

# **HUNTERS POINT RESIDENTIAL DISPLACEMENT STUDY**

**Prepared for:**

**The Hunterspoint Community Development Corporation**

**and**

**The Community Training and Assistance Center**



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## HUNTERS POINT RESIDENTIAL DISPLACEMENT STUDY

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## Hunters Point Residential Displacement Study: Executive Summary

The purpose of this study was to document facts about the residential community in Hunters Point, Queens, in response to concerns of the Hunterspoint Development Corporation (HPDC) raised by the proposed Hunters Point Waterfront Development. A major concern of the HPDC is whether a "central business district for Queens," as its proponents refer to it, is in the best interests of the existing community. This study was sponsored by the Hunterspoint Community Development Corporation and the Community Training and Assistance Center.

The Board of Estimate recently approved the Hunters Point Waterfront Development, a massive project calling for nine million square feet of office, residential, and commercial space. This includes 6,385 units of housing in buildings as high as thirty-eight stories. The residential capacity of 13,500 is more than double the existing residential population in Hunters Point. Most significant is that the new residents will be upper income compared to a current mix of middle- and lower-income families. A small percentage of units are to be targeted for the elderly.

This study sought to identify displacement pressures on a lower-middle class neighborhood in the Long Island City section of Queens. The prodigious Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Waterfront project, which is supposed to document the effect of the project on social, economic, and environmental conditions in the local area, makes little attempt to address such factors in the existing community. For example, it utilizes only outdated 1980 census information for its analysis of socio-economic conditions.

This study attempted to document conditions in Hunters Point as they are today by interviewing residents. For these purposes, a questionnaire was administered in person to 200 residents in three sections of Hunters Point. Of those surveyed, 21% own their homes while 79% rent. Sixty percent of respondents have lived in Hunters Point more than ten years, including 35% who have lived there more than twenty years.

Strong family ties are evident. Seventy-two percent of residences are households with children (compared to a New York City total of approximately

22%), and 23% of respondents have relatives in the surrounding Long Island City area.

Since about 45% of renters live in unregulated buildings, they are particularly subject to eviction. Thus, about 36% of all residents have no protection against displacement, while another 44% are subject to various landlord efforts to get them to move.

Housing costs remain reasonable. Only 14% of renters pay over \$600 a month. However, our study found that over half of tenants paid a substantial increase in rent over the past year (ranging from nine percent to a thirty percent increase). A significant number of residents complained of worsening conditions in their buildings. Twenty-three percent of renters complained of landlord abuse in the past year, while 41% of owners and renters indicated a large increase in insurance premiums.

Residents complain of increases in crime, traffic, and poor street conditions in the past year. Shopping for clothes within the area is problematic. Yet, the area is well used for recreation. Forty-five percent of respondents have friends in the area. A community center for youths and seniors and a day care facility were specific needs identified by respondents.

This study concludes that Hunters Point has a thriving residential community which is still affordable to the lower middle class. Residents feel strong ties to the area and utilize it much as neighborhoods have traditionally been used in New York -- as a center for social and economic activity. The pressure from large numbers of new residents and development which is in direct contrast to the low-density character of the current area threatens to alter dramatically the quality of life. In order to avoid this, there is a need for direct citizen involvement in the planning process and the institution of zoning controls to maintain the physical scale and context of Hunters Point. It is also suggested that the Waterfront Development respond more directly to the make-up and needs of existing residents. As proposed, the Waterfront Development turns its back (literally and symbolically) on the existing community.

## Hunters Point Residential Displacement Study

### Introduction

#### *The Past Ten Years*

During the early nineteen eighties, Long Island City was the subject of numerous headlines proclaiming its gentrification. These included New York magazine's designation of the area as "The Next Hot Neighborhood" (August, 1980), a New York Post article entitled "LIC - NY's Next Boom Area" (May, 1983), inclusion among "The New Real Estate Hotspots" in New York City Business (February, 1984), and a more subdued Village Voice piece asking whether the area was to become "A Gold Coast in Queens?" (May, 1984). Since then, numerous plans and proposals have been outlined to satisfy what many seemed to feel would be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Recent events indicate that construction of a waterfront-based plan is, in fact, imminent. On February 21, 1990, the State's Urban Development Corporation approved plans (originally drafted in 1984) for a \$1.5 billion mini-city project including nine million square feet of office, residential, and commercial space. These plans call for 6,385 units of housing in buildings ranging from six to thirty-eight stories high. There will also be a ten-story, 350-room hotel on the waterfront site. The additional 13,500 residents anticipated upon the project's completion in 1997 are more than double the existing residential population. In addition, most of these will

be upper-income families, not like the current mix of middle- and lower-income families. Although still not final, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement calls for 1,277 apartments which would "rent or sell at below market rates....Targeted predominantly for the elderly." (Draft EIS, p. S-2)

### *The Present: Finding Out About The Community*

During all the years of speculation and proposal generation, few studies have attempted to examine existing conditions in Long Island City, and specifically in its predominant residential community, Hunters Point. Despite a comment in a 1984 study by the City Planning Commission that "existing industrial, commercial, and residential uses in Hunters Point should be protected and strengthened," the current plans treat the existing community as virtually non-existent. The implications of earlier articles and the current plans is that the residential area of Hunters Point requires "upgrading;" that it is somehow not a coherent residential neighborhood worthy of preservation. Indeed, no one would argue that the massive development proposal will unalterably change the character of the existing neighborhood. The question remains whether the profits to be made from the creation of "a central business district for Queens" (as its proponents like to refer to it) is in the best interests of the existing community.

Much of the answer rests on one's attitude toward that existing area: Is it a blighted neighborhood ripe for "renewal," or is it worth preserving? This report attempts to examine that question. The answer is probably surprising to those who would simply over-run the current residents and

businesses. Indeed, in 1979, this office conducted a study of the business community and discovered that it was far more robust than many were willing to admit (The Long Island City Study). The same could be said of the current status of the residential community in Hunters Point. This report attempts to document the character of that community and concludes that it is a vibrant, multi-ethnic, functioning neighborhood worthy of preservation. We conclude further that, despite years of neglect and speculation rationalized by the media and city officials, Hunters Point is a good place to live and should not be overlooked (or, worse, bulldozed) in the name of development which is of highly questionable value to existing residents and businesses.

