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ISSUE BRIEF



**HOW NEW YORK'S
PUBLIC HOUSING FAILS
THE CITY'S NEW POOR**

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Executive Summary¹

Scarce land, rigid building rules, and a thriving economy that attracts new workers have made New York one of the world's most expensive cities in which to rent or buy a home.² Low-income New Yorkers suffer most from the lack of affordable market housing. Many cram into tiny apartments. Others seek accommodation in the city's vast public-housing system—spanning 176,066 apartments in 326 developments³ and home to one in 14 New Yorkers.⁴

Here, too, low-income city dwellers are ill-served. Average waiting times for a New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) unit stretch to 7.5 years.⁵ Those who endure the wait face high crime,⁶ dilapidated buildings,⁷ and scant access to supermarkets and other stores.⁸

NYCHA does little to ensure that its scarce public resources are fairly shared. Despite a shortage of units, NYCHA residents can stay indefinitely. Many do: the average tenant has lived in public housing for more than 18 years.⁹ Nor do residents face pressure to leave when they rise out of poverty. More than one in ten NYCHA households have incomes greater than the New York City median (\$53,000).¹⁰

Low turnover is not the only problem. More than a quarter of NYCHA residents live in apartments so spacious that bedrooms outnumber occupants.¹¹ Meanwhile, some groups are sharply underrepresented. Asians, for instance, account for 11.1% of the city's households in poverty but make up only 4.7% of NYCHA households.¹²

To create more equitable public housing, NYCHA should, among other things, prioritize outreach to underserved communities, as well as adopt policies that encourage a higher rate of turnover, particularly among tenants whose rising incomes place them firmly in the middle class.



NYCHA's Racial Disparities Are a Long-Standing Problem

The New York City Housing Authority, the largest public-housing authority in the U.S.,¹³ aims “to increase opportunities for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers by providing safe, affordable housing and facilitating access to social and community services.”¹⁴ NYCHA was founded and its first buildings were dedicated in 1935,¹⁵ two years before the 1937 Wagner-Steagall Act ushered in federal support for public housing.¹⁶

Today, NYCHA administers more than 16% of all public-housing units in the U.S.¹⁷ Its Queensbridge development is the largest public-housing complex in North America.¹⁸ If NYCHA's authorized residents¹⁹ constituted a city, it would be America's 48th most populous, larger than St. Louis, New Orleans, or Tampa.²⁰

FIGURE 1.

Percentage of NYC Households in Private Housing That Are Overcrowded

	Asian	Black	Puerto Rican	Other Hispanic	White	All Races
Foreign-born	24.3%	18.3%	N/A	27.8%	15.5%	21.7%
US-born	18.6%	12.3%	16.7%	20.1%	11.5%	13.2%
Overall	22.5%	14.5%	16.7%	25.8%	12.9%	16.7%

According to NYCHA, a residence is overcrowded if it has “more than twice as many people as the number of bedrooms (e.g., three people in one bedroom, five people in two bedrooms).” Households are classified by the race and immigration status of the head of household. We consider all ethnic Puerto Ricans to be U.S.-born because the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey classifies Puerto Ricans as native-born Americans.

Source: “2014 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey,” U.S. Census Bureau

Despite its vast size, NYCHA does not serve a representative cross-section of New York City's poor. For example, 27.2% of the city's households in poverty are white, but only 4.8% of NYCHA households are white. Likewise, 11.1% of households in poverty are Asian, but only 4.7% of NYCHA households are Asian. In contrast, blacks account for 25.8% of the city's households in poverty but occupy 45.2% of NYCHA units. Hispanics, who account for 33.8% of households in poverty, occupy 44.7% of NYCHA units.²¹

Faced with New York's high market rents and long waiting lists for public housing (the average NYCHA applicant must wait 90 months),²² many poor New Yorkers—especially Asians and non-Puerto Rican Hispanic immigrants²³—have little choice but to live in overcrowded private apartments (**Figure 1**). Meanwhile, 26% of NYCHA residents live in apartments so spacious that bedrooms outnumber occupants (see **Appendix, Figure 9**).²⁴

FIGURE 2.

