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Abstract

New Yorkers are facing a housing crisis. Long-standing disparities of race and class in New York City have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Coronavirus and the looming eviction crisis threaten working-class communities, immigrant families and youth searching for housing stability throughout the city. This report is a call to action demanding that city and state elected officials, along with civic leaders, address the housing crisis that youth are inheriting. A team of youth housing fellows, housing organizers from the Broadway Housing Communities, and CUNY academics shaped this project around the ethos, “No research about us, without us.” The work centers the voices of black and brown youth because they are coming of age in a city with profound inequities and in a time of systemic housing insecurity. Youth Housing Fellows conducted interviews with New Yorkers from communities of color between the ages of 13 and 24 to understand the socio-economic challenges that they and their families face during COVID and the racial uprisings. During this process, youth identified subject materials, designed questions, improved the process of obtaining consent, chose peers to interview and helped to organize the findings for this report. Youth contributions to this participatory project provide qualitative data that humanize and amplify the experiences of those growing up within NYC's deeply unequal housing landscape. Youth Housing Fellows and interviewees raise common issues before offering a series of policy recommendations that seek to create more equitable housing for all. When describing their ideal homes, youth do not dream of gold-plated penthouses overlooking Central Park. Their hopes for future accommodations are incredibly reasonable, and yet seem so far out of reach given the historic and current priorities of policymakers in the city, state and nation.

Introduction

New Yorkers are facing a housing crisis. Long-standing disparities of race and class in New York City have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the wealthiest city in the world, 50% of residents spend more than half their income on rent, thousands are evicted

annually, and one-third of households' face overcrowding.¹ Youth of color are disproportionately impacted by the housing crisis with 22,000 children living in NYC shelters, 95% of which are non-white.² This report is a call to action demanding that city and state elected officials, along with civic leaders, address the housing crisis that youth of color are inheriting.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the looming eviction crisis threatening working-class communities, immigrant families and youth searching for housing stability throughout the city, an intergenerational research team organized the 2021 Youth Housing Summit to provide qualitative data in the fight for dignity and adequate living conditions. A team of youth activists, housing organizers from the Broadway Housing Communities (BHC), and CUNY academics shaped this project around the ethos, “No research about us, without us.”³ The work centers the voices of black and brown youth because they are coming of age in a city with profound inequities, and in a time of systemic housing insecurity. The Broadway Housing Communities created the Youth Housing Fellowship for young researchers who were trained in the ethics and practice of oral history. These fellows conducted 16 interviews with youth of color between the ages of 13 and 24 to understand the socio-economic challenges that they and their families faced during COVID and the racial uprisings of 2020 and 2021. During this process, youth identified subject materials, designed questions, improved the process of obtaining consent, chose peers to interview and helped to organize the findings for this report. This report was read aloud to the entire team to ensure everyone was comfortable with the final product before it was made

¹ Tom Angotti, “The Right to Housing in New York city: Realities and Challenges” May 1 2021, *BHC Youth Housing Summit*; Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights “[The Right to Adequate Housing](#)”.

² Ibid.

³ This report was funded and made possible by The Broadway Housing Communities, School in the Square, The Brotherhood Sister Sol, The Shelton and Cynthia Stone Foundation, and the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art and Storytelling.

available for public consumption. Youth contributions to this participatory project provide qualitative data that humanize and amplify the experiences of those growing up within NYC's deeply unequal housing landscape.

This report addresses the housing crisis by centering issues that the youth housing fellows considered most important. It begins by explaining what young people need to feel secure in their apartments and buildings. This piece exposes how structural and maintenance issues impact tenants' health and safety. It highlights youth anxiety surrounding their ability to afford adequate accommodations when they move into their own homes. This is followed by commentary on how the past year, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide protests against racial injustice, impacted youth living experiences and galvanized youth organizers. The report offers remedies to the crisis by exploring the model of providing permanent and affordable housing through funded programs like those offered by BHC that seek to nurture individuals and communities. Finally, the youth housing fellows and their interviewees offer a series of policy recommendations that seek to create more equitable housing for all.

