



HISTORICAL STUDIES OF URBAN AMERICA

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Figure 8. The Brownsville Neighborhood Council, Sanitation Campaign, 1948. Brownsville community groups frequently included children in their activities. Courtesy Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library.

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The Optimistic Years: Brownsville in the Forties

Rae Glauber grew up in Brownsville during the 1930s and 1940s and continued to live there until her death in the late 1960s. She was an activist throughout her adult years—an organizer for the Brownsville Community Congress of Industrial Organizations, a board member of the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, and later an anti-poverty worker in the 1960s—and her work touched almost every organization in the community. Glauber's memoir, *All Neighborhoods Change: A History of Brownsville Brooklyn* (1963), paints a lively picture of the neighborhood and is particularly useful for understanding the role women played in Brownsville during the 1940s and 1950s. Women had a long tradition of activism in Brownsville, and the war years saw their heavy involvement in supporting the men overseas. Brownsville women formed "Victory Clubs" to sell war bonds, ran knitting circles, sent letters to soldiers, gathered scrap metal for bullets, and organized parties honoring fallen soldiers. They also organized Russian relief groups to provide food and financial assistance to starving families, and they operated the civilian defense organizations that prepared local resi-

dents for war. Brownsville women were also active in political affairs, although the Democratic Party club was closed to them. Several groups, most significantly the Brownsville Women's Non-Partisan Committee for Registration, pushed Brownsville residents to get involved in politics to secure badly needed government services. In September 1944, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spoke to thirty-five hundred Brownsville women at a rally sponsored by the group.¹

Domestically, the war brought the nation out of the depression by putting millions to work in war industries. The war transformed migration patterns, drawing many people to cities and to the developing West Coast. More than two million blacks left the South in search of better opportunities. Thousands of them came to New York and settled in Brownsville. The war also had a dramatic impact on American society, drawing people closer together in pursuit of a common goal. This was especially true of immigrant Americans, many of whom did not feel completely accepted in American society until this period. These immigrants, particularly Jews, worked actively to support the war effort. Hitler's destruction of Jewish society in Eastern Europe certainly was an important factor in the involvement of American Jews, but the war also presented an opportunity to prove their patriotism. Second-generation immigrants aided the war mobilization more directly by volunteering to serve in the armed forces. These servicemen not only testified to their own commitment but also to the patriotism of their families and their communities.²

In prewar Brownsville, residents were generally isolated, relying primarily on their families, their neighborhoods, and their congregations; most Brownsville organizations were small and focused on specific issues. In the 1940s, however, the residents started to look more broadly to the city and the nation, and several communitywide groups emerged that sought to unify the neighborhood and struggle for area improvements. The most significant of these groups were the Brownsville Neighborhood Council (BNC), the Brownsville Boys Club (BBC), and the Brownsville Community Congress of Industrial Organizations (Brownsville CIO). Although they represented different constituencies and espoused different ideologies, each of these groups worked to make government agencies more responsive to the needs of Brownsville residents. The founders of the BNC, BBC, and Brownsville CIO believed that through organization Brownsville residents could create a better neighborhood and increase opportunities for the most unfortunate residents.

In the short term, the war mobilization brought increased activism to Brownsville, and these groups racked up several achievements during the

optimistic forties. They secured new housing, new parks, and other community facilities, and they forced government and private institutions to be more accountable in protecting the poor from the housing, health, and other social problems that plagued the neighborhood. In the long run, however, the economic and social changes brought on by the war had negative effects on Brownsville. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, thousands of second-generation residents took advantage of the GI Bill and economic expansion and moved to newer areas. The departure of young men and women, many of them activists, weakened the community by removing many of the people with the energy, ability, and financial resources to keep the neighborhood viable.³

But the impact of these demographic changes was not readily apparent in the late 1940s. Most Brownsville residents assumed that the neighborhood would continue to serve the function it had for more than forty years—the slow acculturation of Jewish immigrants. The organizations that Brownsville activists created sought to improve life for neighborhood residents, but they were not prepared to deal with the dramatic shifts that the community witnessed in the 1950s.

Brownsville in the War Years

Hundreds of Brownsville residents served in the military, and those who remained at home bought war bonds, donated blood, and supplied materials needed to support the troops. Brownsville community organizations actively assisted both the European Jews fleeing the holocaust and the Allied effort to win the war. Since most Brownsville residents traced their ancestry to Russia, they were also excited by the short-lived detente between the United States and the Soviet Union. America's alliance with the Soviets allowed Brownsville Jews for a short time to proudly proclaim their heritage. Many congregations organized Russian relief efforts and several rallies were held in area halls to welcome Russian leaders. "No other section of Brooklyn so heralded the new (second) front," remembered one resident. On Victory in Europe Day, Brownsville residents turned out in droves at a rally and march to celebrate the end of the conflict.⁴

Brownsville women and men also created organizations that responded to changes in American society brought on by the conflict. Wartime inflation was a major concern to the working-class residents of the area, and Rae Glauber and other activists worked with the Office of Price Administration to combat price gouging. Throughout the country, the government estab-

lished local boards known as “little OPAs” to enforce price regulations, and Brownsville’s female activists became frontline inspectors. Three hundred thousand volunteers, mostly women, served across the country, many as “price panel assistants” who regularly compared prices at local grocery stores to the OPA guidelines. In Brownsville, the women also exposed corrupt inspectors who took bribes from local grocers. Within the neighborhood, Glauber and others organized meat strikes against exploitive local butchers and rent strikes against local landlords. Sometimes these battles got violent, Glauber remembered. “A woman passed the picket line and entered the butcher shop. When she emerged, she got hit on the head with a chicken by a picket. Soon there was a battle. The police wagons came out and arrested some of the leaders.” Brownsville women were in the forefront of these movements.⁵

Labor organizations provided much of the infrastructure for the OPA effort and for local activism in general. The war effort increased the influence of labor unions across the country, in particular the fledgling Congress of Industrial Organizations. Throughout the industrial areas of the nation, CIO locals flourished in this short-lived period of labor-corporate cooperation. Brownsville, long a center for union organizing, was a leader in this movement. Unlike the competing American Federation of Labor (AFL), the CIO actively sought to develop grassroots support for labor organizations by creating Industrial Union Councils (IUCs) in working-class neighborhoods. The main purpose of the IUCs was to bring together representatives of local unions to coordinate support for local strikes, organizing campaigns, and political elections. In many cities, IUCs took on a larger mandate, fighting against price gouging in consumer goods and rents, organizing campaigns for civil rights and social justice, and assuming the mantle of community leadership. The Brownsville Community CIO was an active member of New York’s citywide CIO Council. In addition to its work on consumer protection, the Brownsville CIO organized neighborhood groups and block clubs and brought together civic and institutional leaders to fight for neighborhood improvements.⁶