It is important to insert a note here about the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Hunters Point Waterfront Development (February, 1990). While we were not able to conduct a complete study of its findings, it is evident that the treatment of neighborhood impacts is superficial and transparent. For example, data on population, housing, and income characteristics is taken from the 1970 and 1980 census, with little or no recognition of the significant changes which have clearly occurred in the area since 1980. There is only one current indicator used to show change - new housing units since 1980. Naturally, the lack of new housing units leads to the conclusion that there has been no change. In a period of enormous social and economic upheaval, a simple quantitative measure of new units is hardly a realistic measure of "change" in a neighborhood.



In a project of this scope, it is a great omission not to have conducted an analysis of current households and business conditions, especially when the last census is almost ten years old. There are some large discrepancies between our findings (covering primarily census tract 7) and the 1980 census, for example, including a twenty-one percent ownership rate for housing, compared to a 13.3% ownership rate in 1980. There is also no mention in the Draft EIS of the population mix (now 28% Hispanic according to our study), and no mention of length of residency, among others. Although the project calls for twenty percent of the units to provide below market rate housing, this is targeted for elderly. Among our respondents, only eleven percent were over 65 years old, whereas over seventy percent are under 45. In contrast to the Draft EIS, our study began with the premise that the way to find out about a community (positive or negative) is to query its residents directly.

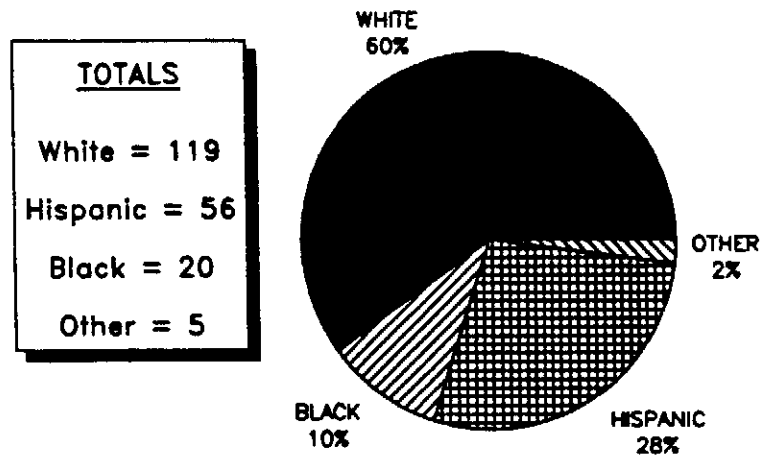
This study was conducted under the auspices of the Hunterspoint Community Development Corporation with funding from the Community Training and Assistance Center. The results and conclusions are entirely our own.

#### Who Lives in Hunters Point?: A Profile of the Residents

The survey results point to a stable, racially diverse, family-oriented community where residents feel very strong ties.

Two-hundred current residents of Hunters Point were interviewed for this study. Of those surveyed, sixty percent are white, twenty-eight percent

Hispanic, and ten percent are Black. More than one-third of respondents grew up in Long Island City. Sixty percent of all those surveyed have lived in Hunters Point more than ten years, including thirty-five percent who have lived there more than twenty-one years. (see Charts 1 and 2)



RESPONDENTS BY RACE (%)

Chart 1

### LENGTH OF RESIDENCY



Chart 2

The neighborhood is very family-oriented, as evidenced by the fact that seventy-two percent of residences are households with children, compared to a New York City total of 21.6% (Stegman report). The remaining twenty-eight percent are single or living with unrelated people. The family-oriented character is further reflected in the fact that forty-four percent of respondents (thirty percent of the most recent in migrants - those there less than five years) indicated that they moved to Hunters Point to be near family or friends. (see Chart 3) Twenty-three percent of respondents have relatives in the Long Island City Area, while an equal percentage have relatives in other areas of Queens. By contrast, only thirteen percent moved to Hunters Point primarily because it is affordable (twenty-one percent of the most recent residents).

### WHY NEW RESIDENTS CHOSE HUNTERS POINT

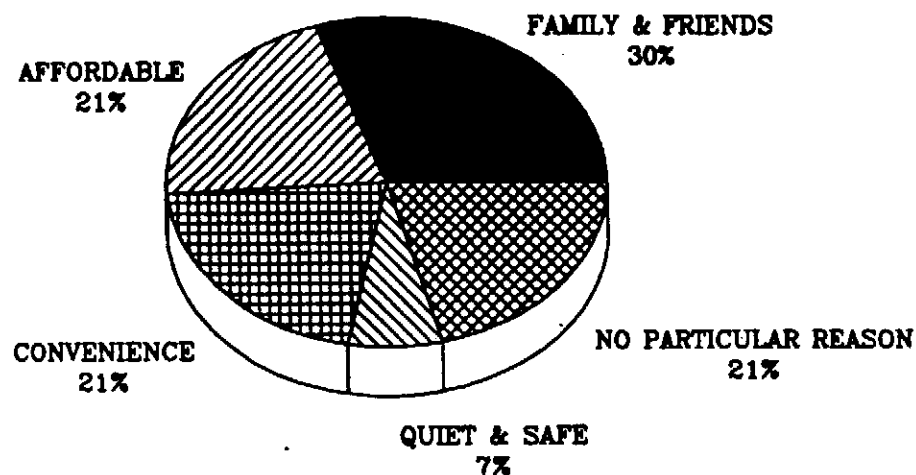


Chart 3

The age distribution of respondents reflects great change from the 1980 census. Rather than a predominantly elderly population, we found a rather young residential population. Almost a third of respondents (31%) are between twenty-five and thirty-four years of age, for example. (see Chart 4) While these percentages are based on a small sample, the discrepancy between the earlier census and our findings warrants further examination.