As you will see, when describing their ideal homes, youth do not dream of gold-plated penthouses overlooking Central Park. Their hopes for future accommodations are incredibly reasonable, and yet seem so far out of reach given the historic and current priorities of policymakers in the city, state and nation.

Youth Experiences With The Modern Housing Landscape in NYC

As leaders of the 2021 Youth Housing Summit, the youth housing fellows insist that to understand the current housing crisis faced by their generation, we need to understand what “good housing” means to young people of color throughout the city. We learn from those

interviewed for this project that key elements to “good housing” include a clean and spacious living environment that is both accessible and surrounded by good community infrastructure. Interviewees explain that “good housing” should be affordable for the city’s immigrants and working class and that landlords should be responsive when maintenance issues arise. Unsurprisingly, the youth share a desire to feel safe in their own communities. Finally, youth advocate for investment in programs that support individual growth and knit communities together, especially communities threatened by displacement.

Throughout these interviews, youth insist they want a sanitary and comfortable living environment. Prompted by the question “What does good (and bad) housing mean to you?” a 24 year-old from West Harlem explains that “good housing”, "means a clean environment, a nice amount of space, nice tenants [and is] accessible to stores, schools, and transportation." Getting what they pay for, as opposed to suffering due to price gouging, was emphasized by interviewees. An Afro-Latina youth from Manhattan states, "Good housing is a good amount of rent that you have to pay; inside the housing community there is not like trash all over the floor, rodents everywhere...no mold...." A woman in her mid-20s from West Harlem describes bad housing as having a "constant stench, dirty environment, [and] cramped living conditions." Echoing these sentiments is a 17-year-old Latina from The Bronx: "I feel like bad housing is if the landlord doesn't clean at all...." Having experienced less than sanitary conditions in her previous place of residence, a 15-year-old now living in a building run by Broadway Housing Communities reflected on her older apartment when she said, “Having a dirty building and everything, that's really bad.” Informed by their own housing experiences and those in their social network, youth are adamant that they want to avoid homes where sanitation goes unaddressed by landlords and policymakers.

Unresponsive maintenance deeply frustrates many of the youth participants, and yet is quite common. Many of the young people interviewed for this project come from Harlem, Washington Heights, the South Bronx and Hunts Point. Statistically, these neighborhoods have landlords who have been less responsive to the needs of tenants when maintenance issues arise than landlords in wealthier and whiter neighborhoods.⁴ This is a crisis many of the interviewees want to address. An 18-year-old Puerto Rican from Harlem focuses on landlord responsiveness as key. In her “dream” building she states, “I would say maintenance is up to par, where if you call maintenance to fix something in your house or apartment, they will come in a couple business days and won't leave you hanging and wondering where they are.” This young woman merely sought a landlord who would “pay attention to the issues you bring up.” A 15-year-old from Manhattan concurred, “In my old house, [when] we would have...something repaired you would have to wait a long time...it was really bad.” A young Harlemiter explains that COVID-19 was used by landlords as an excuse to delay repairs: “COVID held things back just on maintenance wise, like, there were some issues in my apartment that needed to be fixed.... When we spoke to maintenance about it, it was held back for a long time just because of COVID.” These youth are outraged that landlords deprioritized responsiveness to tenant needs, focusing instead on their bottom line. As a result, landlords deny youth and their families dignity, health, and respect.

Reflecting on experiences within their communities and the reality of overcrowding faced by 1/3 of city residents, many young people interviewed for this project aspire to homes that provide adequate space for themselves and their families.⁵ Explaining her desired apartment, a

⁴ “Maintenance Deficiencies,” *Citizen Committee for Children*. (2017)

⁵ Tom Angotti, “The Right to Housing in New York City: Realities and Challenges” May 1 2021, *BHC Youth Housing Summit*.

17-year-old of Haitian descent expresses, "I want a house that is big enough for me and my family." A 17-year-old whose family immigrated from the other side of Hispaniola agrees, "For me, space in the house is everything." A young African-American woman from West Harlem elaborates, "I would like a place that has a lot of space. Like an actual good amount of space for at least three people where you don't feel on top of each other." These young people hope to break free of the crampedness and lack of privacy that characterize so many homes in NYC.