Poverty Rates and Share of NYCHA Residents by Race, Percentage of NYC Total, 1980–2015

Year	Asian Share of Impoverished Households	Asian Share of NYCHA Households	Black Share of Impoverished Households	Black Share of NYCHA Households	Hispanic Share of Impoverished Households	Hispanic Share of NYCHA Households	White Share of Impoverished Households	White Share of NYCHA Households
1980	2.1%	n/a	27.6%	51.1%	22.7%	31.9%	47.2%	14.9%
1990	4.4%	1.9%	26.9%	43.5%	26.5%	35.6%	41.7%	18.1%
2000	7.4%	2.4%	27.5%	49.2%	28.7%	41.9%	32.7%	6.3%
2010	9.8%	6.2%	26.5%	42.3%	32.3%	42.8%	29.7%	8.0%
2015	11.1%	4.7%	25.8%	45.2%	33.8%	44.7%	27.2%	4.8%

Current Population Survey figures labeled 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 are derived from averages for, respectively, 1976–85, 1986–95, 1996–2005, and 2006–16. Because the Current Population Survey did not record Asian ethnicity until 1988, the 1990 Asian population in public housing is derived from a 1988–95 average. Here and throughout this paper, the ethnic labels “Asian,” “black,” and “white” exclude Hispanics. Impoverished households are defined as those with incomes less than 60% of the city median. 2015 NYCHA figures exclude Section 8 transition households (i.e., Section 8 voucher holders who haven’t yet found private housing), as well as public-housing households in developments managed by Kraus Management, Inc.

Source: Decennial Census (1980–2010 poverty and population figures); 2011–15 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2015 poverty and population figures); Current Population Survey (1980–2010 public-housing figures); and 2016 NYCHA Resident Data Book (2015 public-housing figures)

Historically, NYCHA has served some types of poor households more than others. For instance, in 1980, blacks represented 27.6% of New York City households in poverty but made up 51.1% of all NYCHA households. In the same year, whites represented 47.2% of poor households but made up 14.9% of NYCHA households (**Figure 2**).

In recent years, the underrepresentation of certain groups has not improved. As Figure 2 shows, Asians accounted for 11% of New York’s impoverished population in 2015—up from 2% in 1980—but made up fewer than 5% of NYCHA residents. Blacks and Hispanics are sharply overrepresented in public housing, accounting for 25.8% and 33.8% of impoverished households, respectively, but 45.2% and 44.7% of NYCHA households.

How NYCHA Fails to Adequately Serve All Groups of Low-Income New Yorkers

Low Turnover

NYCHA is much less successful than most public-housing programs at accepting new tenants and encouraging old ones to move out. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the average U.S. public-housing resident has spent 10 years in public housing; in New York City, the figure is more than 18 years.²⁵

In 2016, 13% of America’s public-housing tenants received their apartments in the previous year, compared with only 3% of NYCHA’s tenants.²⁶ Similarly, the average U.S. public-housing resident waits about two years for his apartment, compared with 7.5 years for the average NYCHA tenant.²⁷

Inefficient Use of Space

A significant amount of NYCHA’s housing stock is underused. According to HUD, 16% of U.S. public-housing residents are “over-housed” (i.e., they live in apartments with more bedrooms than occupants), compared with 26% of NYCHA residents, as previously noted. In other words, whereas nearly a quarter of privately housed foreign-born Asian households and nearly

30% of foreign-born non–Puerto Rican Hispanic households live in overcrowded private apartments (see Figure 1), a large minority of NYCHA residents live in apartments that could comfortably house more people.

Many Nonpoor Residents

Only households below the poverty line can become NYCHA residents. Yet NYCHA residents who later rise above the poverty line are not required to leave. Instead, they merely pay more rent.²⁸ In 2014, 10% of NYCHA households earned more than the city median of \$53,000 (Figure 3).

Lack of Racial Diversity

More than 90% of NYCHA households are black or Hispanic, though both groups together make up only 60% of New York households in poverty.²⁹ Some NYCHA developments are even more narrowly segregated (see Appendix, Figures 5–8). For example, 12,977 households live in 31 developments (of which 25 are in Brooklyn) that are at least 75% black.³⁰

Figure 4 shows developments by size, location, and percentage of households that are black and Hispanic. The closer a development is to the diagonal black line, the more its population is exclusively black and Hispanic; developments that touch the black line have only black and Hispanic residents. The lack of racial diversity in NYCHA developments may discourage applications from underrepresented groups, especially immigrants, who may be willing to endure overcrowded private housing in order to have a sufficiently large cultural support network.