#### RESPONDENTS BY AGE

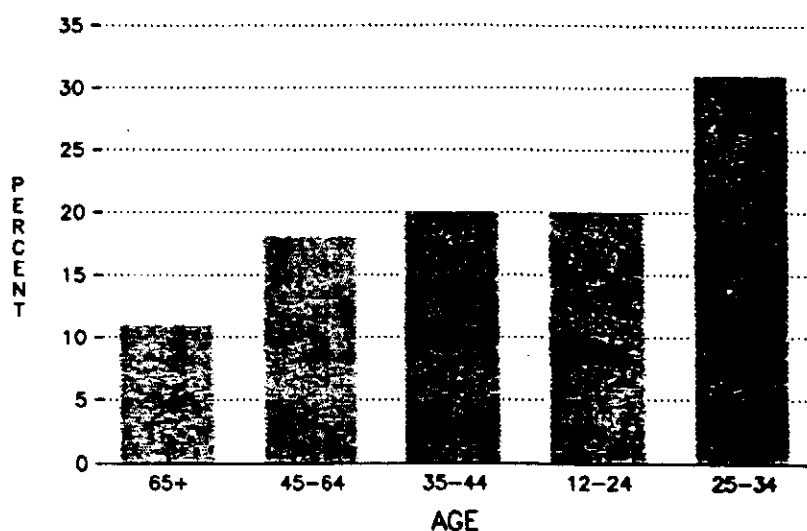


Chart 4

#### Living in Hunters Point: Housing Costs and Conditions

Twenty-one percent of respondents own their own homes. This is lower than the 1987 citywide average of 30.3%, or the Queens borough average of 43.4%. Nonetheless, it does represent an increase over 1980 rates, in which Hunters Point had only a fourteen percent home ownership rate. Thus, during the same period that ownership increased by only 2.5% in the City as a whole, and 1.2% in Queens, the rate of ownership in Hunters Point rose by seven percent, a 67% increase. It is unclear whether this is simply the

result of buyers taking advantage of a good market or of speculators buying in to profit from potential property value increases.

Rental costs reflect the fact that Hunters Point remains an affordable, moderately priced neighborhood. Thirty-four percent of tenants reported paying between \$251 and \$399 per month in rent. Thirty-one percent pay from \$400 to \$599 per month. Only 14% of renters pay over \$600 a month. This compares to a citywide average rental in 1987 of \$359, and \$440 in Queens. Twenty-one percent of residents pay less than \$250 in monthly rent. (see Chart 5)

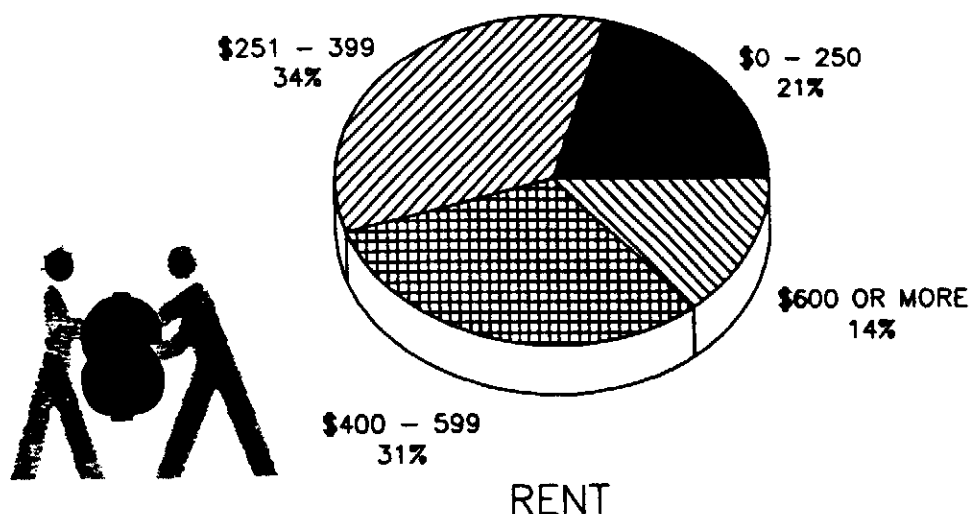


Chart 5

Not surprisingly, rent levels of most recent residents (those who moved into the area in the last five years) are higher than for those who have been living in Hunters Point six years or more. More than one quarter (28%) of new residents pay \$600 or more in rent while only eight percent of other

residents pay that much. Forty percent of new residents pay \$400 to \$599, while only twenty-eight percent of other residents reported being in that range. (see Chart 6)

### RENT LEVELS BY YEARS IN NEIGHBORHOOD

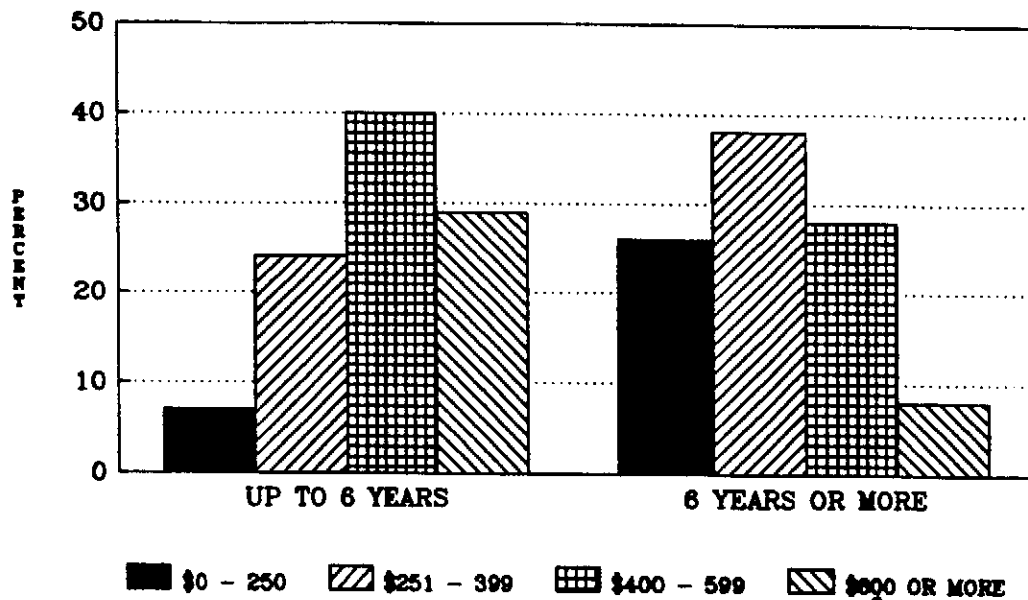


Chart 6

### Displacement Pressures

Home ownership is important because it represents a measure of control over displacement. Among renters, those in smaller, unregulated buildings, are subject to eviction without cause, while those in larger buildings are subject to the city's rent control and rent stabilization guidelines. It has been estimated that about 45% of renters in Hunters Point are in the former category (substantially without protection from eviction or rent

increases). Those in the latter category (rent regulated tenants) are subject to landlord efforts to get them out if the landlords feel they can rent apartments for higher prices. Even owners are subject to pressures when property values increase and the value of their homes is increased accordingly. This leads to higher assessments and higher property taxes.

