

‘HOUSING IS HEALTH’:

Overcrowding, COVID-19, and Evictions in NYC’s Immigrant Neighborhoods

By Sara Herschander



Hundreds of protesters march at a rally against the end of a State eviction moratorium in August 2021.

Adelia Farciert was away from home when her sister called around lunchtime: “Did you finish work yet? There’s a fire in the building—they’re evacuating everyone.”

Farciert, 50, who is originally from Puebla, Mexico, rushed home from her job as a housecleaner. The bus skipped her street, by then engulfed in black smoke. It was a chilly day in April 2021, and when Farciert finally got off the bus, she passed by firefighters and fellow tenants, some shivering in pajamas.

“In that moment,” she recalls, “you don’t think of anything at all.”

Farciert and her neighbors had grown closer over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had hit families in the two-building, 133-apartment complex hard when cases first exploded in New York City a year prior. The largely immigrant neighborhood had become a hotbed for infection, killing three building residents and leaving many undocumented and mixed-status families, whose members might have differing immigration statuses, without access to government relief. Still, they socialized on the building’s adjacent “Open Street,” on 34th Avenue in Jackson Heights, Queens—part of a citywide initiative launched as a response to the pandemic. The Open Street afforded families, many of whom lived in overcrowded apartments, with more than one person per room to save on rent, a welcome breath of fresh air.

Until crisis struck again. The devastating eight-alarm fire sent residents scrambling out of their six-story, rent-stabilized building. Rent stabilization, which applies to around one million apartments in New York City, prevents landlords from implementing sharp increases on rent and preserves tenants’ right to renew their leases. The NYC Rent Guidelines Board, a nine-member panel appointed by the mayor, determines the level of rent increase permitted in rent-stabilized apartments each year. The fire injured 21 people, displaced more than 200 residents, and scattered a tight-knit community into friends’ and families’ homes or emergency housing in hotels run by the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) throughout the city. By August 2021, over 100 residents, including Farciert and her 11-year-old son, remained housing unstable, fighting month-to-month to remain in city-sponsored hotel rooms, as officials attempted to relocate them to homeless shelters run by HPD. While NYC’s Department of Homeless Services (DHS) provides housing services to New

Yorkers experiencing homelessness, HPD is the city agency tasked with preserving affordable housing and providing emergency housing to households displaced by fires and city-issued vacate orders. Yet, as residents have decried, there are no HPD shelters in Queens, which is New York City’s largest borough by area and its second most populous, and finding new affordable housing in their neighborhood has become all but impossible.

“Had people just gone to DHS [NYC Department of Homeless Services] intake, they probably could have ended up at a shelter 10 blocks from home,” says Andrew Solokof Diaz, co-president of the 89th Street Tenants Association, a group that has advocated for residents of the two buildings, which are located at the intersection of 34th Avenue and 89th Street.

In neighborhoods like Jackson Heights, where residents are predominantly foreign-born, community members have been sounding the alarm for years over rising rents, rampant overcrowding, gentrification, and a dwindling stock of affordable housing. When the pandemic arrived, these pre-existing housing conditions led to tragedy, with residents suffering from disproportionate rates of COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death. In the economic and housing crisis that has followed, residents have once again found themselves on the brink.

“The rents in those two buildings were some of the lowest in Jackson Heights,” says Solokof Diaz. “This fire was a major shot in the gut to those working to prevent displacement in the area.”



“We either eat or we pay rent,” says Bárbara, a single mother and tenant in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, whose landlord has threatened to kick her and her family out of their apartment, despite national and state eviction moratoriums. A national eviction moratorium declared by Congress was in effect for most tenants from March 2020 to June 2020, after which the Center for Disease Control and Prevention continued to issue its own national moratoriums until the Supreme Court struck them down in August 2021. In New York, tenants have been protected by some form of statewide eviction moratorium since March 2020, with its most recent iteration protecting most tenants until January 2022.



LEFT: Many Bronx residents work in hospitality and retail, industries with the highest rates of layoffs during New York’s initial lockdown.



RIGHT: With evictions looming, some Sunset Park residents must choose between food and paying rent.

The pandemic, Bárbara says, has forced her and other women to work “more hours for less pay” to afford rent.

