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All in Our Backyard: Exploring how Environmental Discrimination Affects Health and Social Conditions in the South Bronx

Mireille Martineau

Introduction

Imagine growing up in an environment where garbage dumps are more readily accessible than grocery stores. An environment where being hospitalized for asthma or other pollutant-related ailments is not just an excuse from missing out of school or work but a fact of life. Unfortunately, for far too many individuals living in areas of the South Bronx, as well as in other urban cities throughout the United States, this scene is not just part of a transitory life, but instead an everyday experience. Although these living conditions prove to be detrimental to the health, safety, and overall quality of life for the South Bronx inhabitants, the most daunting realization is the calculated decisions that were made to intentionally create such a horrid environment.

Through the use of research studies on the South Bronx, interviews with some of its inhabitants, and plain demographical information, we will see that the unique conditions of the South Bronx are not merely terrible accidents, but a careful planning of the area based on environmental discrimination. Moreover, it useful to not only research and expose the inequalities, but to present a solution to at least one of the problems the community faces. Far too many times are departments and organizations created to study the injustices of environmental racism, yet little is done to prevent and mitigate the conditions. As a result, I will provide an architectural and planning solution to the issue of environmental racism in the Morrisania section

of the South Bronx and its affect on the well-being of the community. My proposed solution is a development of a recreation center that physically and theoretically addresses the distressed state of the South Bronx stemming from environmental discrimination. By doing so, the solution will not only tackle the poor health conditions and prevalent juvenile delinquency problem, but will provide a viable source for dealing with stressors associated with living in an urban environment.

The case of the South Bronx is crucial to analyze because it exposes the inequalities among minority and low-income groups that occur in other urban centers throughout the country due to environmental discrimination. This form of discrimination is particularly more severe than other forms of discrimination, such as discrimination at one's job or institution, because it has the potential to greatly affect other facets of ones life and community.¹ With environmental discrimination comes the decay of a person's health and community because of crime, poverty, and high incarceration and delinquent rates. However, as the South Bronx becomes revitalized through the efforts of community-based groups, it stands as a model for other cities battling the detrimental effects of environmental discrimination.²

Environmental Discrimination and the Environmental Justice Movement

While many people believe that with the Civil Rights Era came the end of racism, prejudice, and discrimination, studies and just ordinary experiences would suggest otherwise. Instead of focusing solely on voting rights and segregation, the Civil Rights Era created an additional channel to address yet another facet of discrimination. The Environmental Justice Movement began as an extension of the Civil Rights Movement that demonstrated its cause to creating healthier and more livable neighborhoods for minorities and low-income families living

in urban cities.³ They focused mainly on addressing and resolving the issue of the disproportionate placement of toxic and waste facilities in low-income, minority-based communities. Since the 1960's, the Environmental Justice Movement has succeeded in some aspects of defeating environmental discrimination. However, the movement still has a long way to go to eradicate the injustices that environmental discrimination has created in hundreds of cities in the United States.

Even with the creation of the Office of Environmental Justice in former President Bill Clinton's Executive Order 12898, researchers have mostly just documented the disparities that minorities encounter as a result of environment discrimination.⁴ However, very little has been done to come up with solutions to this devastating problem. While some scientists suggest that the historical process of suburbanization is the reason behind the disparities, others argue that they are expanded expressions of embedded white privilege that continues to pervade contemporary society.⁵ Another explanation as to why environmental discrimination is able to have such a damaging impact on minority and low-income communities is because of the existence of residential segregation.

The historical practices of discrimination in the residential sector such as redlining, blockbusting, and steering have isolated minority and low-income groups. Additionally, the discriminatory practices have enabled the federal government and private real-estate agencies to block these groups from attaining grants, subsidies, and monetary assistance that would have helped their community flourish. In doing so, affluent and middle-income white communities profited from the bias treatment. However, minority and low-income groups were left with minor resources and were disproportionately zoned for the undesirable toxic facilities resulting in a continuing system of environmental discrimination.⁶

The practice of redlining is a more direct form of residential segregation, and later environmental discrimination, because it distinguishes and separates districts of a neighborhood from other areas based on race. The purpose of redlining is to target one certain group for benefits including mortgage loans, and access to health care, supermarkets, and jobs while denying another group these same benefits.⁷ On the other hand, steering is less direct in its causation of environmental discrimination, as opposed to the fixed policies of redlining, because it relies on the behaviors of real estate agencies to push particular racial home owners in their respective predominate racial community.⁸ Blockbusting is also an indirect yet vital force behind residential segregation and its route into environmental discrimination since it relies on the prejudicial attitudes of realtors to convince residents in white neighborhoods to sell their homes before property values drop as black moves in.