Most IUCs did not play an important role in their communities. The difficulties faced by working people did not ease quickly with the wartime mobilization, and food and housing shortages were severe. CIO councils were not equipped to respond to such concerns, and as a result they received little support from residents. Although the Brownsville CIO could not solve the problems created by wartime inflation, it did encourage residents to seek solutions. At the Brownsville Labor Lyceum, large groups of neigh-

borhood residents met to organize protests against local landlords and grocers who violated wartime price controls. The Brownsville CIO also produced a community resource guide that provided information on government and privately run programs to aid residents in need of assistance, and it gave guidance to tenants regarding their rights in rent-controlled apartments. The group focused both on local concerns, such as removing an anti-Semitic policeman, and national concerns, such as fighting for the passage of the Fair Employment Practices Act. To strengthen ties within the neighborhood, the Brownsville CIO organized goodwill dinners and holiday parties that sought to improve relations between blacks and whites and keep union members abreast of the activities of the CIO’s affiliates.⁷

Throughout the 1940s, housing demand in New York was high and landlords dramatically increased rents in many buildings, making thousands of families unable to afford shelter. During the war the OPA attempted to impose rent restrictions, but it was often unable to enforce these guidelines. The “Temporary State Rent Commission,” created through pressure from New York’s labor organizations, was also charged with the responsibility of protecting residents from price gouging, but it too was ineffective. The Brownsville Tenants Council was thus created by CIO activists to prevent local landlords from exploiting residents. The group distributed circulars to inform tenants of their rights and supported local tenants’ organizations. Brownsville’s housing stock was in serious disrepair, and rats, refuse, crumbling walls, and rusted pipes were a constant problem, as were fires and gas explosions. Through the Brownsville Tenants Council, residents pressed the State Rent Commission to investigate and fine local landlords. According to Glauber, the council had five thousand members during the war, one-third of them black. “Tenant Council headquarters became a haven for refugees of landlord terror. . . . the faithful helped raise money, run functions, sweep—in short, to them it was a kind of union hall.” Council volunteers helped local residents make complaints, organized presentations at local meetings, and pursued major violators in court.⁸

It is difficult to determine how many Brownsville residents participated in the programs of the Brownsville CIO. Leftist organizers were unquestionably the leaders of the organization, and often other groups declined to work with CIO activists because of their Communist connections. In 1943, Rae Glauber attempted to organize a protest against the reinstatement of a local policeman accused of anti-Semitism. Several Jewish advocacy organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish

Congress, and the Brooklyn Jewish Community Council (BJCC), attended the meetings, but they squelched the protest rally. The BJCC representative concluded that the protest "was influenced by a number of Communist Front elements which were present, and that because of the make-up of the group, it would be unadvisable for our office to participate in any of its activities." Established groups like the American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee were generally opposed to grassroots organization, choosing rather to use connections and private pressure to secure changes. In the case of the anti-Semitic police officer, these organizations preferred to organize "a group of leading citizens to try to arrange an appointment to meet with Commissioner of Police Valentine." Their efforts failed, and the commissioner placed the officer back on the beat.⁹

The leadership of elite advocacy organizations did not live in Brownsville, and they did not bear the brunt of discrimination. They resided in more genteel communities and looked at such matters in abstract terms. Brownsville residents were used to protest and believed that it was often the only productive means for achieving a goal. While the CIO Councils were less successful elsewhere, the Brownsville CIO provided a forum for liberal and leftist political activism in the neighborhood. As in most parts of the borough, the Democratic Party in Brownsville was controlled by professionals who used the party apparatus for their own benefit. Most local politicians were unresponsive to the needs of the area, and the Brownsville CIO Council provided organization and influence to residents lacking political clout. These groups created communitywide unity in an area that was otherwise divided by race and gradations of class. Glauber remembered that the CIO Council created "consensus among ministers, CIO, rabbis, councilmen, police captains, legislators, [community] leaders, [and] political, Jewish, [and] parent leaders." Throughout the war years, the Brownsville CIO served as a clearinghouse for Brownsville organizations, providing them information and logistical support.¹⁰

The Brownsville Boys Club

Children were the focus of much activity in these years. Political leaders, during the war and the anticommunist crusade that followed, were particularly concerned with securing the patriotism of American youths. Activism for youth took all forms during the 1940s, from the mundane Parent-Teachers Associations to the exotic "Pied Pipers." The Schools Council

of Brownsville and East New York, led by Reverend Homer McEwen, the black minister of Congregational Church on Watkins Avenue, established "Telephone Tuesday," where each week parent leaders called all the other parents to discuss important issues at local schools. Another mechanism designed to educate children was the "Pied Piper" program, which organized entertainment spectacles that included patriotic education. In 1941, eight hundred area youths paraded through the neighborhood to Public School 64 to hear about plans for civil defense. At the event, local rabbis and black ministers stressed the need to overcome "racial, religious and political differences" in the battle against Hitler. In 1944, Brownsville children attended the "Good Will Youth Festival" at the Loew's Pitkin Theater. There they took an "Oath of Good Will" written by Judge Joseph Proskauer that committed them to "the advancement of the highest ideal—dignity of mankind, human equality, fellowship and brotherhood." In changing neighborhoods like Brownsville, local leaders gave additional attention to race relations among youths. On February 16, 1947, local groups organized another goodwill event, the "Know Your Neighbor Interracial Youth Festival," featuring lightweight champion boxer Henry Armstrong. Organizers weighed in against both anti-Semitism and racism at these unity events. Like their black neighbors, many Jews were subject to employment and housing discrimination in the 1940s, and many were denied jobs at Manhattan firms like Metropolitan Life Insurance. Injustice was not an abstract idea to Brownsville residents.¹¹

Brownsville's teenagers took these lessons of goodwill to heart and many participated in local organizations during the war years. The Brownsville Boys Club (BBC), like other groups in the area, emerged out of the residents' belief that Brownsville was not receiving the resources it needed. Other than Betsy Head Park, a recreation area too small to serve the densely populated neighborhood, there were almost no places for local children to play. Private institutions like the YMCA and YMHA served other Brooklyn communities, but they did not have a major presence in Brownsville. According to a 1940 study of recreational facilities, Brownsville fell far below acceptable levels in every category, from playgrounds to fields to park areas. Parks Department head Robert Moses himself acknowledged that Brownsville's need in this area would be great even after planned facilities were completed, noting that "[t]he small space set aside in the [Brownsville Houses] project for playground use will not meet the entire demands of the residents of the new houses. Even at the present time, Betsy Head Park is hardly large enough to meet the needs of the neighborhood." Another

study found, not surprisingly, that blacks' access to recreational facilities was even more limited. The shortage of recreational areas resulted in an intense competition for those that did exist.¹²