Studies by Chall (1984) and Marcuse (1985) examine the relationship between gentrification and displacement of regulated renters. In addition to the obvious increases in costs of housing, Marcuse discusses methods utilized by landlords to increase what he calls "involuntary relocation," changes that make continued occupancy undesirable. These methods include negative changes in building conditions, services and other similar tenant needs. Using these analyses, and a study of the Lower East Side, our survey instrument included questions that would help determine to what extent tenants in the Hunters Point community might be directly experiencing displacement pressures.

In the last year more than fifty percent of residents have paid an increase in rent, ranging from nine to thirty percent. (see Chart 7) When asked what kind of housing was needed in the neighborhood, sixty-one percent of respondents identified a need for middle-income housing, while a little over one-third thought low-income housing was needed. Only five percent thought that more upper-income housing was needed. It is worth mentioning the lack of affordability of housing proposed for the Waterfront Development, where 80% of proposed units are at market (i.e., upper income) levels.

## RENT CHANGES IN THE LAST YEAR

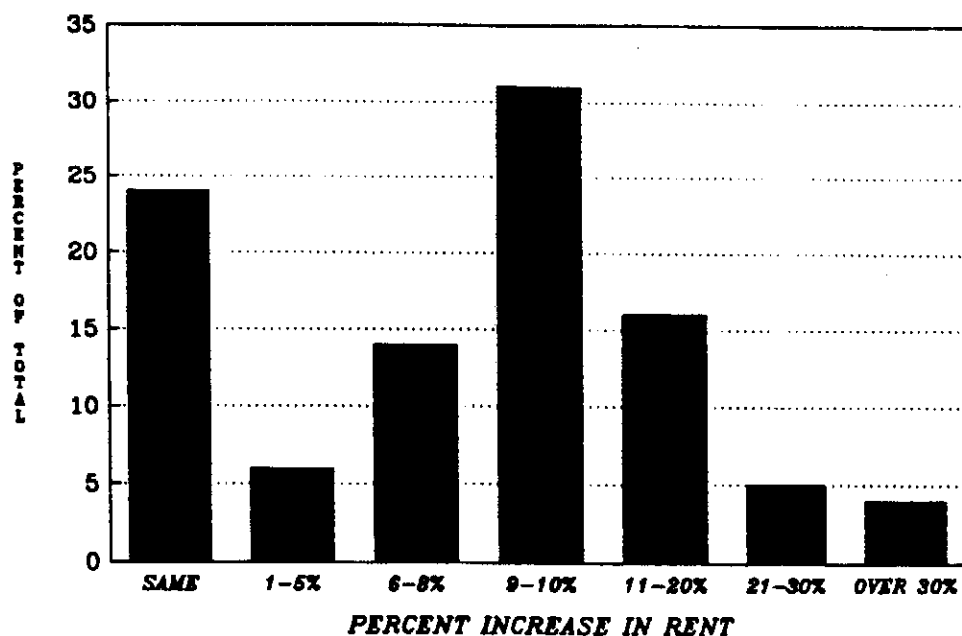


Chart 7

Of 154 renters who responded to our survey, approximately two-thirds found conditions of security, vital services, safety, vermin, and poor maintenance to be the same this year as last. (see Chart 8) Roughly a quarter of them found conditions improved over the past year, ranging from eighteen percent who saw improvements in vermin control to twenty-eight percent who noted improvements in vital services. Yet, almost an equal number, nineteen percent, consider the problem of vermin to have worsened in the past year; while twelve percent complained of worse maintenance; and ten percent noted worsening conditions of security and safety. Whereas these results are somewhat less dramatic than those found in the earlier study of the Lower East Side, and also somewhat ambiguous, it is evident that a significant number of renters are concerned about problems with their buildings. This warrants continued monitoring.



# Service Issues for Renters In Past Year

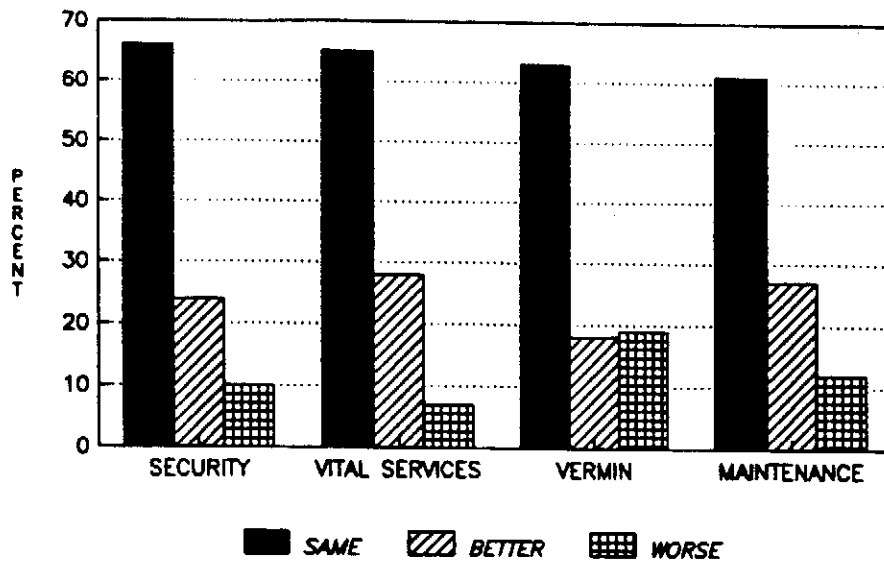


Chart 8

Problems with alcohol and drug abuse, robberies or assaults, and threats of physical abuse from landlords are more evident, and, indeed, constitute a surprisingly large response. Twenty-three percent of tenants complained of robberies or assaults during the past year; and another twenty-three percent complained of landlord abuse. Ten percent noted problems with alcohol or drug abuse among fellow tenants. These responses, too, warrant action and further monitoring.