Exploring the Unique Environmental Conditions of Minority and Low-Income Urban Cities

The discriminatory practices shared by both the government and the private sector are not merely theoretical since many researchers have found that their implementation is very prevalent throughout urban cities in the United States. James T. Hamilton conducted a study that investigated the site selection for hazardous waste facilities in various American cities from 1987 to 1992. He found that neighborhoods that had an average non-white population of 25 percent, meaning a more diversified if not potentially minority-based communities, were usually selected for the placement of these facilities.⁹ In yet another study conducted by the University of Colorado at Boulder, in 2002, it is discovered that not only does the average African American and Latino live in areas of the city where pollution is disproportionately high, but that for some

major cities, the levels of environmental inequality are shockingly high. The researchers found that minority-based environmental inequality was highest in Florida, Virginia, and Kentucky, and weakest in Maryland, Nevada, Massachusetts, and New York. These findings are surprising and terrifying because the conditions in the South Bronx section of New York are nonetheless unacceptably appalling.¹⁰ Several reports have surfaced, such as the New York Times article titled *As Asthma Rates Rise, Tough Choices and Lessons*, that state that Chicago and New York are just two cities in the United States whose hospitalization rates for children with asthma nearly double exceed the national levels.¹¹ Consequently, if the conditions in these two cities are considered unhealthy, then the social conditions in the states, listed in the study with having the highest minority-based environmental inequality, must be grave.

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), there are some prominent environmental hazards that are often found in areas where minorities and low-income inhabitants reside. High concentrations of lead, for example, are usually found in low-income housing units in inner cities where the apartments were built before 1970.¹² As discussed earlier, because of discriminatory practices of the federal government and the biased attitudes of private realtors and mortgage bankers, minority and low-income groups continue to live in old and hazardous housing units that endanger their safety as well as their health. Consequently, high rates of lead poisoning tend to be most common in urban minority neighborhoods exactly because of the discriminatory practices of the mid-twentieth century that continue to affect the residents of these communities today. A case study of Bedford-Stuyvesant, a predominately minority community in Brooklyn, revealed that more than a third of the buildings tested in that area had at least one apartment with a dangerous amount of lead.¹³ Additionally, the study shows

that 32 percent of the individual apartments tested had hazardous lead levels ranging from five to 100 times the federal limit.

In addition to having higher lead concentrations, low-income neighborhoods are usually the dumping ground for waste sites as well as landfills, incinerators, and other hazardous waste-treatment facilities.¹⁴ Throughout the United States, low-income and minority neighborhoods have to live among a higher proportion, thus disproportionate, amount of toxic plants. Since these populations are often seen as docile communities that will not detest to the placement of these facilities in their neighborhoods, and whose complaints will not even be considered, these disadvantaged communities have to cope with the inequalities. Another environmental hazard that is plaguing the urban environments is air pollution. According to the EPA, it is estimated that 57 percent of all whites, 65 percent of African Americans, and 80 percent of Hispanics live in communities that failed to meet a single EPA ambient air quality standard.¹⁵ These standards aim to mitigate the amount of wide-spread contaminants, including carbon monoxide, lead, particulate matters, and sulfur dioxide, that are considered to be harmful to the public health as well as to the environment at certain high levels.

As discussed, environmental racism can present itself in various forms, one of which is the lack of parks and their inaccessibility as well as their poor quality. Living in an environment where parks and open space is scarce leads to the manifestation of other problems, such as poor health, in the community. In a recent scandal involving the East Bay Regional Park District of San Francisco, Paul Kibel, adjunct of Golden Gate University's School of Law, claims that the Park District had improperly utilized the city's space for the creation of public parks. He argued that a majority of the 100,000 acres of land in Alameda and Contra Costa, San Francisco, comprised of 14 parks, 19 preserves, three recreation centers, and 13 shorelines, have been

placed in the hillside areas of the wealthy white communities.¹⁶ By doing so, low-income and minority residents of the Oakland, Richmond, Berkeley, Hayward, and Fremont neighborhoods are unable to access the open spaces. Since people are more likely to go to their nearest parks in their communities instead of traveling far distances to visit any parks, the district's acquisition of vast amounts of land in the affluent hillside neighborhood has created major inequalities in park visitation and usage for low-income minority groups.

Unfortunately, since most efforts of the Environmental Justice Movement focus on toxic site issues and not on the accessibility of parks and open spaces, residents in the impoverished neighborhoods of San Francisco, as well as other impoverished neighborhoods of the United States, have been living and continue to live in deficient and inadequate environments. Furthermore, they are living in this area that only worsens the existing conditions of overcrowding, health hazards, and poverty solely because they belong to a particular racial and socioeconomic group.

As research of urban environments in the United States reveal, environmental discrimination exposes minority groups to a limited and inadequate amount of resources that leads to the overall deterioration of one's self and community overtime. A study conducted by Schill and Scafidi discovered that neighborhoods in New York City with higher scales of critical housing problems were also higher among non-white populations than among white populations.¹⁷ The consistent deteriorating housings conditions almost often lead to the rise of boarded-up homes in a given neighborhood. As a result, Douglas Massey concluded that as the prevalence of boarded-up homes begin to intensify in a community, arson and residential fires also begin to increase.¹⁸ Furthermore, churches and schools begin to rot because very few individuals are willing to renovate these broken down structures.¹⁹ Therefore, as neighborhoods

experience increasing abandonment and incidences of fires, other social problems such as inadequate education, homelessness, and crime quickly follow.