In 1940, after a number of cars parked near the PS 184 (the local elementary school) fields were damaged, the school board decided to restrict the use of the fields to those younger than thirteen. In response to their exclusion, a group of boys led by Jacob "Doc" Baroff organized a campaign to get the Board of Education to allow them to use the fields. Even though they secured over one thousand signatures, city officials rejected the boys' petition without consideration. This rebuff motivated the boys to organize a larger group of petitioners, and with the support of neighborhood adults, they regained access to the field. The success served as a rallying force for the creation of the BBC, enabling the boys to unite in their efforts to improve their situation in the neighborhood.¹³

While many boys played important roles in the creation of the BBC, Doc Baroff was the founding father. Baroff's parents came to Brownsville from Russia early in the century. Like many residents, they worked in the garment trades originally, and Baroff's father also worked on the construction of the subway system. After a few years, the Baroffs turned to peddling, and they eventually opened a small secondhand shop in Williamsburg. "We were very poor," remembered Baroff, "but we were rich in tradition." Baroff's extended family included many notable rabbis and scholars, and they passed their love of learning on to him. Just a teenager, Doc Baroff was the responsible person to whom adults turned when they had problems with Brownsville juveniles. Over time, he gained such respect that local police called on him to take supervision of first-time juvenile offenders. Before he reached his twenties, Baroff was a substitute father to many of the boys in the neighborhood.¹⁴

During the depression and after, many Brownsville boys suffered from economic and social neglect, and a large number had no fathers at home. Because there were few jobs in New York, male heads frequently left their families to find work in other parts of the country. Under New York's public assistance program, a family became eligible for aid if the father died, and many local men disappeared so that their families could qualify for financial support. "Many men who I thought were dead I later found out had just left," remembered Dudley Gaffin, a former BBC member. But in fact, during the 1930s and 1940s, many young fathers did die, often as a result of occupational hazards—for example, the inhalation of lead paint and other noxious fumes by those in the construction trades. "In my first group of

youth, more than half had no fathers," remembered Baroff. Through the BBC, Baroff and the others increased the number of facilities and the amount of resources devoted to Brownsville children. In addition, the group provided a mechanism for peaceful interaction between different groups of young people.¹⁵

After winning the right to use the fields at PS 184, the BBC set its sights on other facilities. Through the cooperation of Parks Department officials, who were impressed by their organization, the BBC was able to achieve almost open access to the neighborhood recreational facilities, including the right to regulate the use of the parks and their equipment. Almost two thousand boys were BBC members by 1945. During its first five years, the BBC developed strong relationships with several organizations, including the Police Athletic League, the YMHA, and the Brooklyn Council for Social Planning. With the support of these groups and others, the BBC was able to secure funds for equipment and the rental of a clubhouse. Baroff, Izzy Lesovoy, and Norman Goroff were active recruiters of local boys, through their clubs and gangs, and they created an organizational infrastructure envied by many established social work organizations. They published a newsletter written by the members, organized trips to museums and to sporting events (to see the beloved Dodgers), and sent several hundred poor youths to camp for the first time.¹⁵

The BBC provided not only recreational opportunities but also a training ground for Brownsville males. The group charged dues of one penny a month to all members and had detailed operating guidelines. It had its own "penal code," which punished members by denying them athletic privileges, and each constituent club had voting rights in the BBC assembly in accordance with the number of people in its group. The officers, with the approval of the "board of directors," allocated the BBC revenues to specific programs and arranged for competitions among the groups. Baroff and the other BBC leaders also organized all-star clubs in basketball, baseball, and other sports to compete in borough and citywide competitions. "We had Friday night meetings in the library. We met there for seven years without an adult," remembered Baroff. By providing a safe, supportive atmosphere for local boys, the BBC filled a great need in Brownsville during the 1940s. Juvenile delinquency, long a problem in the area, had increased during the war. The problem was so severe that when the Brooklyn Council for Social Planning (BCSP) launched a pilot program against delinquency in 1944, the council selected a site at the heart of Brownsville. After World War II, when delinquency intensified, the BBC was one of the major institutions in

Brownsville working to solve this problem. From its beginning as an athletic club, the BBC thus developed into a resource for many of Brownsville's youths, while serving as a mediator between the young people and several adult institutions.¹⁷

The Brownsville Neighborhood Council

Brownsville's working-class activists operated in many forums during the 1940s—as tenants' advocates, union organizers, and political leaders. Local institutional and business leaders were also energized by the war effort, and they too increased their community participation. The focal point of their efforts was the Brownsville Neighborhood Council (BNC), founded in 1938 as a coalition of more than twenty local civic associations, leaders of community institutions, and owners of area businesses. The forces behind the creation of the BNC were attorney Milton Goell, Rabbi Alter Landesman, director of the Hebrew Educational Society, and local businessman Thomas Atkins. The primary goals of the BNC, as stated in its charter, were (1) to stimulate more active and effective participation by the citizens of the community; (2) to secure neighborhood improvements; and (3) to cooperate with governmental and private agencies in matters affecting community welfare. The organization was active in the neighborhood for more than two decades.¹⁸

In its early years neighborhood elites controlled the BNC. While the group eventually became more representative of the whole Brownsville community, most of its early board members were established businessmen, or their wives, and institutional leaders. For Thomas Atkins, the BNC provided a means to "give back to the community" that had helped him grow his business into a flourishing operation. Local politicians, such as Democratic district leader and state assemblyman Jacob Gralla and Alfred Lama, also a state assemblyman, were also board members. As the board expanded in the mid-1940s, black ministers were also elected to executive positions, notably Reverend Homer McEwen of Congregational Church and Reverend Boise Dent of Tabernacle Baptist Church. Leaders of boroughwide organizations such as the Jewish Board of Guardians and the board of education also participated. Women too became active BNC members. Dorothy Montgomery, the head librarian at the Brownsville branch of the Brooklyn Library, was a board member, as was Sarah Fox, a local teacher. While men held a majority of official positions, the organizational work of the group was often done by the women, particularly Montgomery and Fox,

as well as political activists Mildred Wickson and Sue Hein. Several BNC members who had moved from Brownsville to Eastern Parkway looked upon their BNC involvement as an obligation to those less fortunate.¹⁹