Yet, it’s still not enough.

When neighborhoods gentrify, longtime residents often find themselves at a crossroads—unable to match the area’s rising rents, they’re displaced into new neighborhoods or the shelter system. Or, as is often the case for immigrants, who may be reluctant to use city services or leave a community where they speak the language, the only solution may be overcrowding, which allows multiple families to combine incomes to pay rent on just one unit.

After the fire, in the midst of uncertainty, an aunt offered Farciert a space in her home. Yet that aunt had already offered a place to sleep to one of Farciert’s other aunts, one of several members of her extended family also displaced by the fire. “We couldn’t all be there, piled up together,” Farciert reasoned.

Instead, she and her son accepted an offer from HPD for a hotel room near John F. Kennedy Airport. From the hotel, it now takes Farciert two hours to travel to her cleaning clients in Brooklyn. It

takes her son over an hour to get to his middle school in Jackson Heights, which had been only four blocks from their old home. The move was meant to be temporary, as the agency attempted to rehouse families, but Farciert was still there in August 2021, four months after she was first displaced.

HPD has offered three options to displaced tenants: affordable housing, defined as costing roughly one-third of a household’s income, in the Bronx or South Queens, or first dibs on a pricey new market-rate apartment complex in Jackson Heights that Solokof Diaz called a “giant gentrifying tower.” According to a meeting in which HPD presented housing options for the displaced tenants, a two-bedroom apartment in the newly constructed Jackson Heights complex would cost \$2,849 per month. In contrast, rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Far Rockaway, where one of the affordable complexes is located, would be capped at \$1,437 per month.

That means the price of moving back to Jackson Heights is prohibitive for people like Farciert, who’s also found excessive documentation requirements, such as paystubs, bank statements, photo



Sunset Park’s Chinatown neighborhood bustles with activity as many face possible eviction.

IDs, and other records—which many tenants lost in the fire—to be a barrier to housing in the community.

“If they’re checking your credit score and your status, it’s better to just forget about it,” says Farciert, whose family first moved into the apartment complex 23 years prior, at the height of Jackson Heights’ transformation into a haven for multiethnic immigrant families. “I’m just going to wait to see what my solution here can be,” she says.



She’s not the only one struggling to stay in the neighborhood.

“The communities we serve have been pushed out,” says Annetta Seecharran, Executive director of Chhaya CDC, which offers services to South Asian and Indo-Caribbean immigrant communities in Jackson Heights, and, increasingly, throughout the borough, as residents have left the neighborhood in response to gentrification.

In the Bangladeshi community concentrated in Central Queens, 42 percent of households are overcrowded, compared with 9 percent in the city overall. The neighborhoods of Elmhurst and Corona in Central Queens are the most overcrowded in the city, with 11.3 percent of households severely overcrowded and more than 1.5 people per room, followed closely by Jackson Heights at 10.2 percent. Overcrowding, along with other poor housing conditions, has been a major source of COVID-19 contagion.

“If one member of the household gets infected, because they’re an essential worker, the rest of the household will immediately catch the virus,” says Seecharran, referencing the pandemic’s devastation of overcrowded communities.

According to researchers at Weill Cornell Medical College, severe cases of COVID-19 were 67 percent more likely to occur in overcrowded neighborhoods, with multigenerational households at even greater risk. As of August 2021, in the majority Latino immigrant neighborhood of Corona, Queens, one out of every 183 residents had died of COVID-19. In Manhattan’s majority white and high-income Financial District, only one out of every 3,381 residents had died.

“There were so many traumas, and we all became sick,” recalls Leonila, a mother in Los Sures on the south side of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a Latino neighborhood greatly impacted by gentrification in recent decades. “It’s been so much for me,” she continues. “I think about how it’s affected my children.”



At a protest and civil action in August 2021, advocates and tenants from throughout the city marched while carrying moving boxes and spray-painted suitcases, meant to symbolize their demands for comprehensive rent relief and eviction prevention for New York City tenants.

“They just keep raising and raising the rent,” says Jorge, a tenant in Woodside, a Queens neighborhood adjacent to Jackson Heights. “We don’t want them to evict us from our homes.”