This process of neighborhood decay not only brings down the value of property, but also brings down the level of education in segregated minority neighborhoods. Since poverty is associated with poor educational performance, segregation caused by continuous environmental and housing discrimination, affects the organization of public schools. Due to the residential segregation of these communities, as a result of environmental discrimination, the neighboring schools are usually under funded thus attracting less qualified teachers and other insufficient resources, as well as receiving lower educational advantages.²⁰ This form of institutional discrimination will only continue to present itself in other facts of the lives of minority groups ranging from high school drop-outs to teenage pregnancy, unemployment, and reliance on federal assistance programs. Additionally, in these segregated communities, minority households are disproportionately exposed to serious health risks, such as asthma, that associated with poor housing qualities.²¹

Understanding the South Bronx

The South Bronx community suffers from a wide array of environmental degradation, increasing poverty, prevalent health problems, and low educational goals among its population. While New Yorkers suffer from one of the worst rates of asthma in the country, with over 6 percent of the total population and 10 percent of children affected with this chronic condition South Bronx residents encounter worse conditions.²² In the South Bronx, twenty to twenty-five percent of children suffer from asthma and are hospitalized for their condition at a rate 250

percent higher than the rate for children in other parts of New York City and 1000 percent higher than New York State rate.²³ Along with this distressing disease, South Bronx residents also have to deal with abnormally high rates of other respiratory diseases that are becoming epidemics in the area. The Bronx Community District 3, which includes Highbridge and Morrisania, has a self-reported asthma rate of 7% for adults, which is higher than the overall City average of 5 percent.²⁴ The asthma rates are even more disturbing among the children where 19.3 asthma hospitalizations occur in this neighborhood for every 1,000 children, compared to the 3.7 asthma hospitalizations for every 1,000 children in the affluent white community of mid-Manhattan.²⁵

The South Bronx is comprised of 44 percent non-Hispanic African Americans and 52.9 percent Hispanics living off a median family income of just \$30,682, a per capita income of \$13,959.²⁶ The median family income in this impoverished area of New York is approximately \$20,000 less than the average national family income. This level of poverty is highly associated with high rates of crime, mortality, and incarceration, as well as low rates of high school graduation, employment, and financial independence. In 2006, 40,463 of the 68,574 inhabitants, that is 59 percent of the total population, living in the Bronx Community District 3 of the South Bronx required some sort of financial support from the government including Medicaid and supplemental security income.²⁷

Additionally, over 40 percent of the population is in poverty, a percentage higher than any other part of the Bronx. One of the reasons for the high poverty rates among many South Bronx residents is because the vast majority of their earnings are spent on their housing finances. Nearly half of a household's monthly income is reserved for rent. As a result, many families tend to double and even triple up in a single apartment to lessen the burden of paying rent. Like many other conditions in the South Bronx, the South Bronx has overall higher rates of homelessness

than the national rates, especially among families. In a study examining the prior addresses of homeless families in New York City and Philadelphia, the majority of homeless families roaming in New York City had previously lived in Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx. These addresses accounted for 61 percent of all homeless families in New York City between 1987 and 1994.²⁸ Additionally, these families came from areas where houses had higher occurrences of crowding, abandonment, vacancy, and inflated rent prices. All of these qualities are characteristics of the housing conditions in the South Bronx.

Since the South Bronx is located in the southwestern portion of the borough and is encompassed by the Cross Bronx Expressway and the Bruckner Expressway, it has constant industrial activity. Given that waste-transfer stations require zoning appropriated for manufacturing sites, the South Bronx is home to a disproportionate amount of these stations because a large majority of its property is zoned a industrial/manufacture locations. According to the New York City Solid Waste Management Plan, nearly 26,000 lbs of residential trash and an additional 40,000 lbs of commercial waste are discarded every day in one of the 60 private waste transfer stations throughout New York City.²⁹ However, nearly 15 waste transfer stations, about 24 percent of the City's total stations, are located in the neighborhood of the South Bronx. The New York Organic Fertilization Complex and the Bronx Lebanon Hospital/Browning Ferris Industries Medical Waste Incinerator are two of the 35 waste facilities stations in the South Bronx.³⁰ While the City's waste transfer stations hold over 31 percent of New York City's solid waste, the South Bronx holds 6.5 percent of that amount.