FIGURE 3.

Percentage of NYCHA Households with Incomes Greater than \$32,000 and Incomes Greater than \$53,000

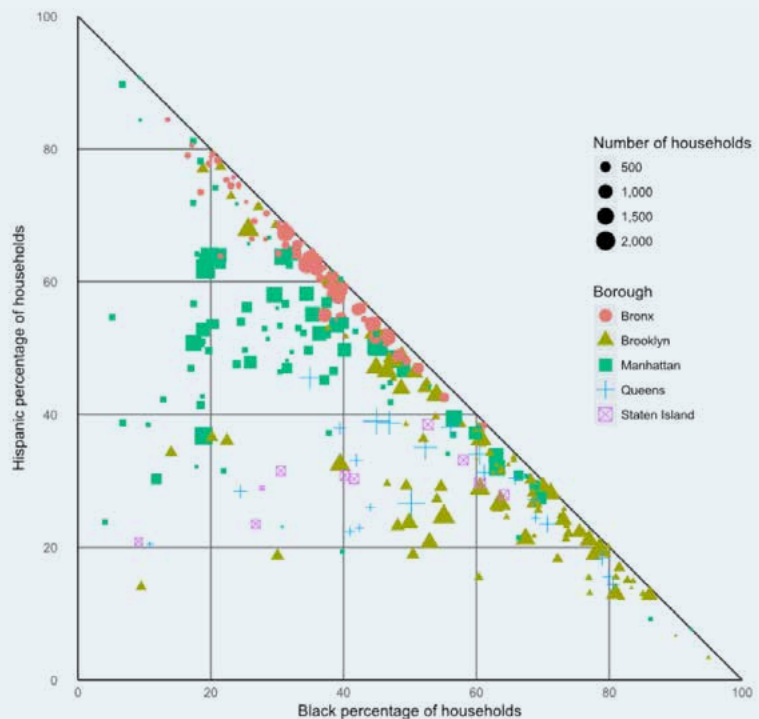
Ethnicity	Household Income > \$32,000	Household Income > \$53,000
Asian	25.9%	4.8%
Black	26.6%	9.3%
Puerto Rican	26.3%	9.1%
Other Hispanic	30.3%	15.9%
White	8.5%	3.8%
Overall	26.4%	10.1%

\$32,000 is roughly equal to 60% of the New York City median household income (\$53,000).

Source: "2014 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey," U.S. Census Bureau

FIGURE 4.

NYCHA Developments by Size, Location, and Percentage Black and Hispanic



The NYCHA developments displayed in Figure 4 consist of all developments with their own entries in section 3 of the 2016 NYCHA Resident Data Book Summary. The exceptions are the Betances II and Betances III developments, each of which is displayed as a single development despite comprising subparts with their own entries in the Data Book.

Source: "NYCHA Resident Data Book Summary," New York City Housing Authority

Conclusion

To make public housing in New York better reflect the demographic profile of New York's poor population, NYCHA should take the following steps. First, bolster outreach efforts to underrepresented groups, such as poor whites, Asians, and non-Puerto Rican Hispanics. Second, to give all poor New Yorkers a better chance at securing public housing, encourage a higher rate of turnover by adopting the following rules:

1 | 10-year time limits.

Given the huge backlog of applicants, new NYCHA residents should not be allowed to stay in public housing longer than the U.S. average for public housing.

2 | Fixed-rent, long-term leases.

Instead of penalizing NYCHA residents for earning more income, adopting fixed-rent, long-term leases would offer residents an incentive to improve their finances, as well as save for the time when their NYCHA residency concludes.

3 | Mandatory transfers and voluntary buyouts for over-housed residents.

Transfers would downsize residents to apartments of an appropriate size. Buyouts would pay tenants to move to private housing. Residents with higher incomes might receive smaller payments; residents with deep, long-established ties to their development might receive larger payments.