Youth also identified the inaccessibility of NYC buildings as another crisis facing tenants throughout the city. A 17-year-old from The Bronx explains "Good housing means...an elevator because I don't have an elevator and I be struggling..." While she, as a physically able young person could somewhat manage this major inconvenience, she reflected the same could not be said for others in her building, "A neighbor of mine has a bad leg...and everytime we see her I ask her if she needs help but I feel like every apartment... [should] have an elevator." Issues with accessibility can hit even closer to home as one interviewee reflects, "My grandmother is in a wheelchair and when she has an appointment every month...it's hard on my dad because he has to carry her down the stairs and that is going to hurt his back..." The lack of adequate building infrastructure to accommodate non-able-bodied tenants and the inability to afford accessible accommodations can have devastating long-term consequences for NYC families.

Youth also highlight a desire for safety in their homes, apartment buildings and communities. A 21-year-old Latina from The Bronx exclaimed, "Number one for me will be safety of a neighborhood where... kids could walk without being harmed.... A clean building where...families are safe to live." The desire to ensure the safety of themselves and a future family was paramount with one interviewee wanting "to avoid living in a dangerous place, a bad building." A third interviewee determined while safety was a priority, the city shouldn't continue

to over-police communities, “I need a place that is safe...that I feel safe and my children feel safe.... I don't want to be worried that something might happen to them.... And definitely choosing an area that...the police are trustworthy.” Hygiene, accessibility and safety are fundamental elements of “good housing.”

Beyond community safety, youth interviewed for this study describe amenities within communities as creating conditions for “good housing.” A 21-year-old from the Bronx explained “good housing” as being situated near “medical facilities, supermarkets, [and] parks.” A 19-year-old from Ozone Park, Queens centered the importance of “housing location,” expressing a desire to live somewhere “close [to] public transportation [that is] safe, close to schools and work.” The relationship between public and private amenities in a neighborhood and the ability to develop a sense of community are centered by youth. A 13-year-old of Haitian descent from Sugar Hill desires community infrastructure to augment neighborhood cohesiveness: “Having bad housing means to me...people are not together, or they don't feel comfortable in the space they're living in, or the buildings are not getting taken care of....” Having the capacity to build community—the physical infrastructure, the human commitments and solidarities, and a sense of collective freedom for safety, without police aggression—anchors the housing aspirations of youth. And yet the priorities of policymakers has made this basic dignity unachievable for so many New Yorkers.

Buildings Creating a Culture of Community

Living in a building with the infrastructure to develop a sense of community proved exceedingly important to the youth interviewed for this project. As this work is sponsored by Broadway Housing Communities (BHC), many of the youth fellows live in permanent housing

built and managed by BHC. These fellows and interviewees reflect on their living experiences in and out of intentional communities like BHC.

Since 1983, BHC has provided permanent housing and programming for thousands of children, adults, and families that would otherwise be in inadequate apartments, the shelter system or on the streets. BHC operates under the ethos that “Housing is a stabilizing agent” and that a permanent home is more than just four walls. Homes should be places people rest, find peace, and dream. Homes should help forge the social bonds of communities that can struggle together and support each other. To this end, Broadway Housing Communities provides programming and tools to residents to ensure that they have the economic and socio-emotional skills to succeed holistically. This work takes place throughout Harlem and Washington Heights in BHC’s two preschools, galleries across multiple buildings, and the Sugar Hill Children’s Museum of Art and Storytelling.

As the interviews began to pour in from the youth housing fellows, we noticed a stark contrast between experiences from youth residing in intentional communities like the one developed by BHC and those young people living in buildings run without an emphasis on housing as a social justice project. Youth residents of BHC buildings describe the sense of community cultivated through tenant support programs. A young woman from Harlem explains, “We have a pretty good living condition.... The building tries holding events to have tenants come together.... The building definitely does a great job of engaging students in whichever way possible. I love that it constantly enriches the tenants in many ways.” A 13-year-old residing in the BHC Sugar Hill building seconds the sense of community developed: “In my building, the community is good. I feel like everybody has a connection with each other.” A 15-year-old Latina from a BHC building in Manhattan also talks about how the intentional design of the

building and tenant supports have positioned her and her family for success, while cultivating a sense of community: “I live in Broadway Housing and it's really good because it gives you a lot of opportunities along with these programs like Homework Club.... It's like a family because you have many events and everyone is all together and we have meetings with the tenants to try to explain what we need to do better.” Youth explain a familial sense of community, as well as personal growth deriving from the programming and services engaged by those living in BHC buildings.