To understand the extent of environmental discrimination, the EPA conducted a research by employing techniques and models to analyze the socioeconomic information about people living within one mile of any waste transfer stations or any major highways. The findings

revealed that not only does the South Bronx have a disproportionate share of these hazardous plants, but there is also a specific racial and socioeconomic characteristic that makes up the population living near these facilities. The populations that are living within a one-mile radius of the South Bronx waste transfer stations tend to have more black and Latino residents than in the Bronx as a whole. The median household income for this community also tends to be generally lower than that of the median household income for other Bronx and New York City communities.³¹

In the South Bronx, pollution and air quality are also major problems. Everyday, more than 3,000 trucks drive through the Hunts Point station of the South Bronx primarily because of the excess quantity of waste transfer stations. As a result, diesel trucks are ever-present and create exceedingly dangerous levels of air pollution. A study of the South Bronx, conducted by researchers in New York University, shows that hourly concentrations of diesel exhaust are higher in all of the tested sites of the South Bronx neighborhoods than in the sites tested in parts of Manhattan.³² The study's team tested the street level air in their selected areas to examine the quality of air that people breathe. The study showed that the street level air had substantially higher concentrations of pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and carbon monoxide, than the rooftop air. Additionally, levels of most of these pollutants in the South Bronx, with the exception of ozone and particulate matter, are below the EPA's standards. While many residents have expressed major concerns and complaints about the noise and air pollution, not much has been done to alleviate these conditions.³³

Although the South Bronx is one of New York City's greenest and most open boroughs, because it does not have as high populations as other parts of the City, it still has a lack of viable park spaces. As discussed, instead of the open space being used for recreational activities,

they are occupied by waste transfer facilities. While the district area of this neighborhood is 1032 acres, the amount of open space allotted to its inhabitants per 1,000 people is a mere 2.34 acres and 6.42 acres for every 1,000 children. Conversely, in an 83 percent white and affluent mid-Manhattan area of New York, 9.01 acres of open space are allotted to every 1,000 children.³⁴ With these staggering social problems, one would assume that the area is equipped with the necessary facilities to mitigate these problems. However, because of the impact of environmental discrimination, residents in the Morrisania area, and throughout the South Bronx, are left without the proper resources and attention needed to tackle these issues. Instead, they are left with these conditions to worsen.

Along with the horrible health and social conditions of asthma, poverty, and pollution, environmental discrimination in the South Bronx also expresses itself in the form of high incarceration and juvenile delinquency rates. Since the community lacks productive resources, as a result of environmental discrimination, some of the distressed residents participate in other illicit activities. Although crime has declined nationally as well as in the South Bronx since the crack epidemic, violent crime related to gang activity is still prominent in areas of the South Bronx. The Fort Apache 41st precinct of the South Bronx has reportedly the highest violent crime rate in New York City to date. Nearly two-thirds of the males in the South Bronx community have been arrested at least once at some point in their lives.³⁵ Additionally, these South Bronx male inmates are also disproportionately represented in the New York state prison and jail facilities. Overall, 46 percent of prison inmates and 42 percent of jail inmates are African American. These numbers are extremely high given that African Americans only represent 12 percent of the population. Hispanics are also overrepresented in incarceration facilities where,

while they make up 12 percent of the general population, they constitute 18 percent of the prison population and 16 percent of the jail population.³⁶

Along with high rates of incarceration, the South Bronx also has a serious problem of delinquency. The New York Department of Juvenile Justice reports that the Bronx Community District 3 of the South Bronx ranks tenth in highest number of youths admitted to the City's detention centers.³⁷ Schools in the area have also reported a significant amount of cases of violence as well as excessive high school drop out rates. While violence is not a new phenomenon in poor cities worldwide, the current practice of violence has never been as dangerous as in the past. *Fist stick knife gun* looks into the personal history of violence in American and specifically cites the South Bronx as having one of the most dangerous violent acts in the country. The author identifies that violence has gotten so ruthless because "sidewalk boys," young individuals who hang on the corners of streets, are ranked in terms of their violent behavior and are protected through the rituals of violence as well.³⁸ The nature of violent acts has also evolved into a more brutal form of violence beginning from just fists, to sticks, then knives, and, lately and most dangerously, guns. However, even with the more vicious forms of violence, discrimination plays an even larger role in the admittance of teens into juvenile detention centers. While African American youths constitute 15 percent of their age group in the United States, they represent 26 percent of juvenile arrests, 31 percent of referrals to juvenile court, 46 percent of waivers to adult court, and 58 percent of juvenile sentenced to adult prison.³⁹

Although it may seem that the reason behind the swelling of juvenile detention centers and incarceration facilities is due to the high incidences of violent crime, the South Bronx and the rest of New York City, along with the entire country, has experienced sharp decreases in crime and homicide rates. However, incarceration rates dramatically increased in New York City

because of the policies enacted during the late 1990's. The police commissioner, at the time, aimed to decrease crime by tackling less serious and delinquent acts, such as subway fare beating, vandalism, and public drinking, in hopes of sending a message to the community that no form of crime was tolerated.⁴⁰ While this "broken windows" approach may have curbed the minor criminal infractions, it did so at the cost of singling out certain 'kinds' of individuals.