While concerns about building and neighborhood conditions are divided fairly evenly on a geographic basis, the areas of Vernon Boulevard, 47th Avenue and 47th Road, and 44th Drive seem to experience the most problems in each category. Three of six respondents at Ely and 23rd Street also complained of robberies in the past year.

Insurance costs have grown significantly in the past year. Sixty-six percent of owners and renters experienced an increase in home or renters insurance. Of these, forty-one percent indicated a large increase. Without further examination, it is unclear whether these increases are a result of the perception by insurers that Hunters Point is more risky or simply whether this is a part of the "normal" trend of large increases in insurance rates in New York City over the past several years.

### Income

Hunters Point is a lower-middle class neighborhood. Forty-six percent of respondents report family income of \$20,000 or more. Thirty-two percent estimate family income to be between \$10,000 and 19,999, while twenty-two percent (22%) indicate an income of from \$0 to \$9,999. (see Chart 9) Comparison to the earlier (1980) census data reflects, naturally, an increase in the \$20,000 and up bracket, but only slightly more than inflation would dictate. In 1980, forty-five percent indicated an income of less than \$10,000. As of 1989, twenty-two percent of our respondents are still in that lower income bracket, also consistent with inflation. Thus, income in the Hunters Point area appears, like rent, to have maintained a range consistent with a decade ago. The real question is how fast the upper income group is growing and what its impact will be on overall development trends. These questions were beyond the scope of the study.

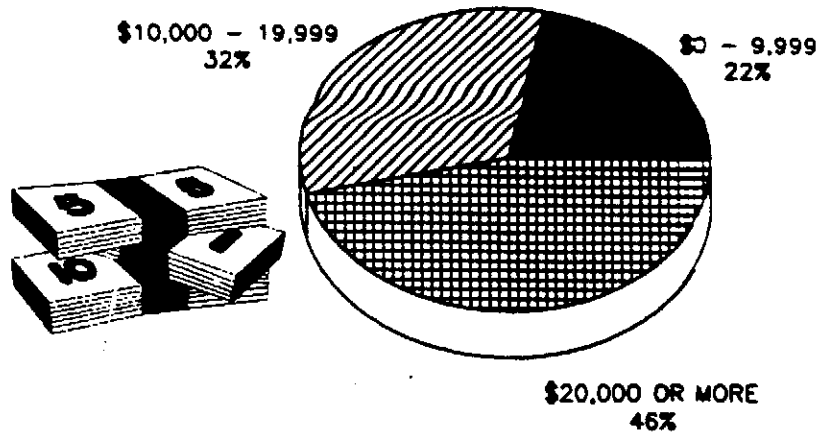


Chart 9: Income Level, All Respondents

Newer residents fall primarily in the middle- and upper-income categories (for Hunters Point). There are fewer in the lowest income group (earning under \$10,000) than the survey respondents as a whole, and slightly more in the middle and upper income categories. (see Chart 10)

### Income of New and Other Residents

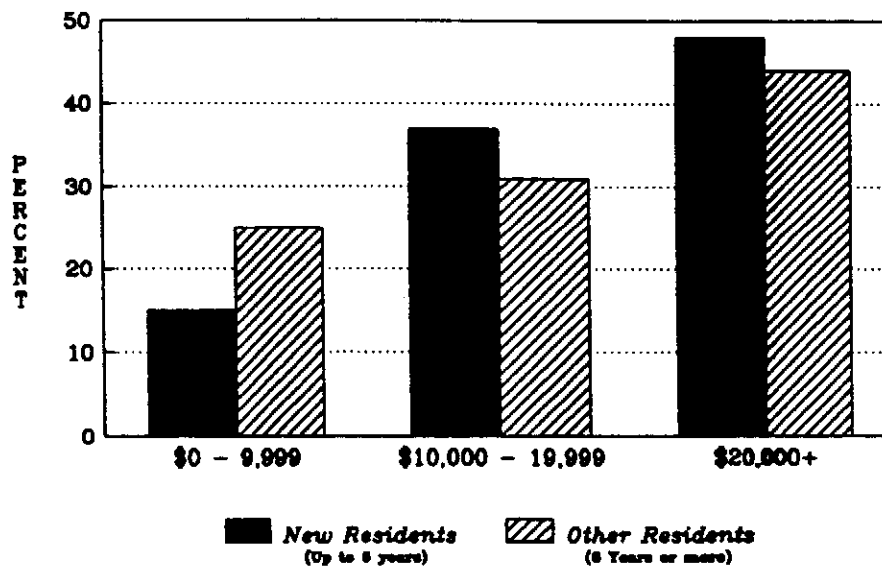


Chart 10

## Employment

Seventy-two percent of respondents work. Nineteen percent work part-time and eighty-one percent work full time. Almost a majority (47%) work in the Long Island City area, while only eight percent work in the rest of Queens. Over a third (37%) travel to Manhattan for work. Finally, four percent work in Brooklyn and another four percent work in areas other than Queens, Manhattan or Brooklyn.