Those who were interviewed for this project who live outside of BHC defined community in terms that were geographic, sporadic, and “better than living on the street,” but not as family, solidarity, or the space to progress as an individual. The absence of structures that forge intentional communities limits the sense of possibility in developing a set of relationships that present opportunities for personal, educational and occupational growth. An 18-year-old from Harlem doesn't identify any community-strengthening structures cultivated by their building. In response to questions about “community,” they focus on interpersonal interactions, “I guess there's some people that have you know, friends, and we help each other open the doors.” A young Latina describes her building as “a little weird...[but] better than living on the street.” The sense of opportunity and connectedness, observable in intentional communities like BHC, is absent in the vast majority of apartments throughout the city. This material experience and felt community have significant consequences for tenants, particularly youth coming of age in a city fraught with systemic inequities.

Accessing Affordable Housing

While able to articulate vividly both adequate and inadequate housing for their present and future, youth of color in NYC are deeply concerned with their ability to afford satisfactory accommodations. With ever-increasing rent, stagnant wages, and the displacement of communities of color, for many the goal of securing “good housing” feels increasingly out of reach. Youth interviewed for this project articulate an anxiety about gaining entrance to programs and buildings intended to help working class tenants, with many only able to imagine achieving decent housing by dramatically improving their financial situation.

Frustration with the current, and future state of the housing market was uniform across the interviews. An 18-year-old from Harlem gives voice to this anxiety, "I kind of am worried about finding affordable housing, just because of the economy today where everything is just expensive." A 24-year-old from West Harlem agrees, reflecting on her own inability to find affordable accommodations that meet the needs of her budding family: “I have been looking for an apartment for over a year with my fiancé and we can't find anything within our budget." Youth criticized the city’s prioritization of real estate projects, such as Hudson Yards, that do not house people, over efforts to solve the housing crisis. The youth understand how in the U.S. economic model the low supply of housing vs. the high demand from aspiring tenants has always benefited landlords. A 19-year-old from Queens explained, “There's too much people, not enough housing.” They bear witness, and some know from their own experience that youth, working class residents and immigrants are being priced out of the accommodations that would allow for a sense of stability and comfort. A 15-year-old who now lives in BHC housing explains, “I do feel like there is a problem in New York because everywhere you go, you can't find a place to live [where]...rent... [is less] than a 1,000 dollars...” She continues that this

reality makes finding affordable accommodations impossible for “people [who] get paid the minimum wage.”

The current efforts undertaken by the city are inadequate in addressing the scale of the housing crisis. The process to secure affordable housing is competitive and complicated with families often forced to wait years before suitable accommodations become available. A 14-year-old from The Bronx explains, “We...signed up for an apartment, but they didn't reply at all...we got the confirmation literally two months ago after [11] years” A 15-year-old from Manhattan expresses a similar sentiment, “I think the website that you can go to is really helpful, but it takes a long time to be able to create a place where you can have affordable housing, it takes 10 years....” The current system is insufficient in mollifying the pain of families in crisis who need safe and stable accommodations. A 17-year-old from the Bronx recounts, “Last month my mom...got laid off and she immediately tried to apply to housing, but her salary she made...last year [prevented her from qualifying]...I don't think that the housing is going to want her.” The extensive waiting period has led to family separation as detailed by one of the youth researchers, “My cousin and his wife were searching for an apartment ever since their first child. They remained on the waitlist for two buildings even after having two additional children. They ended up leaving two of their children in Africa in the hands of family for a few years until they were able to find a larger apartment. They finally were able to find one this year and are in the process of bringing [the kids] over.”