Policing was and continues to be most stringent in low-income and minority neighborhoods resulting in an overwhelming population of inmates originating from recognized decaying neighborhoods such as the South Bronx. While a black male, born in 1991, has a 29 percent chance of being incarcerated in prison at some point in his life and a Hispanic male has 16 percent chance, a white male, who is representative of the majority of males in the United States, has only a 4 percent chance of being incarcerated.⁴¹ A New York state study discovered that minorities who were charged with committing a felony were more likely to be detained than whites. The researchers of this study also reported that if minorities were detained comparably to whites, 10 percent of these minorities detained in New York City and 33 percent detained throughout the state would have been released prior to their arraignments.⁴²

The South Bronx may not be well-equipped to address the issue of asthma, but it was and continues to be well-equipped in addressing the growing delinquent and inmate population. In the Bronx alone, there are three main facilities that house the emerging delinquent and incarceration population including the Bronx Detention Complex, the Vernon C. Bain Center, and the Horizon Juvenile Center in Mott Haven.⁴³ As discussed, African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to makeup the prison, jail, and delinquent populations in incarceration facilities. Since African Americans and Hispanics largely reside in urban and low-income communities, like the South Bronx, their environment plays a major role in their quantity and

quality of life chances in society. Therefore, lacking the appropriate resources because of the broader environmental discrimination may lead to environmental degradation, poverty, and prevalent health problems, but also a substantial increase in one's likelihood of being incarcerated.

Current Developments in the South Bronx

It would be an understatement to say that the South Bronx is an unhealthy and unlivable environment due to the excessive degrees of poverty, asthma, pollution, unsuitable recreational spaces, homelessness and incarceration rates that plague the neighborhood. These inexcusable conditions exemplify all of the different facets of environmental discrimination that can greatly damage the quality of life for an individual and decay his/her community. Fortunately, several organizations as well as the South Bronx community have taken steps to improve the devastating conditions in the South Bronx. In March 1999, the United States Department of Justice and Environmental Protection Agency opened an investigation looking into the health effects of the 35 waste transfer stations in the South Bronx.⁴⁴ As a result of this inquiry and the aid of some environmental advocacy groups, the Bronx Lebanon Hospital's Browning Ferris Industries Medical Waste Incinerator was forced to tear down its incinerators.

The South Bronx community, in accordance with the New York University Wagner School of Public Service, has devised a strategy to improve the environmental state of the area. The recognized cleaner air, pollution-control, and sustainable buildings, vehicles, and waste transfer stations as key objectives to improving the quality of life in the South Bronx. They suggest that equipping vehicles, traveling along the South Bronx's major expressways, with

clean fuel technology can substantially mitigate the environmental impact of these trucks. These clean fuel systems include diesel oxidation catalysts and particulate filters, 225 light duty bio-fuel, and 28 clean natural gas refuse collectors.⁴⁵ In order to improve the health of the South Bronx children, they recommended the New York Power Authority (NYPA) to retrofit 1,000 of its city school buses with particulate filters in an attempt to counterbalance the buses' gas emissions. In December 2001, the NYPA approved their recommendation and devoted \$6 million to carry out the program.⁴⁶ Later, in 2003, the state granted \$1.25 million to the New York City Department of Education to provide emission-reducing equipment to 2,194 city school buses. The South Bronx community and NYU Wagner also stressed the importance of improving the overall quality of air in homes, schools, and community centers, by employing "green" features that would enhance the ventilation and insulation in these facilities. They also proposed that homes be painted with low-VOC paints and sealants, and furnished with solid wood instead of particle boards so as to not exacerbate the severe asthma epidemic and instead better the respiratory health of the South Bronx community.⁴⁷

Perhaps the most noteworthy development came on August 14, 2007, when former Governor Spitzer and Mayor Bloomberg opened the first green affordable housing complex, in the history of the state of New York, to qualify for the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) for homes. Prior to the construction of this development, affordable housing communities had begun to spring up in areas throughout the Bronx. The Sunflower Way is one such community that was constructed in the Melrose Commons section of the South Bronx. The Morrisania Revitalization Corporation also opened 68 apartments in October of 1993 at the Jacqueline Denise Davis Court Building at 576 East 165th Street.⁴⁸ Michal Avramides, one of the architects who helped renovate the 51,700 square foot apartment building, designed the new

housing to include 68 units of Class A apartments including 14 one-bedroom, 49 two-bedroom, and 5 three-bedroom units. While these new low-income housing units were a transition from the dilapidated and overcrowded existing units, the construction of the green affordable housing was more fundamental. The developments not only addressed the issue of low-income, but also environmental degradation as a result of environmental discrimination.

Having the first green and affordable housing in New York be constructed in the poverty-stricken South Bronx was monumental because it highlighted the community's severe conditions and recognized that their problems were far worse than nearly any other region in the state. As a result, the South Bronx needed to set the precedent for green and affordable development since it was one of the most deprived, discriminated against, and underprivileged neighborhoods in New York. This 64-unit affordable housing development, known as Morrisania Homes, is situated in the Morrisania section of the South Bronx.⁴⁹ The development comprises of 16 three-family and 8 two-family houses which was financed by the State, City, and private funding. The goal of the development, according to former Governor Spitzer, was to "increase the number of affordable homes, which is essential for working New Yorkers to achieve economic security, and...do so in a way that also protects the environment and increases energy efficiency".⁵⁰ These new homes are part of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's NYC2030 Plan to create 165,000 units of affordable housing by 2030. In addition to increasing the availability and quantity of green affordable housing, the plan also seeks to make parks more readily accessible by providing neighborhoods with parks that are only a 10-minute walking distance from any point in a community. Going along the lines of Mayor Bloomberg's 2030 plan, I, too, have devised a strategy to address some of the social problems of the South Bronx. By approaching the problem of delinquency from a

theoretical and physical standpoint, I will attempt to tackle the institutional factors stemming from environmental discrimination that affect the overall quality of life of South Bronx residents.