Sixty-five percent of respondents who work are blue-collar employees. These respondents include skilled and unskilled labor, waiters, waitresses, factory workers and taxi drivers. The remaining 35% are employed as white-collar workers, including teachers, middle management, secretaries and technicians. (see Chart 11)

### EMPLOYMENT

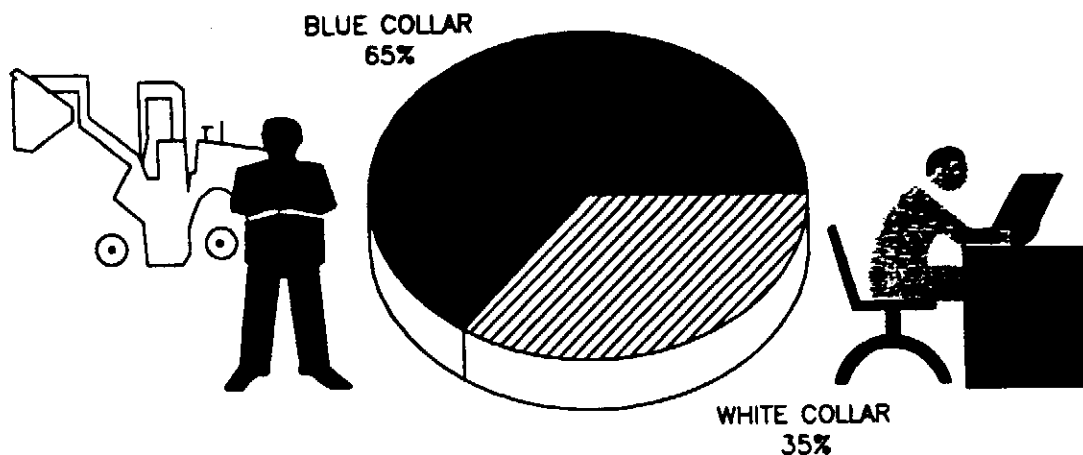


Chart 11

Fifty-four percent of commuters get to work by subway; sixteen percent use automobiles; and twenty-eight percent walk to work. (see Chart 12) Ninety percent of workers report that it takes them less than thirty minutes to arrive at their workplace. The other ten percent take between thirty and sixty minutes. None commute more than sixty minutes. The centrality of Hunters Point is, of course, one of its great assets and a prime reason for development pressures.

### Mode of Transportation

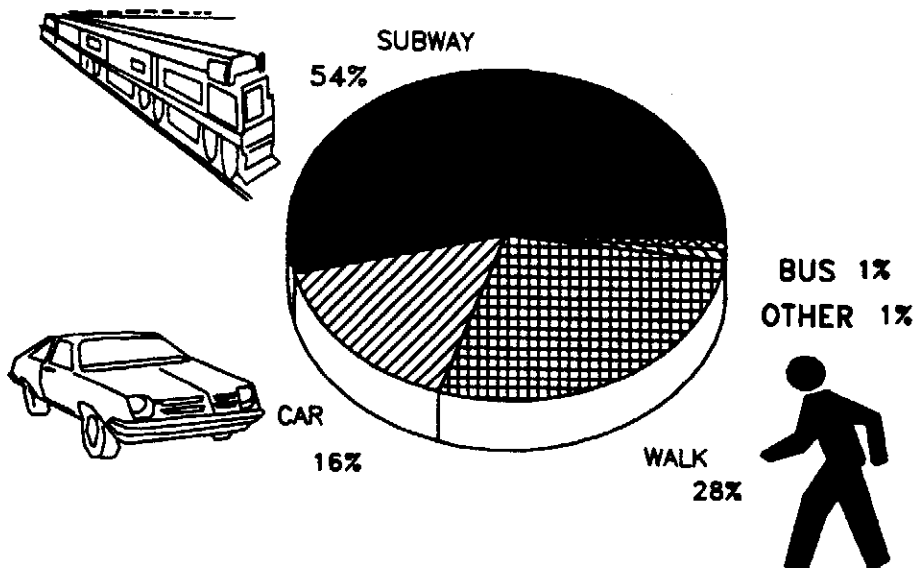


Chart 12

## Crime and Traffic

There is a widely held belief that crime has increased in the past year. Overall, fifty-seven percent of residents complained of an increase in crime in Hunters Point in the past year. This concern cuts across all age groups. (see Chart 13) It is worth pursuing this concern to find out more about the types of crime that have occurred and whether these perceptions are reflected in police records. For instance, specific problems in the area of the Ely Street subway station and the presence of prostitutes in several different areas were noted. Some are unhappy with the presence of the homeless veteran's shelter in the neighborhood, although there is no real evidence to show that this group is committing crimes. Although it is beyond the scope of the present study, in these times of great fear over safety, a rational examination of crime issues needs to be done.

Attitude Toward Crime In Past  
Year, By Age

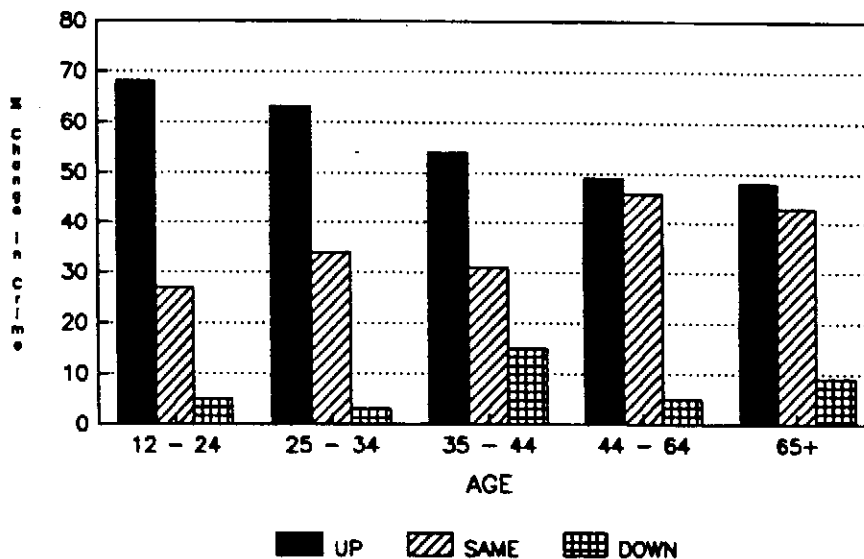


Chart 13

When residents responded to questions about changes in traffic in the past year there was an almost unanimous outcry about unsafe conditions. Eighty-eight percent of residents feel there has been an increase in traffic (both cars and trucks) in the last year.

It is also evident that, before any construction has begun, many residents are concerned about street conditions, including inadequate street lighting, the need for more traffic lights, poor sanitation, bad street paving, excessive traffic congestion, and a pressing need for additional parking. The length of lights on Vernon Boulevard seems to present a problem for senior citizens trying to cross the street. Of particular concern are trucks which run lights rather than stop on red.