Given the obstacles to accessing city and private aid, many young peoples' hopes for achieving an adequate living situation depend on improving their respective financial situation--a personal, rather than systemic solution. A 17-year-old Latina states, “I feel like once I'm older because I get to have...job pays good so that I can afford a nice apartment. It doesn't need to be

big...it just has to be somewhere I can live and work." A 21-year-old from The Bronx is working toward a degree with the aim of turning that degree into occupational success, which will lead to a comfortable home: "That's why I'm getting an education right now....hopefully, [I'll] get my degree and be able to find a good job, a well paying job...to afford...[a] comfortable living space and life."

While previous generations hoped to live more comfortable lives than their parents, this generation of young people expresses anxiety that what awaits them is worse than what their parents were able to afford. They intimately understand the nature of the housing crisis and know that to achieve housing stability they need to be socially mobile in a labor force unresponsive to the working class' desire for dignity and living wages. Moreover, the current model of housing aid has failed to produce achievable positive outcomes in a timely manner. This undermines the confidence of youth of color interviewed for this project that the system will adequately support them. There is a crisis of faith in the future of housing for the city.

Housing in Times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated communities of color in NYC. While white New Yorkers died at a rate of slightly under 200 deaths for every 100,000 residents, the disease proved fatal for over 330 African Americans, and 360 Latinx per 100,000 residents. Class also proved significant in both contracting the virus and dying from it, with the poorest New Yorkers proving the most vulnerable and the wealthiest the most secure.⁶ With non-white, working class and immigrant communities deemed "essential" in the early months of the pandemic, and with these groups having lesser access to health care, these stark disparities are perhaps predictable.

⁶ "COVID-19: Data," June 1 2021, *NYC Health*, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data-totals.page>

However, less obvious was how families from these communities were financially destabilized in the crisis. With the NYC eviction moratorium, which shields tenants from being removed from their homes for not paying rent, set to expire in August 2021, the full impact of the pandemic on housing is yet to be felt as the worry and stress of working class families grows.

Despite government assistance, the pandemic financially strained many of the families of youth interviewed for this project. The city so far has offered little resources or legal counsel for families whose economic prospects dipped during the pandemic and now face eviction and homelessness when the eviction freeze ends. A young Harlemitte interviewed for this project explains, “Due to unemployment [benefits] in the beginning of the pandemic my family were still able to afford rent and so I’m very grateful for that. But it was honestly still hard to have access to money because all the money that was coming in was simply going to rent and PPE.” A 17-year-old from the Bronx speaks frankly about her own family’s anxieties now that the pandemic undermined her parents’ job security, “COVID impacted [my family] really bad because in like my parents jobs, they're kinda struggling...they are kinda scared too because apparently the boss, the head of the thing was like he was going to drop some people due to COVID.” While her step-father was deemed an essential worker, a 21 year-old from The Bronx explained: “It affected my mom, she lost her job.” The crisis isn’t just about unemployment, but also underemployment as explained by a 13-year-old of Haitian descent from Harlem, “My parents...they have a job, but it's not like they get to work every week because of the pandemic.” These youth fear the pandemic’s exacerbation of the housing crisis will likely become starker in the months ahead.

Racist Housing Structures

While designing this project, we knew that we needed to understand the history of land ownership in relation to cyclical housing crises in New York City. This history is central to the building of this report. Inter-generational activists campaigning for housing justice throughout NYC learned together.

Thomas Angotti, Professor Emeritus of Urban Policy and Planning at CUNY, joined our collective to educate us on the history of housing injustice in NYC and how organizers continue to fight racial and socio-economic disparities. Together we learned about the racist structures that enabled white communities to generate wealth through property ownership, while locking out African-Americans and Latinx, leading to modern and historically accumulated wealth disparities that are easily observed into the third decade of the 21st century.⁷

The youth housing fellows for this project felt it important to address the racial awakening that has unfolded in the United States since the murder of George Floyd. Opinions about the ways race impacts the everyday experiences of youth of color have been dramatically altered since May 2020. Despite their young age, the youth interviewed for this project already understand much about the history and current enactments of structural racism through their own experiences and activism.