The public faces of the group were Alter Landesman and Milton Goell. Landesman ran the Hebrew Educational Society (HES), the most important Jewish organization in the community. The BNC enabled Landesman to maintain the HES as a center for community activism and to connect local residents to their religious heritage, and the BNC held meetings most frequently at the HES headquarters. After four years as the first president of the group, Landesman turned his title over to Goell in 1942. Goell's interest in the BNC was shaped by his family's success in getting out of the area. His father was one of Brownsville's main builders, but the Goell family moved out of the neighborhood in the 1920s. Goell's upbringing was dramatically different from the typical Brownsville youth: he graduated from Harvard in 1925, received a law degree from St. John's University, and later received a Ph.D. from Yeshiva University. Goell's law practice was located in downtown Brooklyn, but he also owned property within Brownsville. He wrote at least seven books, novels and memoirs, including *Tramping through Palestine*, *To All You Ladies, America—The Fourth Decade*, and *The Wall That Is My Skin*, and he also published several poems.²⁰

Despite or perhaps because of his comfortable economic situation, Goell was active in many leftist causes. He was a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, was active in political parties that opposed the Tammany machine, and was nominated by the American Labor Party to the city council in 1945. Each of the pamphlets produced by the BNC in the 1940s was written by Goell, and he used each not only to advocate for resources in Brownsville but also as a political platform to promote the themes of government responsibility for the poor and equal rights. The involvement of men like Goell gave the BNC entry into many of the corridors of power in New York City and provided the BNC with the resources necessary to publicize its activities. In addition, a publicity campaign preceded each BNC publication to ensure that it received attention from media and government officials.²¹

Under the bylaws of the BNC, all organizations of fifty or more persons "in good standing and interested in the civic affairs of Brownsville, without regard to creed, race, sex or political party," were eligible for membership. Each member organization was allowed to elect two delegates to the BNC. Despite these democratic provisions, in its first decade the BNC was hardly a grassroots organization. It claimed in 1940 that its twenty-eight constituent groups represented more than five thousand people, but these resi-

dents rarely participated in the group's deliberations. They were only called upon when the BNC wanted a large crowd at one of its rallies. Local elites ran the BNC and pushed their own agenda, and the primary concern of the group was to bring new government and private resources to Brownsville. During these years the BNC lobbied for slum clearance, public housing, health and recreational buildings, and other programs that they thought would make Brownsville more attractive. All of these programs would certainly improve life for Brownsville's poor, but they would also, BNC leaders hoped, keep residents in the neighborhood, maintain or increase property values, and support local businesses and institutions like the HES. Thus the first major activity of the BNC was its effort to secure slum clearance and public housing in the neighborhood.²²

The Case for Public Housing in Brownsville

New York was a pioneer in the development of affordable housing, with innovations such as cooperative housing and not-for-profit housing corporations that promoters hoped would solve the housing crisis for the city's working class. Although many of these projects were successful, housing advocates realized that without government support they would never be able to meet the enormous demand for affordable housing, and they pushed for expanded federal housing programs during the New Deal. New York's liberals were behind the funding of the Public Works Administration (PWA) Housing Program in 1933 and the creation of the U.S. Housing Authority in 1937. The first units completed by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the First Houses, were built on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1935. Over the next six years, nearly thirteen thousand units of public housing were under construction or completed.²³

From the commencement of the New York public housing program, Brownsville leaders worked to secure a project for their own neighborhood. City officials selected the oldest section of Brownsville as a future site for public housing in 1934, along with Williamsburg and Red Hook, but by the end of the decade, Brownsville alone lacked plans for such a project. This neglect brought protests from many area leaders, and State Senator Jacob Schwartzwald complained to the USHA that Brownsville was "sorely in need of slum clearance projects" and requested that the situation be rectified. Representatives of the businesses in the area also pushed for the clearance of Brownsville's worst slums, arguing that "it is disgraceful to permit

human beings to inhabit them, for they are breeders of disease and should be forthwith demolished."²⁴

Although NYCHA officials acknowledged the need in Brownsville, the amount of money allocated for public housing was small, and the eligible areas were numerous. The lack of funds, Assistant Director George Brown argued, "makes it incumbent upon us to attempt to alleviate the worst conditions throughout the City." He told the BNC's attorney that because Brooklyn already had two projects, one in Williamsburg, and the other under construction in Red Hook, "you can readily see that attention must also be given to other sections of the City which up to now have received no consideration." For the short-term, at least, Brownsville had to wait for public housing. In the spring of 1940 the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, with the support of other local groups, increased the pressure on local government through a well-organized campaign for public housing. The group commissioned drawings of buildings, held community meetings to describe the housing program and solicit support for it, and met with city officials to lobby for selection. The most important facet of this campaign was the publication of "Brownsville Must Have Public Housing," a pamphlet written by Milton Goell.²⁵

In cities like Chicago and Detroit, and even in certain parts of New York, white working-class neighborhoods responded violently to the development of public housing during the 1940s. Even in its early years, many whites identified public housing as housing for blacks, and they believed that the development of these projects would result in the "invasion" of their neighborhoods. By contrast, Brownsville lobbied hard for public housing. Such activism fit comfortably within the ideology of Brownsville residents, because, unlike other working-class groups that opposed any type of "socialistic programs," Brownsville Jews believed that government should intervene when the market failed. Many Brownsville business leaders looked upon public housing as a way to stabilize the community and maintain a substantial white population in the neighborhood. Upwardly mobile residents had been leaving Brownsville for two decades, and even though the depression slowed this process, local leaders were justifiably worried about the future of their neighborhood. Housing advocates did not have the financial wherewithal to develop a private project, so they looked to the government to clear the dilapidated area.²⁶

Slum clearance was just as attractive to Brownsville activists like Goell, Landesman, and Atkins as were new projects. Liberals all, they philosophically supported the program, but they also knew that the projects had to be

better than the rotted buildings they would replace. One-third of the residents of the slum clearance area were black, and race certainly played a role in the considerations of BNC leaders. But the racial motivations of the BNC leaders were more complicated than those of their counterparts in other communities. BNC leaders believed strongly, and stated frequently, that all people deserved a decent home, regardless of color. They also knew that the area's black residents lived in the worst housing in the neighborhood. Goell and other BNC leaders expected blacks and whites to live together in the new projects, functioning as models for interracial living. Most practically, unlike other neighborhoods where projects might bring the introduction of new races, blacks were already in Brownsville. They occupied housing "that no one else wanted." Public housing could serve as a savior to both blacks and whites in the area and prevent the expansion of blacks into the surrounding neighborhood. The slum clearance area had the highest crime rate in the neighborhood, and if BNC leaders did not imply that blacks were the cause of the problem, they certainly believed that blacks were partially responsible. Progressive philosophy held that "environmental problems" created crime, delinquency, and health problems. New housing could cure these problems and prevent them from spreading into other areas (that is, those areas inhabited by whites).²⁷