#### Shopping. Social Relationships. Recreation.

Sixty-four percent of respondents shop for food within the Long Island City area. Another twenty-six percent shop elsewhere in Queens and the remaining ten percent shop outside of Queens for groceries. (see Chart 14)

## SHOPPING AREAS

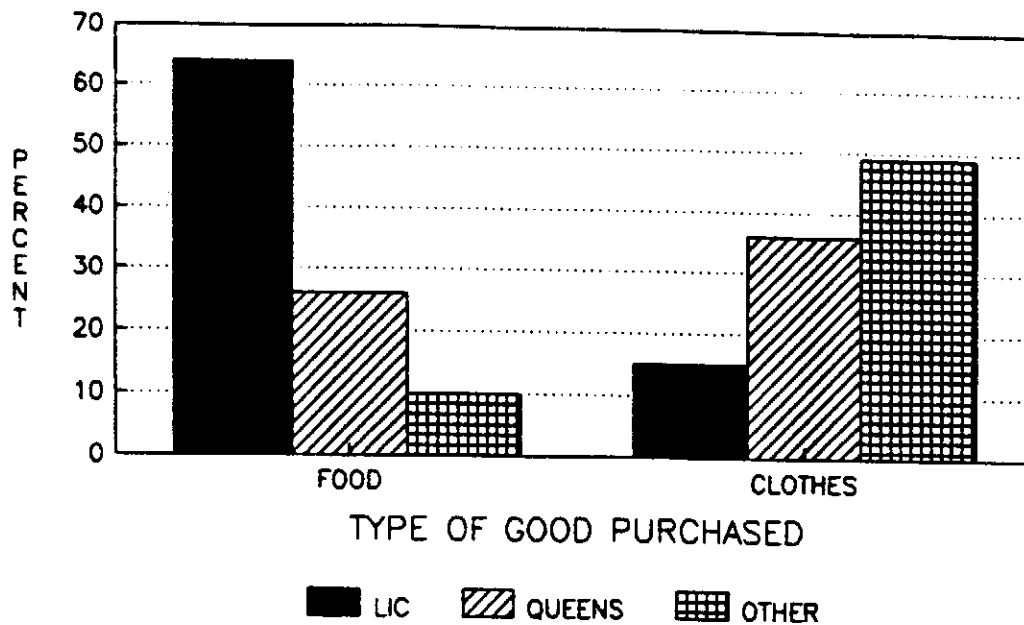


Chart 14

Shopping for clothes presents a problem for the residents of Hunters Point. Only fifteen percent of respondents shop for clothes in the Long Island City area, while thirty-six percent shop elsewhere in Queens, and almost half (49%) shop outside of Queens. Since forty-seven percent of employed live and work in the Hunters Point area, they would certainly find it more convenient to be able to shop there.

It is quite evident from the responses concerning social relationships and recreation that the residents of Hunters Point utilize the area for much more than convenience to work. Powerful family and friendship ties, as well as the pursuit of recreational activities, belie the notion that Hunters Point is simply a manufacturing area interspersed with a few residents. To those living in Hunters Point, the area is both a home and a neighborhood with strong personal links. For example, forty-five percent of respondents have friends who live in the Long Island City area. Another twenty-five



percent have friends elsewhere in Queens, while thirty percent have friends living outside of the Queens area. (see Chart 15)

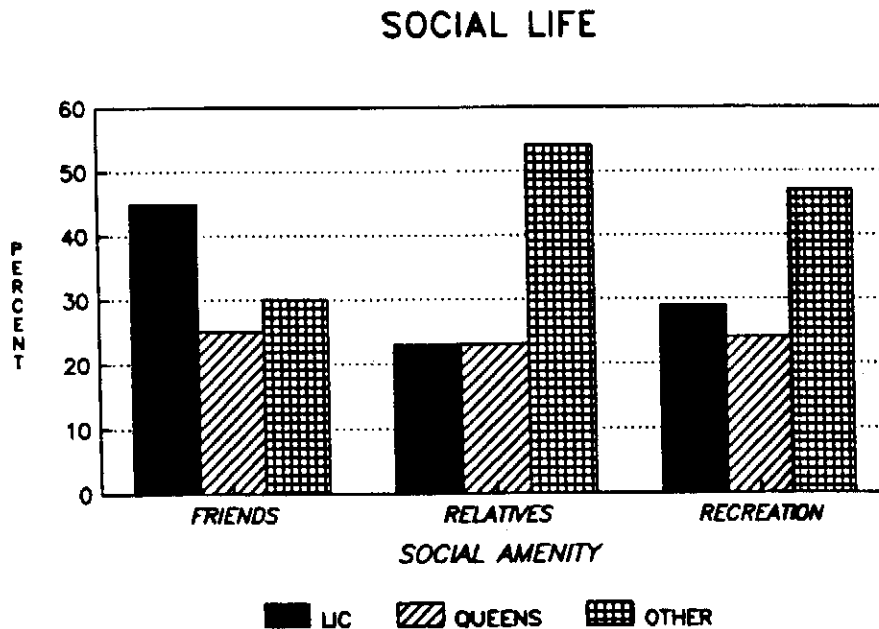


Chart 15

Thirteen percent of total respondents identify a need for more recreation in the Hunters Point area. Yet, twenty-nine percent of respondents choose to pursue recreation opportunities in Long Island City. Twenty-four percent pursue recreation elsewhere in Queens while another forty-seven percent recreate outside of Queens.

Residents commented on the need for a community center for youths and seniors and a day care facility. Many emphasized that recreation areas and facilities, such as parks, a movie theater, and an indoor pool, were badly needed for the children of the area. Children are most inconvenienced by the poor location of educational facilities. The Citibank building has a library with very limited hours. Otherwise, the two other public libraries

are over a mile-and-a-half away. The school age children are bused to schools outside of Hunters Point. This is a deterrent to their participation in extra-curricular school activities.

### Community Involvement

Community involvement is an important indicator of the importance of neighborhood to residents. Using religious affiliation and membership in community organizations, it was possible to get a rough measure of such involvement. (see Chart 16) Overall, approximately sixty percent of respondents attend local religious services and eighteen percent belong to one or more community organizations. Hispanics are most involved in religion, and share almost equally with whites in membership in community organizations.