The interviews exposed that the relationship between police and communities of color has become a central focal point for youth in NYC. In their interviews, youth vividly described the over-policing of their neighborhoods as integral to the struggle for housing justice. An 18-year-old from Harlem explains, "I would say there's definitely a lot of police around...just like watching over everybody. Um, how do I feel about it? ... Weird, because I feel like I'm doing something wrong, even though I'm not just because I'm just constantly being watched by the

⁷ Tom Angotti, "Economic and Legal Barriers to Housing" May 15, 2021, *BHC Youth Housing Summit*

police." Noticing the relative lack of police in his own neighborhood, a 19-year-old from Queens recounts, "In my neighborhood, I don't see much police. But...if you go more near the projects there's a lot of police all over the place." The over-policing of marginalized communities makes youth feel insecure and vulnerable to racial profiling and police brutality in their own neighborhoods. A 16-year-old from Hunts Point describes her anxiety at the NYPD presence in her community: "If I see police members I get nervous that anything I do will tick them off.... I feel like I'm always walking around my neighborhood on eggshells.... It's to the point where there is so much police that everybody is getting locked up...like everyone is getting locked up for misdemeanors all over the place." With many youth sharing painful experiences of racial profiling that they themselves—or their family members—have experienced, the desire for secure communities often feels undermined by the city's "solution" of offering police as the vehicle to achieve that security.

Many youth interviewed voice a serious concern that city officials and policy makers don't care, don't listen and aren't motivated to change the uneven racialized landscape for them and their families. They articulate how the failure to adequately address racism widens the gulf between white communities and communities of color. A young Afro-Latina interviewed for this project explains, "If people are being racist to the Black community... [African Americans] won't be able to find good paying jobs and help their families and find a house where they have food...and a roof over their head." The truth is that policymakers are complacent with structures that keep people of color in substandard housing and youth are deeply frustrated by it. A 17-year-old from the Bronx articulates the problem, "You mostly see Black and Brown people in housing...that looks bad...."

The city's lack of action produces the de facto segregation of whites and people of color throughout NYC. The segregation of the city is obvious to this 18-year-old from Harlem, "It's known for New York City to have different neighborhoods specifically for Dominicans, or the Africans or like white people." Despite the city largely ignoring this crisis, the problem is clear to this Latinx 15-year-old, "White people be living in better areas. Brown and black people just live in different areas...they're separated."

These young people are painfully aware that the modern processes of "integrating" neighborhoods throughout the city is actually gentrification. Gentrification has led to displacement of communities of color as they are priced out of their homes and forced to move elsewhere in NYC or to Jersey, and sometimes even further from the homes and communities they once called their own. As communities are displaced, history, identities, and political and cultural institutions are destroyed. Speaking of the influx of white people to her neighborhood of Harlem an 18-year-old explains, "They like try to take over the businesses and stuff so I will say, yeah, that's an issue." Noticing a similar pattern in Washington Heights where she lived before relocating to The Bronx, a 21-year-old recalls "Now I go back to Washington Heights and I see more, you know, more white people moving..." Displacement of communities of color undermines the stability of neighborhoods and hurts community structures designed to uplift the city's marginalized groups. Despite their age, the ways segregation and displacement have manifested in a city that so often frames itself as "diverse" and a "beacon of tolerance" lives in the experience of these youth.

Policy Solutions

Having identified the problems faced by their communities and those of their friends, the project focused on the power of ordinary citizens in challenging the structures of housing

injustice. We discussed the development of mutual aid societies and the tradition of rent strikes that often rose from immigrant communities beginning in the early 1900s. These rent strikes forced the hands of policymakers to introduce rent control in NYC in 1920. We dove into tenant organizing that swept the city after WWII and the birth of community movements to take control of, and at times save their neighborhoods from efforts to displace marginalized groups under the guise of “urban renewal”. We talked about how activists from the Young Lords to the Black Panthers built many of their campaigns on the goal of achieving housing and community equity. Despite the passage of laws in response to these campaigns, we learned about on-going structural challenges still faced by NYC’s renters confronting all forms of housing discrimination.⁸ We explored modern manifestations of community displacement before asking the students, and the people they interviewed, “How should communities and individuals advocate against housing discrimination in NYC?”

