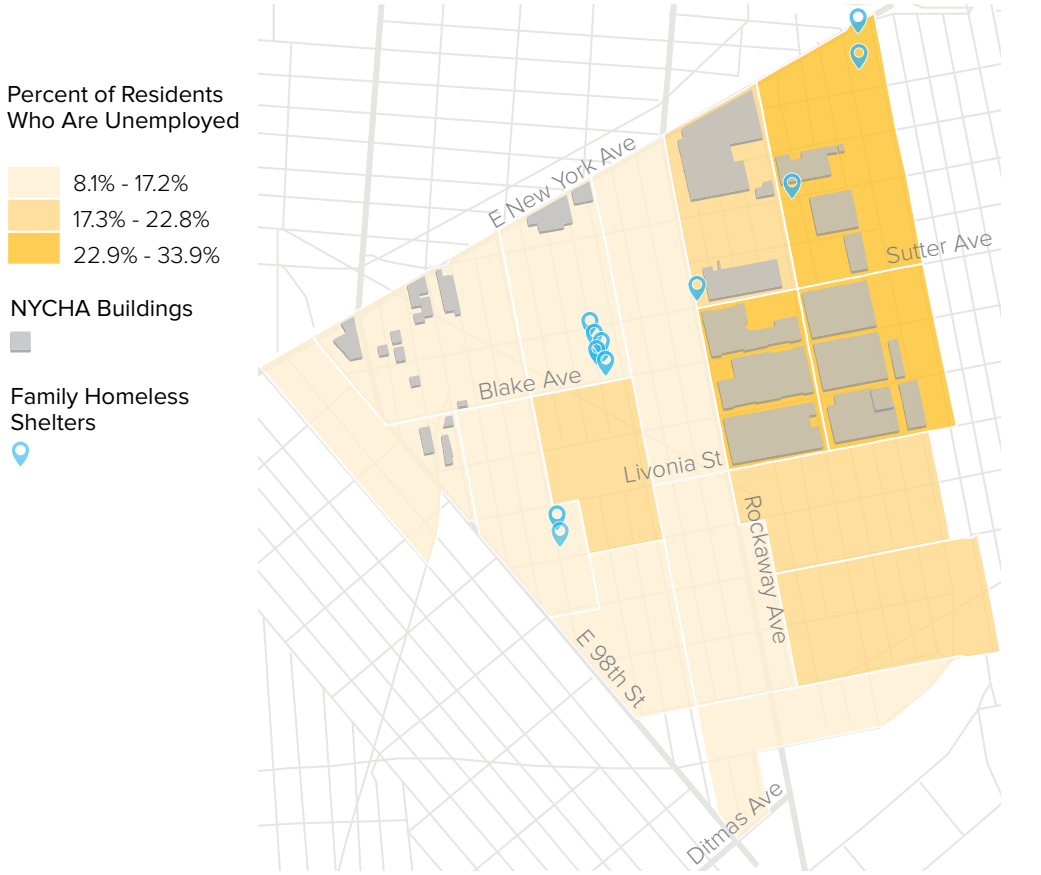
In Brownsville, nearly 27% of adults did not have a high school diploma in comparison to 19% for both Brooklyn and NYC. Just 14% of Brownsville residents had a four-year college degree or higher.

## Percent of Residents Employed in Low Wage Industries



Moreover, workers in Brownsville were about three times as likely to be employed in a low-wage occupation compared to all workers across Brooklyn and NYC (65%, 22%, and 21%, respectively). The community district encompassing Brownsville had the highest rate of workers in low-wage occupations across all districts in Brooklyn and the eighth-highest rate among all NYC community districts.

# Percent of Residents Who Are Unemployed



In 2017, Brownsville’s unemployment rate of 19.2% was more than double that of Brooklyn (8.1%) and New York City (7.8%), and nearly five times the national rate (4.1%).