Youth Initiative and Mentorship Program

Although the United States is considered the “land of the free,” the reality is that America incarcerates more people than any other industrialized nation in the world. In New York alone the average daily inmate population is 13,500 people.⁵¹ Unfortunately, many of these individuals began as troubled youths who did not have the resources nor the positive tools needed to deter them from criminal activities. From pre-adolescence and up, children are being recruited into a life of crime, instead of a life of achievement. The Department of Juvenile Justice reports that there is a daily average of 450 youths in their various juvenile centers and, as discussed earlier, a large portion of these delinquent youths come from the South Bronx. Current policies seek to address the problem of delinquency by focusing more on deterrence after the youths have committed a delinquent act instead of prevention through the provision of pro-active channels for life’s stressors. In order to more effectively address this social issue, I propose and would implement a Youth Initiative and Mentorship Program (YIMP) focused more on the latter approach to delinquency.

While my policy aims to steer the youth to more positive activities and behaviors, existing policies such as the Release to Parent and Life/Work Skills programs intend to address the issue of delinquency after it becomes a serious problem.⁵² While the Release to Parent program aims at preventing juveniles from entering detention centers by releasing them to their parents or guardians before appearing to court, this program does not deal with the factors that

led the juvenile to commit a delinquent act. However, the Work/Life skills program does attempt to address one such factor by working with the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) to provide the youth in secure detention centers with life and work skills training. Nevertheless, this program, like many other policies, only concentrates on the youth who already have been involved in illegal activities and not on the youth who may be inclined to delinquency because of their environment.

Delinquency does not merely affect the youth but their family, friends and community as whole. In New York City, delinquent crimes, which include both non-violent misdemeanors and violent offenses, are committed by children as young as seven years old and up to sixteen years old. Earlier descriptions of violence in the South Bronx describes that the severity and degree of violence has only escalated and matured from sticks to guns. As a result, we need to change the way we perceive these children from young criminals who are headed towards a life of crime to troubled youths who need some steering toward a productive path. My proposed policy would seek to assist in this change of perception by using preventative measures to manage delinquency. Since delinquency is not merely an issue of teenage crime, but a problem of idleness due to the lack of constructive resources available to the youth in their community, the issue should also focus on educational, economic, and spatial deficiencies. My policy would therefore entail of tutoring, test preparation, and resume and computer skills training, as well as athletic, recreational, dance, and art activities, and a mentorship component for the youths. In addition, the policy would also incorporate services for the parents/guardians, including job training so that they may acquire more technical skills and perhaps make them more attractive to employers. Also, parenting tutorials would be included to offer guardians different methods of approaching their children about drugs, sex, and gangs.

As an immediate approach, this policy would require the partnership of various city agencies. Like the Life/Work Skills program that solicits the help from the CEO, my policy would also necessitate the participation of mostly public, but some private, organizations such as the Department of Education and the Department of Parks and Recreation, as well as all of the New York City Public Libraries. The Department of Parks & Recreation would implement the athletic and recreational element of the policy. By creating and hosting after-school and weekend programs such as baseball or football tournaments in nearby parks, children could easily attend these activities next to their homes rather than having to travel to their school's after-school programs.

In addition, the City Parks Dance division could host the dance series in neighboring private dance studios which would be contracted by the City for their spaces. The New York City Public Libraries, on the other hand, could hold the art classes, tutoring sessions, computer training, and professional skills tutorials for the youth as well as the job training, parenting skills training, and money management courses for the parents/guardians throughout the five boroughs. However, in order to advertise this program, the Department of Education would be needed to publicize the events, since this agency is the most direct link between children and their parents and the City.

The Department would also be needed to supply the YIMP with experts including teachers for the educational lessons, qualified college volunteers and professionals for the mentorship aspect, and psychologists for the parenting discussions. The mentors would be recruited from various NYC agencies that include police officers, civil engineers, teachers, professors, fire men and women, doctors, architects, college students, judges, and other public servants. With the assistance of these professionals, the youth would not only gain valuable

counseling and guidance, but could begin to map out their career goals. The most important aspect of the policy is that I would be soliciting the advice of the youth to see what programs they find interesting, productive, and entertaining. By not merely imposing a plan upon the youth, but instead working with the youth and incorporating their ideas, the city and the public can work together to mitigate delinquency.

Through the implementation of this policy throughout the various divisions of the New York City agencies, the public will play a crucial role in the prevention of delinquency among troubled youths by supplying them with the tools and outlets needed to guide their lives in a more positive direction. Moreover, the youths will not only develop beneficial skills and practices, but will learn the value of public service. While my policy addresses preventative measures for tackling delinquency, others may think this policy is not sufficient for dealing with juvenile delinquents. They may claim that this policy is too abstract and cannot be implemented as easily as proposed throughout the various city agencies. They may also argue that this policy detracts from fact that some youths just need strict detention to correct their behaviors, and that it devalues the current policies that aim on reducing delinquency.