Ending racist leasing practices is an obvious place for the city’s powerbrokers to start unraveling the damage of decades of neglect where landlords’ capital has been prioritized over tenants’ basic rights. An 18-year-old from Harlem argues: “In some places landlords don't rent out apartments or houses to certain kinds of people like background wise. So I would like to see that change.” A 15-year-old of Latinx descent spoke out for racial justice in housing, explaining that fair housing needs to mean equal access to apartments for people of all backgrounds: "I would like house owners to give...a fair shot to everybody to rent their apartment and affordable prices."

Many of the youth advocated for a more inclusive and participatory process among decision makers, insisting that those who make decisions include those who have to live with the

⁸ Tom Angotti “How Can We Fight to Make Housing a Human Right?” June 5, 2021, *BHC Youth Housing Summit*.

consequences of policy. Some were explicit: Black and Brown people need the power to influence policy to address the suffering within the Black and Brown communities: “A solution to racist leasing practices is to create a board with people of all colors so that things will not be biased and/or prejudiced and everyone will have a fair opportunity” A few of the youth saw Black home ownership as a way to undo some of the structural obstacles currently and historically facing communities of color. “There should be more Black people....who own the apartments....” Another stated, “I think one of the things was getting more Black owned housing.” Recognizing the entanglement of a racist criminal justice system and housing discrimination, this young person offered a policy reform: “I think a solution would be not to hold everyone’s past against them because a lot of people might have a criminal past even if it was a minor offense and that can make everything a lot harder for people” These young people understand the deep and pernicious racialized intersections of aggressive policing, mass incarceration and housing struggles.

These youth believe that the city has a responsibility to create conditions where youth can look forward to a future of housing stability for themselves and avoid the years of long waiting periods before finding an adequate home. A 24-year-old from Harlem wants to see the city get involved in ensuring, "More affordable housing especially for young people...a way for working students to still make a living and be able to afford rent." Accelerating the timeline for people to access affordable housing remains a priority for youth and their families as they are far too familiar with waiting years to find sufficient affordable housing. One youth posited, "They should be able to have more buildings, and make it fast [to get into affordable housing] and not wait 10 years for affordable housing to be created." An 18-year-old from Harlem agrees, wishing the city would merely, "Help with...finding a new place to live."

The youth interviewed for this project advocate either stricter rent control policies as a remedy for the housing crisis, or aligning wage increases with rent increases. One 24 year-old African American woman offered a creative policy proposal: "I would like to see more strict laws on rent control. I feel like rent is rising for absolutely no reason. And if rent is going to rise then make sure minimum wage is also keeping up with that rise. Minimum wage should literally be the minimum amount you need to make in order to live in a specific place." She continued, expressing a desire to get fair value on homes in NYC: "The apartment should actually be worth the [rent] rise.... Literally people just get a letter saying 'hey, your rent is increasing' without getting an explanation as to why. If we are able to have open honest transparent conversations then there can maybe be a middle ground."

Youth of color in NYC identify the issues of rent, housing precarity and homelessness to be entangled and racialized. They firmly believe that because the city has a responsibility for creating the conditions that lead to so much pain and suffering, it also has a responsibility for relief. They know—from education, their own precarity and from their activism—that they live in a city where 1 in 4 children (or 400,000) grow up in households below the federal poverty line.⁹ They know that outrageous demands for rent force families into shelters. In a city where 80,000 New Yorkers are without homes, our research team explored how housing instability and chronic homelessness has impacted their communities and what the city needs to do to address the crisis.¹⁰

⁹ "Voicing Our Future: Surveying Youth on Their Priorities for 2021 and Beyond," *Childrens' Committee for Children of New York*. (2021)

¹⁰ Tom Angotti, "The Right to Housing in New York City: Realities and Challenges" May 1 2021, *BHC Youth Housing Summit*; "Voicing Our Future: Surveying Youth on Their Priorities for 2021 and Beyond," *Childrens' Committee for Children of New York*. (2021)