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## An Unforgiving Housing Market

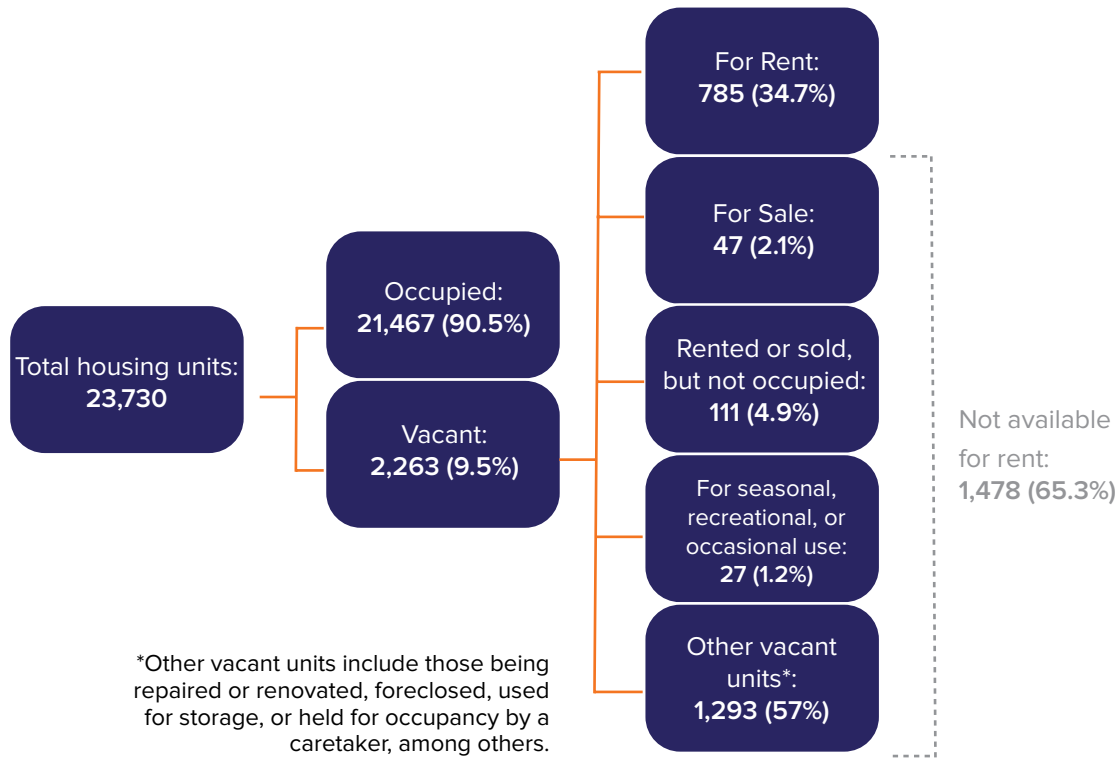
In addition to the socio-economic factors that leave families perpetually vulnerable to homelessness, Brownsville residents also face a difficult housing market with limited vacancies and affordability. While rental prices are lower in Brownsville compared to the borough average, many low-income residents are still rent burdened (spending 30% or more of their income on rent). Three in five renting households (60%) in Brownsville were rent-burdened in 2017—higher than the rate of rent-burdened households for Brooklyn and New York City (52% and 51%, respectively).

Even more troubling, close to two in five households (38%) in Brownsville were severely rent-burdened—spending 50% or more of their income on rent. Brownsville was the second-most severely rent-burdened neighborhood in Brooklyn and the fourth-most in NYC in 2017, where 29% and 28% of households were severely rent-burdened, respectively.

The stock of rental units available to low-income families has dropped considerably over recent years. From 2016 to 2017, there was a 17% decrease in the number of units that asked for a rent of less than \$500 per month. At the same time, the number of units asking for a rent of \$1,500 or more increased by 56%. Rental rates are lowest in the northeast section of Brownsville, which contains the vast majority of the neighborhood's NYCHA units. In this section of Brownsville, the percentage of residents paying rents below \$500 ranges from 47% to 66%.