While all of these arguments are valid, they do not represent the true intent of the youth initiative and mentorship program. Various studies suggest that prevention initiatives are very effective programs that reduce adolescent violent crime, substance abuse, and delinquency.⁵³ As to the concern that this policy cannot be applied within city agencies, current policies use the assistance of various city departments, such as the CEO, and even religious leaders. Therefore, this policy is neither abstract nor non-applicable because it draws from and expands upon current policies. Lastly, as to those who argue that some youths just need strict punishment, my policy does not reject nor undervalue the existing strategies and does not suggest that this policy will

work for all. However, my policy looks toward proactive strategies of addressing the same problem, especially since this environment is not suitable for children or adolescents. In a recent incident, a fourteen year old boy collapsed and died in a Florida boot camp because he underwent many strenuous activities that served to act as a deterrent for his act of joyriding. The Youth Initiative and Mentorship Program simply wants to provide more effective methods for deterring the youth from entering a life of crime by focusing on the factors triggering delinquency.

By providing the youth and their parents with practical and positive resources, such as tutoring, mentoring, athletic and artistic activities, job training, and parental guidance, the Youth Initiative and Mentorship Program aims to decrease the occurrence of delinquency. Although the city has similar sporadic programs throughout the various departments, it does not have a large-scale preventive method of approaching delinquency. Through the YIMP, delinquency has the potential of diminishing, and the New York City community would be generating productive youths that would be as much a benefit to themselves as they would to their community. While it may temporarily be held in nearby parks, libraries, and businesses, the ultimate plan would be to have a single center in various communities that would specifically cater to their needs. In the Morrisania section of the South Bronx, I have designed one such building to address the social conditions of the area.

Morrisania Community Recreational Center

In order to address the devastating social and environmental conditions of the South Bronx, I designed a community-based recreational facility that would provide creative solutions

for their problems. Since the South Bronx consists of a considerable area of territory, I narrowed in on the Morrisania section of the South Bronx to place the recreational center. The site of the recreational center is located on 1472 Stebbins Avenue. The site selection is important because I wanted to choose a neighborhood that was diverse in terms of age, and that was beginning to be revitalized yet still lacked adequate resources. 1472 Stebbins Avenue, therefore, is not only located near the new sustainable Morrisania Homes, but also near an assisted living housing center. The recreational center was designed in a manner that would address many of the social and health conditions in the South Bronx. Some of the conditions I chose to resolve with this center were the incredibly high asthma cases, high delinquency rates, below average median income, and the lack of satisfactory open space.

The Morrisania Community Recreational Center is a 12,600 square feet facility designed to concentrate on and provide relief for some of the poor conditions of the South Bronx. In order to tackle the high asthma rates, I included a Child/Senior Health Care Center that occupies 700 square feet of the building. By incorporating this Health Care Center into the program, I intended for doctors and physicians to visit the center so as to provide regular consultations and preventative medicine for individuals with consistent asthma problems. Another way to tackle the asthma epidemic in the South Bronx is to provide adequate exercise equipment and facilities that serve as natural remedies for the disease.⁵⁴ Therefore, I included a 2,100 square feet indoor track for the winter months and an additional 1,700 square feet outdoor track for the warmer months. Although there are several basketball courts in the nearby Crotona Park, there is not a recreational provision for those who wish to participate in another activity. Due to this lack of diverse activities, I incorporated a 670 square feet dance room where individuals can practice

dance routines with private companies, as described in the above Youth Initiative and Mentorship Program.

A large part of the center is dedicated to the fitness hubs. Since exercise is essential for preventing asthma attacks, I included a 1,080 square foot cardio room where individuals of any age can use the cardio and muscle-building equipment. An additional 350 square feet of the cardio room can be set aside for aerobics classes. For the younger generations, I designed a semi-indoor playground of 1,000 square feet. The reason why I situated the playground in the middle of the building though uncovered, thus semi-indoor, is because most public playgrounds tend to be centers for drug distribution. I wanted to shelter the children and residents from witnessing such transactions and provide them with a comfortable and healthy environment where they can enjoy the activities being offered. Some of the children I interviewed in the Morrisania neighborhood mentioned that they did not feel comfortable going to certain sections of the parks, specifically Crotona Park, because they did not want to be around the drug dealers. These notorious areas were known and considered to be informally sectioned off from the general public for drug operations and drug use. The children mentioned that they would like to be in a park where they did not have to witness such repulsive activities and the Recreational Center aimed to create such an environment.

Since this center is a community organization, I wanted to not only include recreational components that residents of all ages can utilize, but incorporate creative outlets for them as well. Therefore, I designed an arts and crafts center of nearly 300 square feet and a gallery space of 210 square feet which would be used to exhibit the works of the Morrisania community. The community also lacks a practical area for reading. A comfortable lounge is situated at the right of

the entrance area and in the snug quarters of the second floor, due to the slanted ceiling, to accommodate those in search of a quite and cozy spot to read in.