Religious and Organization Ties By Race

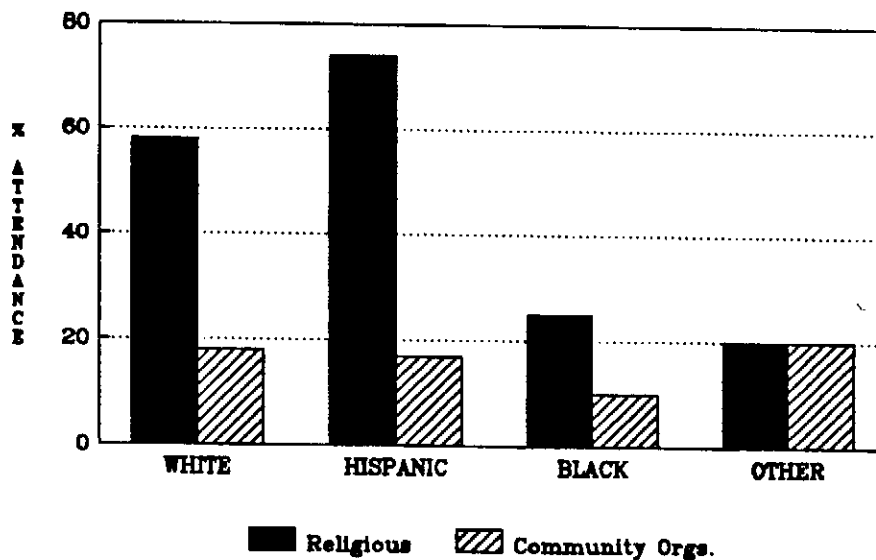


Chart 16

## Conclusion

In today's volatile real estate market, developers are constantly looking to profit from "undiscovered" neighborhoods. Luxury high-rise buildings, office complexes, and upper-class commercial establishments can quickly transform a neighborhood. The pressures of such development, however, can have a deleterious effect on existing residents and businesses. Proper planning and development controls can mitigate such effects and result in upgrading without disruption. What will be the fate of Hunters Point?

This study sought to identify displacement pressures on a lower-middle class neighborhood in the Long Island City section of Queens. The neighborhood has traditionally been the largest manufacturing area in the borough, and still contains many smaller manufacturing, industrial, and commercial establishments. In addition, some 5,500 residents occupy low-rise housing units often interspersed with the warehouses, factories, and lofts. While it was not the intent of this study to do a careful analysis of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Waterfront Development, it became evident that the EIS is seriously flawed in its concept of the existing residential neighborhood and, particularly, in its inclusion of housing for the elderly as the major amenity for existing residents. Only eleven percent of respondents in our study are over sixty-five years of age. It is unsatisfactory that the Draft EIS relies for its neighborhood data on the 1980 census, now nearly ten years old.

Displacement pressures are evident. More than one-quarter of newly arrived residents pay over \$600 per month in rent, while only eight percent of all other residents pay that much. Other pressures of change are evident. Crime has increased, traffic is noticeably greater, and home insurance rates are up dramatically over the past year. Nonetheless, the residents retain strong neighborhood ties. Forty-five percent of respondents have friends in the Long Island City area; and twenty-three percent have relatives in the area.

A number of options are available to control development and to try to integrate waterfront plans into existing conditions. Foremost among these is the need to involve local citizens in the planning process. Time and again in New York and elsewhere, the involvement of organizations representing the interests of local citizens have proved how valuable such input can be. The recent plans for Chelsea and TriBeCa in Manhattan are potential models for such an effort in Hunters Point. They prove that it is possible to allow for development while also strengthening and building upon existing conditions.

More specifically, the establishment of a Hunters Point Special District devoted to preserving and extending the existing housing mix could help relieve much of the pressure from new development. A special district would allow exceptions to current uses, but only according to specific goals and strict guidelines designed to encourage certain types of housing. Changes in zoning can also be useful, particularly in establishing bulk and contextual requirements for certain parts of the area, in order to provide

further protection from unwanted change. Zoning buffers around the existing residential and manufacturing areas might also prove valuable. The promotion of more low- and moderate-income housing might be a goal of development rather than anathema to it. Finally, there is little or no evidence in the current documents to integrate aspects of the existing community into the plans. In this regard, the reasoning behind the recent proposal by the Parks Council, the Municipal Art Society, and the Regional Plan Association for the Penn Central rail yards in Manhattan should be examined for possible ideas.

It is evident that Hunters Point has a thriving residential community with the kinds of neighborhood ties usually associated with an earlier time. Nonetheless, changes brought on by the prospects for development are everywhere. It remains to be seen whether more sensitive and rational planning can retain some of the important vestiges of a rare community in New York City.

## Appendix: Survey Methodology

### PHASE 1: Focus Group

Phase 1 of this study consisted of a focus group session in order to narrow in on the particular concerns of the residents. Ten members of the Hunters Point community were invited to participate in a discussion of community issues. Advantages and disadvantages of living in Hunters Point were discussed.

Many issues were raised and these were included in the formal questionnaire used to gather data for this survey. It was evident that residents enjoy the weekend seclusion of the neighborhood - when industrial firms are closed - and the sense of community which is bred by a sense of small-town life. In fact, many feel that planners and developers are indifferent to their needs and do little to encourage communication between them. Some indicate that they believe developers do not acknowledge their presence.

The lack of a public school, the lack of a hospital, a large increase in traffic, increases in crime, increases in insurance rates for homeowners, and building conditions in rental properties were all cited as specific concerns.

## Phase II: The Survey - Design and Implementation

A questionnaire was designed by the Office of Community Studies in consultation with the Hunterspoint Community Development Corporation. The questionnaire was administered in person to residents in the Hunters Point community. Surveys were conducted both in the home and on the street.

In order to insure a representative sample, targeted areas of Hunters Point were identified, as such:

1. 44th Drive - between Vernon and 11th Street

This is a predominantly Hispanic area.

2. 47th Ave. - 11th Street to Vernon-Jackson

This is a mixed-use area of homes and businesses.

3. 47th Road - 5th to Jackson Ave.

46th Road to 48th Ave. on Vernon

50th Ave. - Vernon to 5th Street

These are predominantly residential areas.

Spanish-speaking interviewers were utilized when appropriate. Surveys were conducted on a random basis during the months of May and June, 1989.