The purpose of "Brownsville Must Have Public Housing" was to rally the population to increase pressure on city officials and to use government statistics to make the case for urban renewal. Like other areas that received public housing, the pamphlet argued, much of Brownsville fit the definition of a slum. The clearance area—the northeast section of the neighborhood—abounded "in shacks and hovels which were flimsy, ill-designed, and badly equipped to start with, and have grown tenfold worse with age, neglect, and poor management." According to Goell, homes lacked adequate light, air, sunshine, space, water, heat, safety, and sanitary facilities, and the Brownsville slum area was filled with "dirty, bad-smelling, germ-ridden structures, abutting upon crowded, ugly, barren streets." These areas deteriorated even more quickly during the depression. Most of Brownsville's landlords, Goell noted, were working-class or middle-class people who owned only a few properties and were forced to abandon them or see them foreclosed when they could not meet their mortgage payments. The lucky ones able to hold onto their buildings were unable to afford the necessary maintenance or improvements. As a result, much of Brownsville's housing stock was uninhabitable.²⁸

The majority of the clearance area's housing stock was more than

twenty-five years old. These apartments were built with low-quality materials, and "construction originally was in large part slap-together, speculative, jerry-built." Many of the buildings had long since deteriorated, held together only by the "meanest kind of tinkering and fixing." According to the 1934 Real Property Inventory, twenty-five thousand Brownsville residents lived in improperly heated units, more than fifteen thousand lived in apartments that lacked running hot water, more than thirty-seven hundred had no bathing facilities, and almost two thousand people had to use outdoor toilet facilities. The worst conditions were in the designated slum area. Goell showed that 56 percent of the buildings were more than thirty-five years old, and that 87 percent were in fair to poor condition. Approximately four hundred units in the slum area were vacant. The fact that such substandard housing was the only shelter affordable to so many people, especially black families, supported the argument that the private market could not provide housing to Brownsville's poor. "The hard fact remains that, in general, neither the white people nor the Negroes dwelling in the housing zone can afford to pay for adequate private housing," argued Goell. Private enterprise, according to the BNC, could not provide for these people, and it was "the duty of our democratic society to help provide housing for those in the lowest income brackets."²⁹

Goell argued that the new buildings would create a better environment for local residents. "It has long been common knowledge among social and health workers that this section has been spawning anti-social elements entirely out of proportion to its population. The history of the community, its economy and social complexity, and its deplorable housing facilities, have all made for a concentration of anti-social factors which our society must now obliterate without hesitancy or delay, in self-defense, and for the physical, moral and economic health of our city." Brownsville activists looked to slum clearance and public housing development not only to improve the housing stock of the area but also to revitalize the social fabric of the community. They expected the same neighborhood transformation that they believed developments in Williamsburg and First Houses had caused. In its research, the BNC found that the Williamsburg Houses experienced only one case of delinquency among the 1,622 families. Public housing, Goell argued, would provide not only adequate shelter but also "a new life" to its residents, giving them "cheery, comfortable, healthful homes which will have a tonic effect upon their bodies, their minds, their souls. . . . The playgrounds, municipal health centers, domestic science classes, musical organizations, cultural clubs, forums, and classes, which would no doubt be

found in a public housing project in Brownsville, would bring physical, social, and intellectual improvements to a larger part of Brownsville," said Goell.³⁰

According to Goell, public housing would assist the whole community by eliminating crime, disease, and "other evils of the slums" and thus increasing property values. Real estate prices had so declined, he argued, "that it is almost impossible to get fresh mortgage money here." Most important to the businessmen who made up much of the BNC, the project would "pep up" local commerce, which was hurt not only by the depression but also by the decline of the area in general. Goell complained that "those inhabitants of Brownsville who can possibly do so, forsake this region as soon as they can, to find better homes and better environment for their children and for themselves."³¹

Public officials acknowledged the concerted effort of BNC leaders, but in reality, housing planners were well aware of Brownsville's problems. Scarcity of funding, not lack of interest, delayed the approval of a public housing project for the area. In the fall of 1940, the federal government al-



Figure 9. The Brownsville Houses. Courtesy Municipal Archives, Department of Records and Information Services, City of New York.

located additional funds, and the New York City Housing Authority announced that Brownsville would be the next area cleared. The war delayed the project for several years, but the Brownsville Houses, the first of several projects to be built in the neighborhood, opened in 1948.³²

In addition to its efforts to secure public housing for Brownsville, the BNC worked to provide other resources for the neighborhood. In 1942, the organization published its second pamphlet, "For Better Health in Brownsville," which described the BNC's plan to improve the health problems that had plagued the community for decades. In this pamphlet, the group made its case to local government for a new, state-of-the-art health facility to replace the small existing center that could not possibly meet the demands of the residents. Illness rates among Brownsville residents exceeded the district average in several categories, with incidents of tuberculosis, gonorrhea, and infant mortality almost double the borough average. To secure a new facility, the BNC launched a well-organized lobbying campaign that included press releases to local media, several large rallies in the area, a letter-writing campaign to local politicians, and increased pressure on city health officials. All these efforts emphasized the findings in the pamphlet "For Better Health in Brownsville" and argued that the area deserved increased attention. As a result of this campaign, the New York City Health Department approved the Brownsville Health Center in 1945. Goell described it as a "modern, well-equipped building close to the heart of its [Brownsville's] worst slum area" that would become a "health mecca."³³

Like the BNC's battle for public housing, its efforts on behalf of a health facility were useful but not vital. The New York City Health Department had planned a health center in Brownsville for several years, and when the city's budgetary restraints loosened, they moved ahead with the project. BNC leaders and Brownsville residents, however, believed that they were responsible for securing these facilities. Regardless, the health center, coupled with the public housing project, greatly increased community optimism and motivated BNC members to work for other neighborhood resources. Unfortunately, after World War II, as demands on city agencies from other neighborhoods increased, the BNC's ability to secure needed facilities declined.