These youth know that once someone is de-housed or evicted or priced out, the adverse consequences cascade for families in the areas of education, employment, health, and involvement with the criminal justice system. One 21-year-old from The Bronx encouraged lawmakers to handle the situations of people on the street not with more police, but with rent control and resources that would actually address the cause of their struggle: “[There are] homeless people...that maybe need to be in a mental facility. They need help too...to stop doing what they're doing.... These people have trauma or like they're going through stuff.... It's not so easy to help them.” Attributing the homelessness crisis to unregulated rent hikes, the young woman continues, “I feel like the price of rent is one of the things maybe that [explains why there] are so many people in the streets...the price of rent, compared to [the] minimum wage.”

These youth realize that homelessness and the lack of affordable housing are not just naturally occurring phenomena, but human-made: a direct result of the priorities of the city, State and Federal Governments that have disproportionately white and wealthy decision-makers creating policies for poor black and brown communities. A youth housing fellow involved in the project writes: “I feel like the city government and federal governments really do not put an emphasis on housing being a right and are looking for as many ways to benefit the rich as much as possible, while at the same time, letting local residents get the short end of the stick by allowing landlords to increase the rents.” His solution is more regulation, where the rich and powerful are held accountable for exploiting poor tenants: “I feel like one of the biggest [solutions] for those who are already living in this housing crisis is to make landlord laws more strict in terms of when they can or cannot increase the rent...” At just 15, another youth recognizes rent control as a major driver of the homelessness crisis: “[The city and landlords] are

responsible for [homelessness] because of the amount they ask for rent, and most of the people make minimum wage that doesn't allow them to cover it, so there are a lot of homeless people."

Youth understand that the criminalization of the homeless is intentional, racialized, classed and damaging to individuals and community life. With a sense of their rights and an insistence on dignity and accountability, they demand more of their government. A 16-year-old from The Bronx details poignantly that poverty has been criminalized in NYC: "They set up this game where they made homeless people felons. 'You can't sleep here after 9pm' [or] 'you can't be here after a certain hour.' And 'you won't go to a home or shelter...so they set them up to be in the prison pipeline...It's the homeless to prison pipeline because when you become homeless, you become very vulnerable to being snatched up."

Laying responsibility for the crisis at the doors of City Hall, youth express a desire for government intervention with an infusion of resources. They call for greater participation by youth, communities of color, and immigrants in the decision making. They demand attention to the pernicious entanglements of housing, policing and the criminal legal system. Coming from the wealthiest city in the world, a 17-year-old from Manhattan mused, "I don't really think that anybody [should] live on the streets because there's too much money around us." A 18-year-old asked why the city does not take control of vacant buildings and create housing to address the grim reality of people living on the streets: "I've seen abandoned buildings being abandoned for years and years and years, and nothing is being done with that space, so I feel like something should be done with that space and building a shelter could be helpful for a lot of families." A 17-year-old interviewed for the project concurred, arguing that the government needs to pump money into the system so that the homeless, as well as the working class could achieve housing

stability: “A solution...is that there should be more resources that people can go to and be able to get affordable housing.”

An overwhelming response from the students was a desire to organize to achieve these ends. A 21-year-old from The Bronx explains, "It takes one person to start something where you start a petition within the building. Like, ‘Hey, I demand that the building gets cleaned.’” Another young person from Manhattan exclaimed, “We can stop paying rent.” A third added that people should, "Protest and try to communicate with people at higher levels to make them know about the situation they're living in."

Youth of color demand that city-wide housing policy incorporate dignity, safety, accessibility, responsive management, participation, organizing and opportunities for community members to grow, build and mobilize social movements. As youth, community members, activists and now oral historians of the housing crisis, the BHC Youth Housing Fellows, as well as the people they interviewed belong to a generation activated by the protests that swept the nation after George Floyd’s murder. They are struggling for “good housing” that strengthens communities, forges solidarity and cultivates organizing. As a collective that has experienced, witnessed and now holds stories of the deeply racialized housing crisis within communities of color, these youth know that real estate developers are exploiting the poor and that the city is privileging profits over people. And so they are fighting back by formulating plans to challenge the power structure that runs NYC housing policy.