

Housing In New York City -- Figuring Out The Big (And Little) Picture

by {ga=grobinson}

Friday, September 15, 2006 12:00 AM



When Metropolitan Life recently announced plans to sell [Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town](#) - two communities the insurance company built a half century ago to house the middle class - many New Yorkers wondered whether the residents would soon be priced out of their homes: "The city can't survive without middle-class housing," Senator Charles Schumer [said at a press conference to save the two housing complexes](#) for the middle class. But a new report shows that the residents of an area that includes Stuyvesant Town already have the highest median income of any community in the city.

In the area with the second *lowest* median income in the city, Morrisania-Crotona in the Bronx, according to that same report produced by the [Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy](#) at NYU, there are high rates of crime and poverty, and low student test scores, but nevertheless the price of housing in the area is on the rise, more people are purchasing homes there, and more homes are being built.

Median Income:

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Highest: Stuyvesant Town-Turtle Bay



Lowest:

Mott Haven/Hunts Point

As New Yorkers obsess about real estate - some struggling to find a place to live, others worried about staving off eviction, still others hoping to get rich off the market - they all think they know what is going on in the housing market: Housing is scarce and expensive. But the picture is complicated, playing out differently in different neighborhoods, and the effect of the situation varies from community to community, as do the reactions to it.

So how does one get a good picture of what's going on?

City Hall released the latest [Mayor's Management Report](#) late last week, a legally-required document that the Bloomberg administration touts as "a public report card on city services affecting the lives of New Yorkers," but which critics see as a missed opportunity to help citizens piece together a picture of the state of the city, issue by issue, including housing.

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The accompanying report put out by the [Mayor's Office of Operations](#) , however -- the online service [My](#)

[Neighborhood Statistics](#)

-- provides information broken down by community, and now features the latest data, from the fiscal year that ended this summer. Other reports, some by city agencies, others by private organizations, offer a closer and often more nuanced look at one of the issues of greatest concern to New Yorkers, the city's housing. There are surprises in these figures, but even more mysteries.

WHAT THE FIGURES SHOW More Housing

The city now issues about 20,000 building permits a year, up from an average of 7,000 in the 1990s. "And the increase is not just in Manhattan," says the Furman center's director Vicki Been. "When we had something of a boom in the 1980s, it was concentrated in Manhattan and a few parts of Brooklyn. But now, perhaps because the improvement in the city has lasted longer, there has been a real shift."

Racial Diversity:



Most Diverse: Ozone Park-Woodhaven, Queens



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Least Diverse: South Shore, Staten Island

While the neighborhoods that had the most new permits issued in 2004 - Clinton-Chelsea and the Upper East Side - are in Manhattan, the number three neighborhood is Rockaway-Broad Channel at the southern edge of Queens, where 886 permits were issued in 2004.

Much available housing is for sale (rather than for rent) and at high prices, judging from information gathered by the real estate broker [Prudential Douglas Elliman](#) , which reports that there has been a 53.9 percent increase this year over the same period last year in the number of condos and co-ops on the market in Manhattan. These are both new apartments and those being re-sold.

What about affordable housing? The latest Mayor's Management Report notes progress in Bloomberg's 10-year [New Housing Marketplace Plan](#) , having started to build or preserve 17,393 homes in the fiscal year that ended in June. The program also financed or otherwise helped complete more than 13,000 homes. To further increase the supply of affordable housing, the report also points out the administration's approval of new

["inclusionary zoning"](#)

- one for a site on the Williamsburg waterfront, the other for Queens Boulevard in Maspeth-Woodside -- that allows private developers to build taller buildings if they provide affordable apartments.

But City Hall has also taken steps to *slow down* construction of new housing in some neighborhoods, those that complain of

[overdevelopment](#)

, by rezoning to allow for less density (known as

[downzoning](#)

) in 20 neighborhoods last year. The Bloomberg administration expects to do this in other communities in the future, according to the Mayor's Management Report.

Meanwhile, rising interest rates, and higher costs for some building products and oil, could discourage new construction in the future -- or push the prices for housing even higher.

More Expensive Housing

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Permits for New Homes



The Most:

Clinton - Chelsea



The Least: Washington Heights/Inwood

What housing there is in New York City -- houses and apartments, rentals as well as coops and condominiums -- continues to grow more costly.