The Shaping of a Postwar Community

Victory in World War II nurtured a feeling of optimism in a majority of Americans. The overwhelming sacrifices made by millions of citizens that

enabled the United States to defeat its enemies convinced Americans that the nation could overcome any obstacle. Americans returned from the war confident that they could confront and conquer domestic concerns such as poverty and racism just as they had defeated Japan and Germany. In Brownsville, activists feverishly prepared their plans for a time when resources could be devoted to local concerns. However, although many individuals benefited from the economic expansion that began in the years after the war, Brownsville residents quickly learned that the neighborhood problems they hoped to cure remained intractable. Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Brownsville organizations demanded city services to fight neighborhood problems such as juvenile delinquency, poor sanitation, and deteriorating schools. In each of these areas, government and private institutions ignored the requests or made only superficial attempts to solve them.³⁴

During World War II, government officials at all levels took the opportunity to think about, and plan for, postwar America. Much of the planning was promoted by economists such as Alvin Hansen, who worried that the end of the war would bring the return of the depression. Keynesians argued that "public works" projects were needed to employ returning servicemen and prevent economic collapse. Yet other leaders looked upon the war as a turning point in the organization of American society. The success of the government-regulated and privately operated war mobilization convinced them that America had accepted the need for long-range planning. Across the country, cities, chambers of commerce, and other institutions prepared "master plans" for the future. In New York City, progressive elites promoted the "Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs," a broad proposal for new highways, bridges, public works, and a reshaping of the city's industrial network. Mayor La Guardia released his own "Post-War Public Works Plan," a program designed by Robert Moses to continue the redevelopment of the city. The "postwar plan" had little of the grand scope of the New York regional plan but rather focused on basic needs in city neighborhoods, offering new schools, parks, and street improvements. Neither of these proposals envisioned much new development in Brownsville.³⁵

Not content to be left out of the postwar planning, in 1944 the Brownsville Neighborhood Council presented "A Post-War Plan for Brownsville," a grand scheme for the redevelopment of the neighborhood. The BNC program included demands for a nursery school, an indoor produce market, a new post office, transit improvements, the covering of the Long Island Railroad trench, public housing in eastern Brownsville, development of the shore in nearby Canarsie, zoning restrictions on develop-

ment, middle-income housing, new playgrounds, a new recreation center, and a casework center. The postwar plan was a well-thought-out wish list of facilities needed in Brownsville and a request for clearance of decrepit housing and warehouses. Most of the requests expressed reasonable desires for additional facilities that had long been needed in the densely crowded neighborhood. Taken together, however, the proposals would have required tens of millions of dollars for a relatively small section of a huge city. Through the pamphlet and the accompanying campaign, the BNC aimed to ensure that Brownsville received adequate consideration in the city government's postwar plans. "Brownsville does not wish to be one of the parts where nothing, or not much, will be done. The purpose of this brochure is to set forth what Brownsville lacks, and to propose improvements which would make this world a better place in which to live, in the part of which is closest to the people of Brownsville," the introduction stated. Brownsville's postwar plan, if adopted, would dramatically reshape the neighborhood, but it received little attention outside the community.³⁶

In the postwar plan, BNC leaders focused in particular on services to the poor. To complement the recently approved health facility, they argued that a social service center was needed. Brownsville had only one center providing welfare assistance, the Hebrew Educational Society, and its programs were oversubscribed. The new social service center, according to the pamphlet, would provide casework services to individuals and families and would serve as "one stop shopping" for all the social service needs of Brownsville's poor. Such a center would "facilitate the organization of a joint referral service, where people in need could be expedited—across the hall instead of across the city—to the agency best able to handle their problem." As a result, the large number of problem families in the Brownsville community would receive intervention early enough to provide the most benefit.³⁷

BNC leaders also lobbied for redevelopment projects to complement the approved public housing. To provide more space for recreation, the plan proposed that the Long Island Railroad trench be enclosed and a park constructed above it. The tracks were a particular trouble spot for Brownsville youths, many of whom were injured or killed while playing along them. Five children were electrocuted in a six-month period during 1946. One Brownsville resident stated that during the seventeen years she lived in the neighborhood, at least one child was killed every summer. This proposal would eliminate a major blight on the community and erase a significant barrier between Brownsville and the more middle-class East New York. BNC leaders hoped that the park would also enhance real estate values in

the surrounding area by causing the demolition of several unsightly factories and warehouses. This area could then become residential. Understanding that urban renewal required the razing of substantial parts of the neighborhood, the BNC also advocated the rehabilitation of other areas. Not all of Brownsville was a slum, Goell argued: "There are many happy memories, there are many valuable institutions, there is much worth saving." Using the medical language typical of the period, he said, "Let us cut out the cancer, let us scrape away the disease, so that the healthy tissues may live, and the bad be succeeded by good." Already cognizant of the attractions and problems of planned communities then going up on Long Island and in other parts of the borough, Goell concluded, "Let us not, in other words, make a brand-new, restless, canned community."³⁸

Activists hoped that public resources would attract private dollars. Specifically, they envisioned programs to keep homeowners and landlords investing in their properties. "It is hardly economically sound," said Goell, "for an individual owner to improve his house . . . when the rest of the neighborhood remains blighted." The BNC proposed allowing owners to pool their resources and, with the support of local banks and insurance companies, to rehabilitate whole blocks at a time. The postwar plan hoped New York's recently passed Redevelopment Act would create cooperative housing out of blocks of tenements. Government would finance rehabilitation of the buildings and the landscaping of their backyards into gardens and play space. Public assistance, Goell argued, would give "enlightened property owners the chance to carry along obstructionist owners, even against their will." These efforts were important, BNC leaders believed, because Brownsville would play an important role in the housing of returning war veterans. "There are no available good dwelling units to be had in New York City," the pamphlet asserted, and nowhere for servicemen and women to go "if they want to start anew." With government support, Brownsville's tenements could be rehabilitated to provide much-needed housing. Combined with new public improvements outlined by the BNC, "it would pay private enterprise to erect new buildings, because in an improved area the owners could obtain a fair return on their investments." The pamphlet proposed the redevelopment of several blocks that "could be developed into fine thoroughfares with spacious medium-rent apartment houses, the same as in other good residential areas."³⁹

The overarching goal of the postwar plan was to modernize Brownsville and make it attractive enough to hold onto its existing population while also drawing newcomers to the area. Perceptions of the neighborhood were extremely important to these leaders, and they responded to every disparag-

ing remark made by local papers or city leaders. The businessmen on Pitkin Avenue were also concerned about the images projected by two remnants of the early community—the open food market on Belmont Avenue just to the south and the pushcart peddlers who patrolled the neighborhood. Both the market and the pushcarts contributed greatly to the unsanitary conditions in the area. Brownsville merchants wanted their area to remain competitive with other commercial strips and felt that modernization was vital to this goal. To eliminate these "blights" on the community, the plan proposed an enclosed market, on Belmont Avenue, similar to those constructed on the Lower East Side and in other communities during the 1920s and 1930s. At this market, Belmont Avenue merchants and peddlers would rent space from the public authority that owned the building. Such a plan, argued Goell, would "make Brownsville streets more fit for what they are, thoroughfares, not open air stores." The market would not, the pamphlet asserted, put peddlers out of business but would instead "give them facilities to conduct business in a clean and orderly way." At the same time, the market would increase property values "for pushcarts do not lend desirability or attractiveness to the buildings in front of which they park." And, of course, it would help established businesses, "for storekeepers find it hard to keep up with competitors who have no rent to pay." BNC leaders seemed more concerned with the appearance of the open-air market and the competition provided by vendors than with the provision of inexpensive food or the livelihood of the vendors themselves.⁴⁰