Finally, it is worth noting that a long-term tenure in public housing should be considered a mixed blessing, at best. Those of moderate means who choose to pay low public-housing rents are forgoing the chance to purchase property. Faced with growing concern about the comparatively lower wealth of blacks compared with whites,³¹ one cannot ignore the fact that public housing across the U.S. is disproportionately black (45%).³² It is time to reimagine public housing as a way station—one where households can save but also strive, and one that serves the full range of those in need.

Appendix. NYCHA's Most Heavily Segregated Developments

FIGURE 5.

Most Heavily Asian NYCHA Developments

Development	Location; Community District	% Asian Households	% Asian Households in Community District
La Guardia Addition	Two Bridges, Manhattan; CD 3	70.1%	28.8%
Leavitt Street–34th Avenue	Flushing, Queens; CD 7	59.0%	46.7%
Rutgers Houses	Two Bridges, Manhattan; CD 3	54.5%*	28.8%
Lower East Side III	East Village, Manhattan; CD 3	48.2%	28.8%
45 Allen Street	Chinatown, Manhattan; CD 3	47.1%	28.8%

Excludes NYCHA developments with fewer than 50 households. All figures consider only the head of household's race. Asians make up 11.8% of New York City's heads of households. * = excludes Section 8 transition households.

Source: 2011–15 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and 2016 NYCHA Resident Data Book

FIGURE 6.

Most Heavily Black NYCHA Developments

Development	Location; Community District	% Black Households	% Black Households in Community District
Rutland Towers	East Flatbush, Brooklyn; CD 17	94.9%	89.4%
Randolph Houses	Central Harlem, Manhattan; CD 10	86.2%	59.9%
Brevoort Houses	Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn; CD 3	86.1%	59.9%
Tapscott Street Rehab	Brownsville, Brooklyn; CD 16	85.1%	76.4%
Park Rock Rehab	Crown Heights, Brooklyn; CD 8	83.6%	61.7%

Excludes NYCHA developments with fewer than 50 households. Community district figures consider only the head of household's race. Blacks make up 21.8% of New York City's heads of households.

Source: 2011–15 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and 2016 NYCHA Resident Data Book

FIGURE 7.

Most Heavily Hispanic NYCHA Developments

Development	Location; Community District	% Hispanic Households	% Hispanic Households in Community District
Fort Washington Avenue Rehab	Washington Heights, Manhattan; CD 12	89.7%	60.4%
West Tremont Avenue–Sedgwick Avenue Area	Morris Heights, Bronx; CD 5	84.5%	65.9%
Washington Heights Rehab (Groups 1 and 2)	Washington Heights, Manhattan; CD 12	81.2%	60.4%
Highbridge Rehabs (Anderson Avenue)	Highbridge, Bronx; CD 4	80.6%	60.5%
Twin Parks East (Site 9)	Tremont, Bronx; CD 6	79.3%	61.5%*

*Bronx Community Districts 3 and 6. Excludes NYCHA developments with fewer than 50 households. Community district figures consider only the head of household's race. Hispanics make up 24.9% of New York City's heads of households.

Source: 2011–15 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and 2016 NYCHA Resident Data Book

FIGURE 8.

Most Heavily White NYCHA Developments

Development	Location; Community District	% White Households	% White Households in Community District
Haber	Coney Island, Brooklyn; CD 13	72.8%	68.5%
New Lane Area	Shore Acres, Staten Island; CD 1	56.4%	44.8%
Williams Plaza	Williamsburg, Brooklyn; CD 1	50.7%*	64.3%
Surfside Gardens	Coney Island, Brooklyn; CD 13	47.5%	68.5%
Taylor Street–Wythe Avenue	Williamsburg, Brooklyn; CD 1	43.3%	64.3%

Excludes NYCHA developments with fewer than 50 households. Community district figures consider only the head of household's race. Whites make up 39.2% of New York City's heads of households. * = excludes Section 8 Transition households.

Source: 2011–15 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and 2016 NYCHA Resident Data Book

FIGURE 9.