In the city as a whole, the cost of a dwelling with two to four families has almost doubled since 1994, with Fort Greene-Brooklyn Heights seeing the biggest increase, according to the Furman Center report. The median price of a condo in the city rose by 12 percent from 2002 to 2003, with the largest increase in Chelsea/Clinton. The median monthly rent for unsubsidized housing increased from \$831 in 2002 to \$900 in 2005 (in constant dollars). While the greatest jump came in the area grouped together as Greenwich Village-Financial District, poor neighborhoods

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are seeing price increases too. In Morrisania-Crotona, home prices went up by almost 50 percent between 2002 and 2004.

The city government is feeling the effects of the housing inflation as well, according to the Mayors Management Report. Its spending on public housing has increased every year since 2002, and the cost of providing homeless shelter facilities has gone up.

Crowded Households



The Most: Borough Park



The Least:

Queens Village

And the increases continue, despite talk of a softening real estate market. At the upper end of the housing chain, Prudential Douglas Elliman found that the average sale price of a Manhattan

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residence increased by more than five percent between the second quarter of 2005 and 2006.

The Housing Gap

The city continues to lose low and moderate income housing. "We're losing more at one end than we're gaining in affordable housing at the other end through the mayor's plan," Victor Bach, a senior policy analyst for the [Community Service Society](#), told the [New York Times](#) recently. "It's more difficult to make the argument that the efforts of the city in affordable housing, which deserve a lot of praise, are going to compensate for the market losses that occur through sales."

In 2005, city residents needed 100,000 more homes than existed in the city, the Furman Center estimates. And the city planning department [Housing Consolidation](#) report for 2005 found that in 1999 (the year it cites in the report) only 3.19 percent of the city's rental housing was vacant - well below the 5 percent rate considered the threshold for a "housing emergency."

As further evidence of the shortage, the Mayors Management Report says that the building department responded to 25 percent more complaints about illegal conversions of residential space.

Given the rules of supply and demand, such a shortage has pushed rents and purchase prices higher. But while housing costs have risen, New Yorkers' incomes have not. The median household income in the city actually declined in constant dollars between 2002 and 2005 - from \$42,700 to \$40,000. And in 35 of the city's neighborhoods, the poverty rate increased. According to the American Community Survey - which is available on the city planning department web site - more than 23 percent of city families with children under 18 have incomes below the poverty line.

Median Rent

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Most Expensive: Greenwich Village-Financial District



Cheapest:

Central Harlem

A general rule of thumb is that people should spend about 30 percent of their income on housing and utilities. By this measure, the Furman Center calculates, a family making \$32,000 should pay no more than \$800 a month on housing. But between 2002 and 2005, the number of apartments that that family could afford decreased by 205,000 homes.

Experts generally agree that the housing crunch in New York contributes to the number of homeless people. But, in the [Mayors Management Report](#), Bloomberg says that the estimated number of homeless people living on the streets, in parks, under highways, and public fell by 13 percent - from 4,395 in fiscal 2005 to 3,843 in fiscal 2006. Advocates for the homeless, however, have disputed the accuracy of these numbers.

Better Neighborhoods, Costlier Neighborhoods

Depending on whom you ask, the housing situation offers a kind of good news/bad news

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dilemma in many communities. Falling crime rates have made previously depressed neighborhoods, such as East New York and parts of the South Bronx, more attractive places to live. And this has boosted costs.

The [Mayors Management Report](#) cites an array of improvements in services from a decrease in crime to cleaner street to smaller class sizes in the public schools.

["Two-thirds of the things are going in the right direction,"](#)

Bloomberg said upon releasing the annual audit. "A third aren't going as fast as I'd like, or in the right direction."

By going to [My Neighborhood statistics](#) , people can chart the improvement or decline in city services in their neighborhood, as defined by community district. Going to the pages for the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, for example, one sees that the area's streets have become appreciably cleaner since 2002 while parks have grown dirtier. Crime has gone down in most categories, while schools are less crowded.

But perusing the Furman report makes it clear that Bushwick is not any easier to figure out than many communities in the city. Even though Bushwick has the fewest number of places to live, and has the highest number of serious housing code violations, it also has the highest number of mortgages being taken out -- and among the highest notices of foreclosures.

GETTING THE NUMBERS

Vacancy Rate for Rental Housing



Highest:

North Shore, Staten Island



Lowest:

Bensonhurst

Any number of agencies, organizations and others compile number of the city's housing situation. Some offer a kind of consumer help - where would you like to live - others advance a political agenda and still others have more of a policy focus.

[Mayor's Management Report](#)

The city charter requires that the mayor issue two management reports a year: a preliminary report by mid-January and a final report by mid-September. The report for fiscal year 2006 was released last week with little fanfare - there was virtually no advance warning and the mayor did not offer visual aids or the general hoopla he has at times in the past.