Overcrowding doesn’t occur in a vacuum and can be considered both a symptom of deeper housing and health crises and a warning sign for evictions, displacement, and, in some cases, homelessness. According to ICPH, more than one-third of families with children

who entered the NYC shelter system in 2018 did so because of an eviction or overcrowding.

“Once you’re evicted, you are far more likely to be evicted again,” says Cea Weaver, campaigns coordinator for Housing Justice for All, a statewide advocacy group that organized the anti-eviction rally in August. “You can’t address homelessness without addressing evictions.”

In April 2021, the Association for Neighborhood & Housing Development (ANHD) released a report warning that landlords were filing evictions at rates 3.6 times higher in the zip codes hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, where 68.2 percent of residents are people of color. Despite national and state eviction moratoriums, landlords have still been able to file for eviction with certain limitations and tenant protections, and most housing court cases have been on hold since March 2020. Exceptions to the eviction moratorium have slowly grown since the pandemic began, and for some immigrant tenants, who are more likely to live in informal and unregulated housing or illegal conversions, the protections have never shielded them from eviction. As of press time, the NYS eviction moratorium was set to expire on January 15, 2022.

“It’s a cycle in which harms are perpetuated by other harms,” says Lucy Block, research and policy associate at ANHD. “Where people of color live is where people are dying from COVID-19 and where people are getting evicted.”

Even as COVID-19 cases skyrocketed, rents continued to rise in Central Queens and other gentrifying neighborhoods. In contrast, many of Manhattan’s wealthiest enclaves experienced a significant, if temporary, drop in rent prices, as office buildings closed and residents fled the city. Central Queens, followed by the Northwest Bronx and Sunset Park, is also home to the greatest share of residents employed in the restaurant, hospitality, and retail industries, which experienced the highest rate of layoffs during the pandemic’s early lockdowns.

“At any moment, they can throw us onto the streets,” says María, a tenant and member of Community Action for Safe Apartments in the Bronx. “We have a right to housing until we get our jobs back, and until we have a normal life.”

In September 2021, New York State enacted a new eviction moratorium, built to protect tenants until the beginning of 2022. The announcement came as the state’s rental assistance program—meant to protect tenants regardless of immigration status as the federal moratorium expires—has been off to a slow start. The program provides rental assistance to low and moderate-income households who have experienced financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Less than 6 percent of applicants had received payments from the state as of August 2021, and only 15 percent of low-income rental households had applied. Many programs have onerous requirements, including proof of income and residency, that act as a barrier for tenants, even if they are eligible, and if the state fails to distribute rental assistance by a September 30, 2021 deadline, the unspent funds may be returned to the national government.

With many undocumented New Yorkers ineligible for unemployment insurance, stimulus payments, and food assistance, it’s been all but impossible for residents to keep up with living expenses. In August 2021, New York State opened applications for its Excluded Workers Fund to help undocumented workers and others excluded



Advocates call for more protections against eviction during a rally at Cadman Plaza Park in Downtown Brooklyn.

from government relief. Still, Alex Fennell, senior housing organizer for ANHD, says that the resulting patchwork of rent relief and eviction moratoria policies has fallen short of protecting the city's most vulnerable tenants.

"Every layer of additional documentation and every layer of technical difficulty reduces the number of our most vulnerable tenants who are going to be able to continue with the process," Fennell says, noting that New York's rent relief program requires a high degree of digital literacy, including the use of two-factor authentication, which requires users to provide a verification code sent to a trusted device, like a cell phone or laptop, to access their account.

What's more, advocates like Jennifer Hernandez, lead organizer for Make the Road New York, fear that the city's looming eviction crisis will make it even harder to fight the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, including new variants: "The only way that we can survive Delta is if we make sure that people are able to stay in their homes," she asserts.

According to the research group National Equity Atlas, over 800,000 households in New York State are behind on rent. Collectively, they owe over \$3 billion in rent debt, and the majority are low-income people of color. As of August 2021, more than 66,000

eviction cases had already been filed in New York since the pandemic began. If adequate eviction prevention measures fail to pass or come to fruition, the results to families' housing stability could be catastrophic.

"We've always paid our rent, but we're in a pandemic now," says María. "We're organizing to be able to live with dignity."

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