High rental costs are exacerbated by a shortage of housing options, especially for families. Housing options were extremely limited for families with two or more children as the stock of 3-bedroom units dropped by 4% from 5,763 units in 2012 to 5,561 units in 2017. At the same time, the stock of studio apartments more than doubled, rising by almost 94% from 749 units in 2012 to 1,456 units in 2017. Moreover, rents were prohibitively high for many low income families, with the median rent for 2- and 3-bedroom units being \$928 and \$1,241, respectively. The housing stock is further reduced by the large percentage of unavailable vacant units—Brownsville has a rental vacancy rate of 4%, and only about one in three vacant housing units (35%) in Brownsville were for rent in 2017.

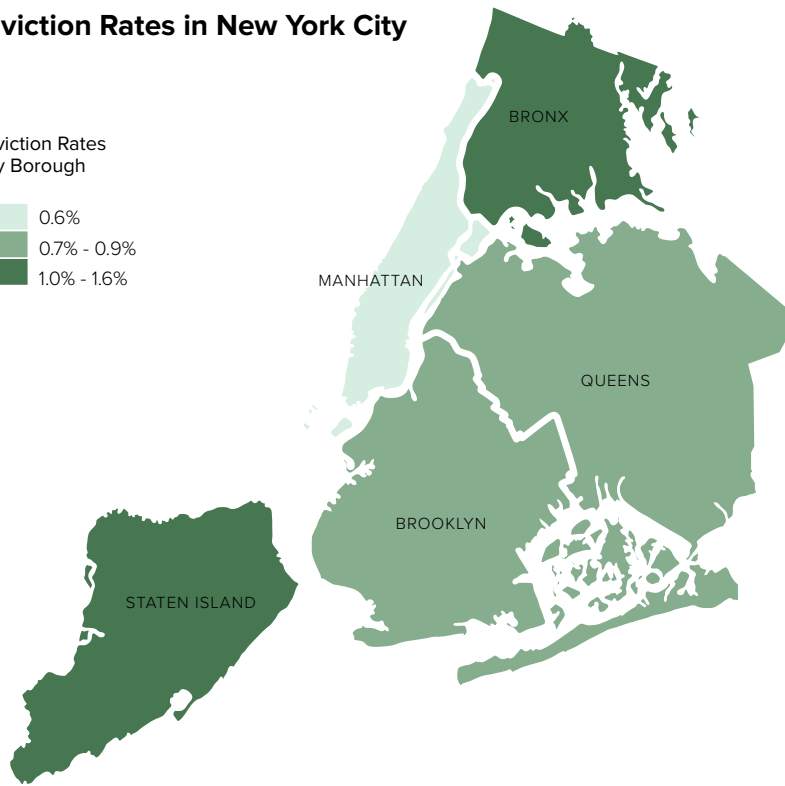
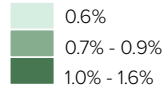
## Vacancies in Private Rental Market in Brownsville, 2017



The end result for many families who struggle to afford rent is an eviction notice. In the first half of 2016 alone (the most recent year for which data are available), 205 families in Brownsville accessed eviction prevention services from Homebase—a citywide homelessness prevention program administered by community-based organizations. Brownsville is one of a few neighborhoods where residents are currently eligible for free anti-eviction legal services, as overseen by the City’s Office of Civil Justice.