NYCHA Households by Number of Occupants and Bedrooms, Percentage of Total

Occupants	0 bedrooms	1 bedroom	2 bedrooms	3 bedrooms	4 bedrooms	5 bedrooms	6 bedrooms
1	3.7%	17.8%	10.8%	3.2%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
2	0.4%	8.7%	15.2%	4.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%
3	0.0%	2.4%	10.7%	4.4%	0.6%	0.2%	0.0%
4	0.0%	0.8%	3.9%	4.2%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%
5	0.0%	0.2%	0.8%	3.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%
6	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	1.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
7	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.6%	0.2%	0.0%
8	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
9	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
10	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
11	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%

*For example, 3.2% of NYCHA households have one occupant living in a three bedroom apartment. 2.4% of NYCHA households have three occupants living in a one bedroom apartment.

Source: "2014 Housing and Vacancy Survey," U.S. Census Bureau

Endnotes

Research assistance provided by Connor Harris.

- ¹ All statistics derived from the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey are the author's calculations. Except where otherwise noted, all statistics derived from the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, and Current Population Survey are the author's calculations from the University of Minnesota's IPUMS-CPS and IPUMS-USA databases.
- ² See, e.g., "World's Most Expensive Cities," Global Property Guide.
- ³ "NYCHA 2017 Fact Sheet," New York City Housing Authority.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ "Assisted Housing: National and Local," U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- ⁶ See, e.g., Laura Dimon and Greg B. Smith, "NYCHA Residents Suffered Increase in Major Crime Last Year as City Enjoyed 4% Dip," *New York Daily News*, Jan. 4, 2017.
- ⁷ See, e.g., Barbara Huang, "NYCHA Residents Rally for Repairs, Funding," *Mott Haven Herald*, Mar. 9, 2017.
- ⁸ See, e.g., Howard Husock, "Turning Food Deserts into Oases: Why NY's Public Housing Should Encourage Commercial Development," Manhattan Institute, Oct. 25, 2016.
- ⁹ "Assisted Housing."
- ¹⁰ Author's calculations and "2014 Data Tables: New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey," U.S. Census Bureau.
- ¹¹ "Assisted Housing."
- ¹² See "NYCHA Resident Data Book Summary," New York City Housing Authority; and "American Community Survey: 2015 Data Release New and Notable," U.S. Census Bureau. In this paper, the labels "Asian," "black," and "white" exclude Hispanics.
- ¹³ NYCHA also offers "Section 8" rental vouchers that cover 86,194 units of private housing. See "NYCHA 2017 Fact Sheet," New York City Housing Authority.
- ¹⁴ "About NYCHA," New York City Housing Authority.
- ¹⁵ "NYCHA 2017 Fact Sheet."
- ¹⁶ See, e.g., "75th Anniversary of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937," FDR Presidential Library & Museum.
- ¹⁷ According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, there are 1,074,437 public-housing units in the U.S., of which NYCHA manages 174,484. NYCHA itself gives an even higher figure, 176,066. See "NYCHA 2017 Fact Sheet."
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ NYCHA's authorized residents total about 400,000, while unauthorized residents total about 200,000. See Jessica Dailey, "10 Surprising Facts About NYCHA, New York's 'Shadow City,'" *Curbed New York*, Sept. 10, 2012.
- ²⁰ "City and Town Population Totals Tables: 2010–2016," United States Census Bureau; and "NYCHA 2017 Fact Sheet."
- ²¹ "NYCHA Resident Data Book Summary."
- ²² "Assisted Housing."
- ²³ 56% of NYCHA's Hispanic households are of Puerto Rican ethnicity, though Puerto Ricans make up 34.2% of New York's Hispanic households. See "2011–15 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates," U.S. Census Bureau; and "2014 Data Tables."
- ²⁴ This waste occurs despite a NYCHA rule that gives priority to applicants with more than two residents per bedroom. See "Tenant Selection and Assignment Plan," New York City Housing Authority, Sept. 23, 2016.
- ²⁵ "Assisted Housing." NYCHA's own figure is 21.4 years. We do not know the cause of the discrepancy. See "Special Tabulation of Resident Characteristics," NYC.gov.
- ²⁶ "Assisted Housing."
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ All NYCHA residents pay 30% of their income in rent.
- ²⁹ "Poverty Tool: Data Tool," NYC.gov.
- ³⁰ "NYCHA Resident Data Book Summary."
- ³¹ Rakesh Kochhar and Richard Fry, "Wealth Inequality Has Widened Along Racial, Ethnic Lines Since End of Great Recession," Pew Research Center, Dec. 12, 2014.
- ³² "Assisted Housing."