At the end of the postwar plan, Goell quickly listed many other facilities requested by the community, including parking facilities for Pitkin Avenue, improved sanitation, and upgraded schools, police stations, and fire stations. The pamphlet made no estimate of the cost of these improvements, but instead argued that it would be more expensive not to make them. "It is generally recognized now that slums are fertile breeding places for crime, delinquency, immorality, disease and premature death, and that they are destructive of public safety and virtue," Goell asserted. Poverty, of course, Goell argued, was responsible for the slums, "but till we remove that ultimate cause by giving slum dwellers the opportunity to acquire competencies, let us endeavor to remove the vicious conditions which may be the immediate cause of the evils." In addition, the proposed improvements would increase property values, business prospects, and therefore tax revenues. Most importantly, "people and their money [would] remain in or come to Brownsville, instead of going away from it, as they have been doing for decades."⁴¹

The postwar plan was a nuanced attempt to create a modern Browns-

ville while giving consideration to the needs of the old. The proposal received a ringing endorsement from the editors of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, which called the plan "inspiring" and noted that Brownsville was "entitled to more such recognition than it has received in the past." The BNC leaders wanted to attract middle-class residents, but they sought at the same time to provide for the poor. Local activists did not see a contradiction in these goals. The proposal revealed a sincere concern for the welfare of the poor, but it was certainly cognizant of the needs of businesses and landlords for profit. In many ways the document represents the high point of American optimism. The United States could defeat Hitler, and it could defeat poverty at home. With organization, Americans could provide housing, recreation, and services for the poor, and build middle-class housing at the same time. This optimism was short-lived. For the next ten years, BNC leaders would refer to the "Post-War Plan" in their contacts with government officials, but none of the proposals made in the plan came to fruition. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Brownsville residents would battle government intransigence in pursuit of their goals of community revitalization.⁴²

Brownsville in the Postwar Years

After devoting so much of their energies to the war effort, many Americans turned away from public affairs in the postwar years. Within Brownsville, many residents celebrated the return of family members, and they welcomed the opportunity to take advantage of the recently passed GI Bill. Many local veterans used government funding to become the first in their families to attend college, and hundreds of residents took advantage of VA loans to purchase new houses. These programs provided significant benefits to Brownsville families, but they did not help the community as a whole, because most participants did not remain in the neighborhood. In the late 1940s, many people, including Doc Baroff, moved to new developments in areas like Sheepshead Bay and Canarsie. Many bought houses while others rented, but all dramatically improved their living conditions. Like many activists, Baroff continued to work in Brownsville after he moved out, but activists' ties to the neighborhood began to weaken as opportunities became available to them elsewhere.⁴³

The BNC continued to be active after the war, but its focus shifted from lobbying for significant new investments in the area to promoting the maintenance of existing institutions. After producing three significant pamphlets between 1940 and 1945 on the needs of Brownsville, the BNC pub-

lished nothing in the fifteen years to follow. Some of its leaders remained on the BNC board but shifted their focus outside of the neighborhood. Board member Abe Stark, for example, who later led the Brownsville Boys Club through a significant expansion, began a political ascent that would lead him to the borough presidency in the 1950s. Milton Goell, who lost a race for city council in 1945, became increasingly active in citywide leftist politics. Staffers of the Brooklyn Council for Social Planning had been hopeful that the BNC would provide a model for organization in a working-class community, but by 1947 BCSP secretary Flora Davidson "felt that they had not been entirely successful" with the group and argued that the BNC had "become more and more concerned with political matters and less with social welfare." But the organization did not disappear. In fact, the BNC experienced a significant increase in activity during the early 1950s. However, the years immediately following the war were a transitional period when the original leadership pulled away and a new cadre of leaders was yet to emerge. Consequently, much of the energy generated by the group's early successes was lost.⁴⁴

Other local organizations did not survive the postwar retrenchment. The Brownsville CIO Council was an early casualty of the fight against Communism. In New York, Communist-run organizations—including the Transport Workers Union, the Fur and Leather Workers, and the Clothing Workers—were leading forces in Industrial Union Councils. These organizations provided a powerful political forum for Communist leaders, and the activities of local Communists raised concerns within the CIO's national leadership. In the midst of the anticommunist hysteria of the late 1940s, national CIO leaders purged Communists from their leadership, and local IUCs were often battlegrounds for these intra-union conflicts. In 1946, the CIO convention adopted rules for IUCs that directed them to follow the policy positions handed down from CIO national offices in Washington. These rules also prohibited local CIO councils from associating with organizations (such as the Negro Labor Council) that were not approved by the CIO. In 1948, New York's IUCs and other leftist IUCs battled with the national organization over such issues as support for the Marshall Plan and for presidential candidate Henry Wallace. In response, anticommunist factions in the New York Council charged Communist leaders with numerous rules infractions, and many were expelled. The result of these battles was that many IUCs lost their leaders and began to decline. By 1950, Brownsville's CIO Council was no longer active, and Brownsville's connection to the labor movement declined.⁴⁵

The demise of the Brownsville CIO also accelerated the decline of

other advocacy groups, particularly the Brownsville Tenants Council. The tenants' movement was in some ways a victim of its success. After World War II, a dramatic increase in New York City housing costs brought about protest from voters, and city politicians were forced to pass one of the nation's most comprehensive rent-control laws. These new laws, which protected tenants from exorbitant rent increases, combined with the slow easing of housing shortages for middle-income persons and weakened support for tenants organizations. Many tenants groups ceased their grassroots efforts and became part of the public/private rental system, serving as mediators between tenants and housing providers rather than as agitators. While thousands of residents continued to need assistance in securing and maintaining affordable housing, many community members who were active in tenants unions found new accommodations in newly developed areas of Brooklyn and in public housing projects. The Brownsville Tenants Council lasted longer than most organizations, but it failed to address the problems of the new, predominantly black residents. The decline of local organizations left Brownsville without the strong infrastructure necessary to demand government resources. After World War II, as many neighborhoods battled for the attention of city agencies, Brownsville was a low priority.⁴⁶

Receiving increasing attention, however, was Brownsville's rising rate of juvenile delinquency. During World War II, concerns about "wayward youth" intensified across the country. Many civic leaders worried that, with their fathers abroad and their mothers at work in the factories, thousands of teens were wandering the streets without oversight. Social workers talked forebodingly about the lack of control exhibited by such youths, and this resulted in increasing police attention to American teenagers. Within Brownsville, juvenile delinquency had long been a concern, but anxiety escalated during and after the war. In 1942, the Brooklyn Federation of Jewish Charities announced the opening of a new recreation center focusing on local teens and "calculated to save youth from the dislocating effects the war has had upon the day-to-day life around them." And in 1944, the Brooklyn Council for Social Planning decided that its pilot project to combat delinquency would be located in the Brownsville-East New York area. Brownsville leaders gave mixed responses to outside involvement in Brownsville affairs. While leaders like Goell frequently noted that juvenile delinquency, caused by bad housing and lack of recreation, was a serious problem, others like Abe Stark worried about the image of the neighborhood. In response to the announcement of the pilot project, Stark complained that Brownsville was being "singled-out for finger pointing."