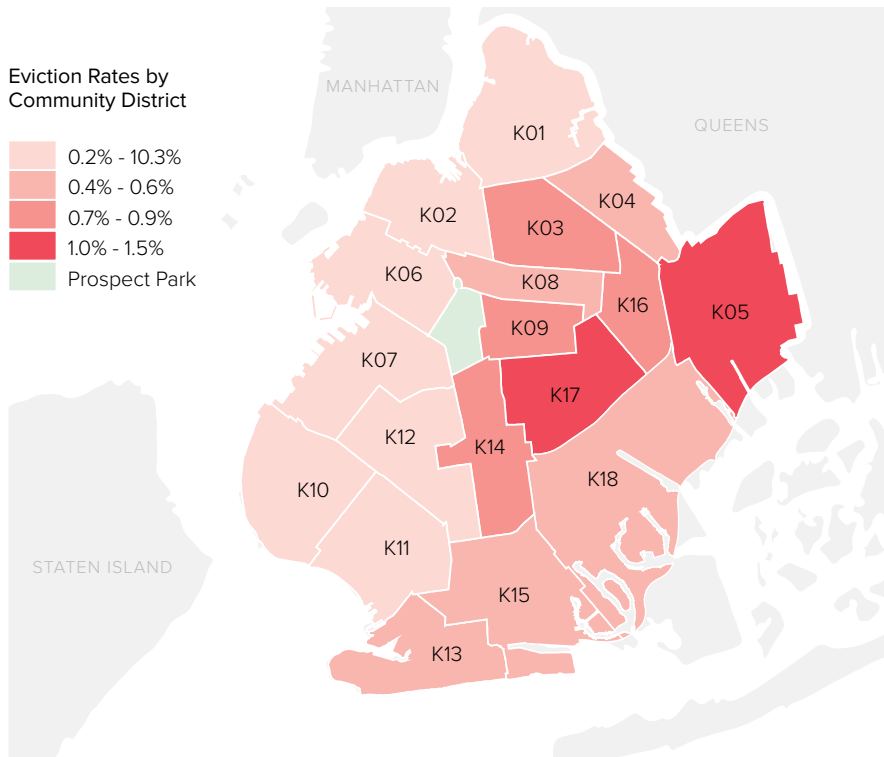
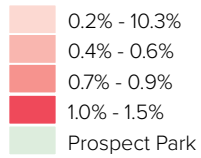
## Eviction Rates in New York City