To address the high delinquency and low employment rates, I incorporated two classrooms that would be utilized for tutoring and job training. As discussed in the policy section, the Youth Initiative and Mentorship Program seeks to provide adequate tutoring sessions for students struggling through their classes. The Morrisania Community Recreational Center is well equipped to provide these services to the youth as well as to their guardians and older resident population. The center also provides the adult population with a classroom for their job training sessions which would include practical job proficiencies, information of current positions, and computer skills training. I thus included a computer resource center composed of 20 computers in its designated 670 square feet area to allow the instructor and the adults to have access to computer programs. The computers are also available to the youth for both tutoring and basic computer skills training.

The environmental conditions of the South Bronx would also be addressed directly through the building. The entire roof of the building, of all four sections, includes a green roof or a roof with plant life and vegetation. This component of the building provides sustainability because it minimizes the amount of heat and air conditioning needed to maintain the building since green roofs naturally supply a degree of insulation. Additionally, it can also be used to plant and grow produce that residents can consume. This is not only beneficial for the diet of the residents but also gives them a garden of their own. There are several affordable housing units in New York City who have used green roofs as community gardens and the neighborhood's residents see them as both convenient and effective. The green roof also absorbs some of the carbon dioxide and other pollutants contaminating the area.

Aside from the green roof, the courtyard playground in the middle of the building provides a large amount of natural lighting. Natural lighting as a form of sustainability is most effective when it is accessible throughout the entire building. Since natural lighting is only viable within a 30 foot range, it is important to have the entry positions of the lighting available to all areas of the building. Therefore, because the playground is situated in the middle of the building, the natural light is able to illuminate the entire building. For areas of the building that are farthest from the courtyard playground, I designed portions of the walls as glass walls and included elongated windows to provide a sufficient amount of natural lighting for those regions.

Conclusion

When a neighborhood is not well equipped to handle the problems of an urban environment and those problems are further exacerbated by the plethora of discrimination practices imposed on it, the result is a downward spiral and decaying of a community. The South Bronx serves as a perfect case study of a community that underwent various systematic environmental discrimination practices resulting in alarming social and environmental consequences. The South Bronx community not only has one of the highest incarceration rates, but some of the worst environmental conditions in America. Along with being a major dumping site for waste facilities and other hazardous services, the South Bronx community has one of the most escalated rates of asthma and other respiratory diseases.

Fortunately, the public has increasingly become aware of the severe conditions of the South Bronx and has addressed some of the issues. Through the construction of new affordable housing complexes, requirements of clean air standards for passing vehicles, and implementation

of sustainable features in new and existing edifices, the South Bronx has seen much improvement. Nonetheless, much is still left to be done to undo the effects of environmental discrimination on the neighborhood. I proposed a policy, known as the Youth Initiative and Mentorship Program, which would address some of the economic and educational disadvantages of the community because of the lack of resources available in the neighborhood. Additionally, with the design of the Morrisania Community Recreational Center some of the components discussed in the policy could be employed in the program of the building. The center also provides various health facilities to tackle the vigor and physical condition of the South Bronx residents. By utilizing sustainable features, the center is also equipped to handle some of the environmental hazards in the community and decrease its ecological footprint. With my proposals and the current works of other organizations and agencies, the South Bronx can turn from being a model of a decaying neighborhood to a revitalized neighborhood, and undo many of the outcomes of environmental discrimination.

¹ While job discrimination based on race and income affects the likelihood of a person to get a job at an organization or corporation, and discrimination in the admittance to an institution just denies an individual from partaking in a school, club, or other institution, environmental discrimination, based on the above factors, affect the entire surroundings of an individual from the housing available, the quality of schools being offered, the accessibility to recreational activities, and other contextual opportunities.

² Organizations such as the Morrisania Revitalization Corporation, Housing Development Corporation, South Bronx Clean Air Coalition, and Center for Sustainable Energy at Bronx Community College have created programs to tackle the environmental issues of the South Bronx.

³ Though the Warren Count PCB Landfill ignited the Environmental Justice concept in 1982, the Environmental Justice Movement began in 1991 with meeting of the First National People of Color Environmental Justice Summit. Here, the movement's main principles were drafted to address certain areas of environmental discrimination.

⁴ For example, researchers at the Office found that minorities are more likely than whites to live in proximity to areas producing mass pollution.

⁵ John Goering. *Fragile Rights Within Cities*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: 2007.

⁶ Refer to footnote 5.

⁷ Refer to footnote 5.

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⁹ Yse Serrat. *The Distributional effects of Environmental Policy*. Edward Edgar Publishing: 2006.

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¹⁶ Angela Rowen. *Minority Communities Need More Parks, Report Says*. Special to the Planet: November 11, 2007

¹⁷ Benjamin Scafidi and Michael Schill. *Housing Conditions and Problems in New York City*. New York University: 1997.

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