The report assesses whether city agencies have met goals in a number of different areas. Housing information can be found in the sections for the departments of Housing Preservation and Development, Homeless Services and City Planning.

But by its focus on specifics, the report makes it difficult to glean information on big city problems. For example, the advances in providing affordable housing are concealed in two dry paragraphs about the New Housing Marketplace Program.

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"It includes too many insignificant indicators, lacks any overview or sense of priorities, and says little or nothing about such major (and problematic) policies as the reorganization of city schools, big changes in homeless services, the costs of school construction, and high levels of overtime among the city's uniformed services, " [Glenn Pasanen wrote in Gotham Gazette](#) assessing last year's report.

[My Neighborhood Statistics](#)

Compiled by the Mayor's Office of Operations, this accessible program provides information about city neighborhoods as defined by community board. One types in an address (or an intersection) to get to an array of information, including complaints to the city's 311 line, health and education data, information about the condition of area parks and streets, crime and figures

The site takes data from city agencies, so there is no information on rents (since that is charged by private landlords) but there is data on housing complaints. Much of the data is raw - one sees the number of felonies in the neighborhood but it is not ranked or given as a rate so that people can easily compare one community with another.

[City Planning Department](#)

The city planning department offers a number of reference tools on its site:

Serious Housing Code Violation



Highest Rate Bushwick

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Lowest Rate: Financial District

New York City Census Fact Finder: The planning department's home page features a "GeoQuery" box. Typing in an address brings you to a map, showing the census tract and the adjoining area, and to tables with a lot of information from the 2000 census. Two pages focus on housing - one on characteristics, including vacancy rates, types of housing and so on; the other looks at costs.

The tool allows users to create the boundaries of their own neighborhood, combining adjoining census tracts and to get statistics on that area

In the case of Stuyvesant Town for example, one can focus on its census tracts from 14th to 23rd Street, rather than on the whole swath of the East Side up to 59th Street that comprises the community district. While the more tightly defined area is hardly poor, in 2000, more than two thirds of its households had incomes of less than \$100,000 - bolstering claims of its middle class character.

[Community District Profiles](#) : These are portraits - each about 35 pages long - of each community district in the city, based on the 2000 census and broken it down by census tract. Some information is updated to 2003; other charts compare the figures for 1990 and 2000. It also lists community facilities - such as schools, libraries and hospital.

[American Community Survey](#) : This is essentially a 2005 update of the 2000 census, providing information for community districts with at least 100,000 people.

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[City Planning Commission Reports](#) : In addition to providing a sense of what a neighborhood is like now, the site also offers links to reports on how the area might change. Visitors can search the commission reports section by borough, type , date and perhaps most conveniently by keyword. Typing in Williamsburg and inclusionary, for example, produces the report the commission report on allowing a 20 percent taller building

[New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey](#)

The city housing department produces this every few years. Its primary goal is to get information that can be used to evaluate [rent control and rent stabilization laws](#) , but the survey also includes a range of demographic and other information that can be used to help set housing policy. To gather this data, an adult in each of about 18,000 homes is asked a series of questions focusing on housing and its cost - the utility bill, whether an apartment is wheelchair accessible, if rodents are a problem and so on. The tables provide a wealth of raw statistical information but the report, published on the U.S. Census Bureau web site, but does not analyze the material on the site.

State of New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods

Number of Places to Live



The Most:

Upper East Side

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The Least: Bushwick

The Furman Center does analyze much of the data from the housing and vacancy survey, along with material from the city finance department and other sources, and puts it on its [New York City Housing and Information system](#) that offers information for the city as a whole and by borough and community district. They boil this down into the [State of New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods](#) -- available in hard copy and online -- that shows how each of the city's communities has been changing over the past four years and compares community districts, by ranking them on a number of indicators. It also interprets the data in interesting ways, devising, for example, an indicator of racial diversity and of income diversity.

Community groups use this data to address issues in their communities, such as so-called [predatory lending](#) -- housing loans with excessively high interest rates or fraudulent terms. Groups working to address housing code enforcement - a key fight for many housing activists this year -- have also used it. (See related story, [Housing Activists' Fall Agenda](#) .)

[Market Reports](#)

Produced by the real estate company Prudential Douglas Elliman, these reports offer a very different perspective on the housing market, surveying the market for homes in Manhattan - loft, coops, condominiums, etc. They are the source of those stories, so beloved by the New York Times, of average home prices going above the \$1 million mark.Â

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