Eviction Rates by Borough



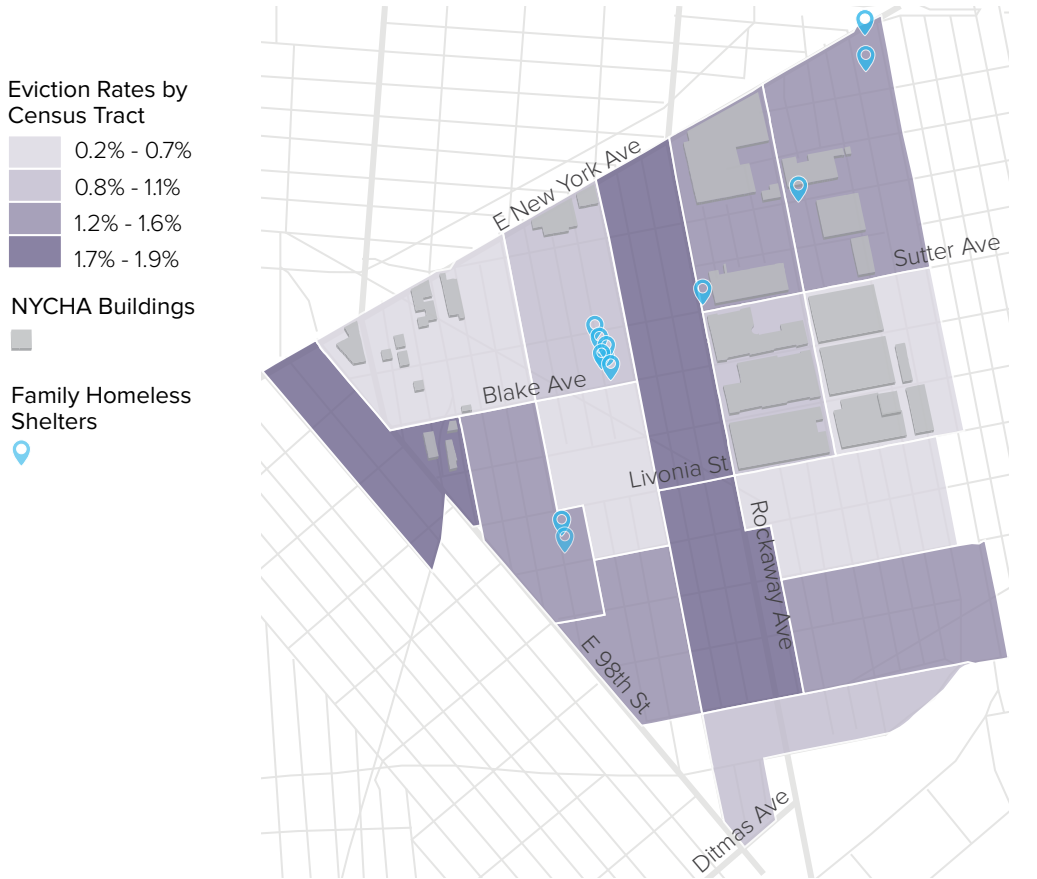
## Eviction Rates in Brooklyn

Eviction Rates by Community District





## Eviction Rates in Brownsville



Despite these services, eviction rates remain high in Brownsville. Approximately 24% of Brownsville families who entered shelter in FY 2015 became homeless due to an eviction.

In 2018, 252 evictions were completed in Brownsville. This amounted to 1.2% of Brownsville's approximately 21,000 residential units, which was 1.5 times the average eviction rate across Brooklyn (0.8%). These eviction rates are undercounts, as many evictions occur informally. A past eviction can be very damaging to a family's ability to avoid or remain out of shelter, often automatically barring these families from rental consideration.

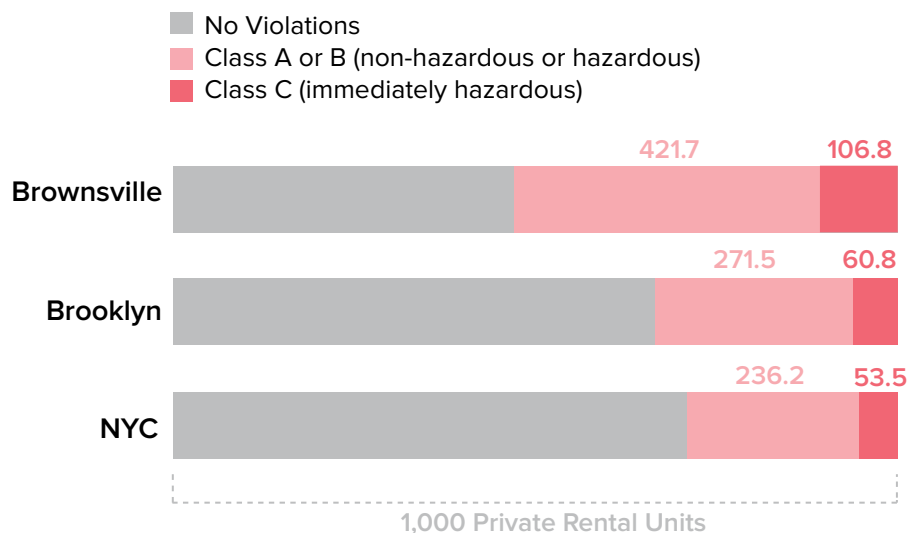
# Housing Conditions in Brownsville

Aside from high rents and subsequent evictions, another factor contributing to family homelessness is unlivable housing conditions. The neighborhood’s housing stock is deteriorating and the rate of housing code violations is far greater than the averages across Brooklyn and New York City.

There was one violation for every two privately-owned rental units in Brownsville in 2018 (529 per 1,000 units), with some units having multiple violations. This was more than 1.5 times the rate in Brooklyn (332 per 1,000 units) and NYC (290 per 1,000 units).

While housing code violations can be either non-hazardous or hazardous, serious hazardous violations (or Class C) require correction immediately, within 24 hours or within 21 days in some cases. Class C violations include inadequate supply of heat and water, rodents, peeling lead paint in dwellings where a child under seven resides, amongst others. Units with heat and hot water violations are usually uninhabitable and require immediate correction. One in five violations (20%) in Brownsville was serious—about 107 of 529 total violations per 1,000 units. This was 1.8 times the rate of serious violations across Brooklyn (61 per 1,000) and twice the rate across NYC (54 per 1,000). The persistence of maintenance deficiencies can indicate landlord disengagement or refusal—an issue often faced by low-income renters.

## Housing Code Violations Per 1,000 Private Rental Units, 2018



Note: Class A violations are non-hazardous and require the condition to be corrected within 90 days, while Class B violations are hazardous and require correction within 30 days. Class C violations are more serious and require immediate correction for violations related to heat or hot water, or between 24 hours and 21 days for other violations. Rates represent Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) violations that were opened in 2018.

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## Factors Compounding Family Homelessness

The second most-common reason cited by families in Brownsville for entering shelter was [domestic violence](#). The incidence of domestic violence is extremely high in Brownsville. Of the 59 community districts in NYC, Brownsville had the fourth-highest number of intimate partner violence incident reports in 2017, with nearly 3,400 reported incidents (East New York, Brooklyn; Jamaica, Queens; and St. George, Staten Island all reported over 4,000 intimate partner violence incident reports that year).

Families are further destabilized by the effects of high rates of mental illness and incarceration. With 1,897 of every 100,000 adults hospitalized due to mental issues, Brownsville had the second-highest rate of psychiatric hospitalizations in the city in 2018. This rate was far greater than the average rates for Brooklyn (684 per 100,000) and NYC (676 per 100,000).

Brownsville residents have identified several challenges to mental health, with incarceration being the greatest challenge. Brownsville's incarceration rate of 1,698 for every 100,000 adults is the highest in the City. This high rate of incarceration is indicative of a lack of economic opportunity and a lack of responsiveness in the public education system.

In addition, single parent households with children are at high risk of homelessness. In Brownsville, 73% of all households with children were female headed, and half (51%) of those families lived in poverty. These households are often just one missed paycheck or medical emergency away from an eviction. While data are not available on the makeup of families entering shelter from Brownsville, nationally it is estimated that about 84% of homeless families are female headed.

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## The Effort to Revitalize Brownsville

Brownsville residents are at the forefront of neighborhood revitalization efforts, creating youth training opportunities, developing public space, and investing in their community in a variety of ways. Recent efforts from the city and state also promise to aid these efforts if planned and executed with the full inclusion of community members. From 2016 to 2017, the NYC Office of Housing Preservation and Development worked with dozens of city leaders, community organizations, and Brownsville residents to create [The Brownsville Plan](#), which is currently being implemented. The Plan invests \$1 billion to develop vacant city-owned land into more than 2,500 new affordable homes. Along with new affordable housing, the investment includes new retail and community spaces, a new arts center, and a Neighborhood Health Action Center. It remains to be seen whether these new affordable housing units will truly be affordable to homeless families.

Additionally, in August 2019 the City declared an investment of \$9 million to support anti-violence initiatives in Brownsville. The new funding will go towards renovating the Brownsville Houses Community Center, new security cameras and public lighting, and continued investment into the Neighborhood Health Action Center, the Brownsville Recreation Center, and the Mayor's Office to Prevent Gun Violence's Crisis Management System violence disruption program in Brownsville's 73rd Precinct.

The City also chose Brownsville (along with the South Bronx) as the first district to offer 3-K for All—free, full-day pre-Kindergarten education for all 3-year-old children. The wider availability of 3-K is expected to extend the benefits of early education to children of low-income families and will also reduce childcare expenditures for these families.

With Brownsville as the focus of several critical policy initiatives, it remains essential that the well-being of families facing homelessness is prioritized. Homelessness can have far-reaching, intergenerational consequences for adults, children, and communities, so every effort must be made to prevent homelessness and provide the necessary supports to those families already experiencing the loss of a home.



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