Brownsville, he stated, was not "a setting for 'Green Pastures,' but neither is it a place out of Dante's Inferno." Stigmatizing the neighborhood was unfair, he continued, to the area's "good and honest people to be asked to suffer the indignities that have been heaped upon them by thoughtless people." Officials from the BCSP argued that Brownsville was chosen because it was racially and ethnically diverse and therefore a good test case, not because it was worse than other areas. Brownsville's juvenile delinquency rate was, however, among the highest in the borough.⁴⁷

After the war, gang violence and juvenile arrests in the area increased, and Brownsville became a major focus of the newly created New York Youth Board, the city agency given the responsibility to commence a "War on Juvenile Delinquency" across the city. In 1949, the accidental shooting of a fifteen-year-old local boy named Stanley Fox brought additional attention to the area. Fox, a member of the "Black Hats," was killed by a gun that discharged while his group prepared to "rumble" with the rival "Bristol Street Boys." Fox's family and teachers at Public School 156 argued that the group was more a social club than a gang, but the newspaper articles that followed the shooting noted that the Black Hats had a significant arsenal, typical of the dramatic rise in gun possession among the local youths. A Brooklyn assistant district attorney stated that many weapons were sold in comic books, while others noted that the boys used weapons brought home by their veteran fathers and brothers.⁴⁸

Stark and Goell responded to the shooting by insisting that Brownsville was "a nice place with a fine community spirit and with thousands of fine upstanding boys and girls." Whatever juvenile problems existed were caused by the deterioration of local housing and the failure of the city to provide recreation opportunities. Stark further asserted that the bad name given to the neighborhood by local papers was responsible for the juvenile problem. According to Stark, area youths "were developing various types of complexes because this neighborhood has a reputation . . . as a breeding ground for crime." Milton Goell added that neighborhood improvements would solve the delinquency problem. "Incidents occur in all communities," Goell argued, and would occur in any area "where families are crowded together and youngsters are deprived of proper facilities for wholesome recreation." Brownsville leaders were justifiably concerned about the impact of outsider perceptions on the neighborhood. In the spring of 1948, the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported that most insurance firms had "blackballed" Brownsville, refusing to issue new policies to local businesses and apartment owners. One company flatly stated that it was "staying out of the Brownsville area." Another company admitted avoiding Brownsville be-

cause "petty crimes are on the rampage." Insurers further argued that Brownsville residents were "claims conscious" and that the number of small claims filed made the area a bad investment.⁴⁹

Local leaders and public officials struggled to address youth problems. The New York City Youth Board initiated a program that sent young adults to work with gangs in their neighborhoods, and it created a referral service for concerned schoolteachers. However, in general, most leaders relied on the traditional philosophy that recreation would cure delinquency. The Youth Board provided workers and equipment for four summer play streets, which were blocked to traffic. Local activists called for a more "integrated program" of social work, recreation, and better housing. Mildred Wickson, head of the Brownsville Tenants Union, argued that "delinquent landlords and delinquent national state and city agencies should take their share of blame for juvenile delinquency," but politicians ignored broader plans like those proposed by the BNC.⁵⁰

Many people put their hopes in the expanding program of the Brownsville Boys Club (BBC). As an agency successfully working with youth, the BBC received increasing support from social welfare organizations like the BSCP in the last years of the 1940s. In 1946, local businessman and politician Abe Stark began to support the group, and he persuaded the boys to incorporate. By 1947, the BBC was affiliated with the Boys Clubs of America and had a new board of directors made up of local businessmen and politicians. Through the political connections of Stark, Governor Thomas Dewey, Mayor William O'Dwyer, Borough President John Cashmore, and dozens of other city leaders became BBC sponsors. Funds raised by the board enabled the BBC to purchase new equipment and transformed the organization from a volunteer institution to one with staff and offices. The change, however, was not completely smooth. Since its founding, the BBC had prided itself on the philosophy of "No Adult Control," and the bylaws of the organization specified that no one older than twenty-one could be a member. The changes in the structure of the organization were not welcomed by all BBC members, but the new board did not interfere in the group's daily operations. Despite their greater dependence on adult financiers in the late 1940s, the BBC continued to be run by the teenage members. Three alumni members were elected by a representative council to sit on the board of directors, and they fought to protect the prerogatives of the teenagers. And Doc Baroff, then in college, became a BBC "professional group worker," at a salary of \$110 per month.⁵¹

The late 1940s brought not only a growth of the organization's budget but also a change in its orientation. Many of the founders, who were in their

twenties by this time, returned from the war with a desire to remake their community. In 1947, BBC founder Norman Goroff wrote that the goal of the club was "not to keep the boys off the streets, but to make the streets attractive and safe." These young social workers felt that it was necessary to move away from sports as the focus of the BBC's attention, and to place more emphasis on the educational, social, and economic needs of the boys. This change in philosophy helped the BBC attract greater support and acclaim from other welfare organizations.⁵²

Irving Levine was one of this group of socially minded BBC leaders. He joined the club in 1941 at the age of eleven. One of Baroff's protégés, Levine became the president of the club's Junior Division. By 1947, he was in charge of the BBC recreation program, and the members elected him president in 1950. When he entered Brooklyn College in 1947, Levine was more interested in working at the BBC than in his studies. "The Brownsville Boys Club for me was all-consuming," he remembered. While Levine was originally attracted to the sports programs the club offered, over time he came to see that the BBC could be a means to a better life for Brownsville's poor. Levine, who graduated from New York University, became a paid worker in 1950 and went on to a long career in race relations. Although Levine and other BBC members believed that good jobs and housing were as important, if not more important, than recreational opportunities to the development of Brownsville's youth, Abe Stark and other members of the BBC board continued to endorse a traditional "juvenile program" of recreation and tutoring. In response to several gang-related killings in the neighborhood, Stark insisted that "the way to fight 'boy gangsterism' was for the city to finance new recreational facilities." The BBC board did not share the loftier goals of its staff, and in the early 1950s conflict between the groups escalated.⁵³

While increasing juvenile delinquency and declining infrastructure concerned many Brownsville activists, for most residents the neighborhood had changed little over the decade. Many Brownsville institutions continued to function without concern for future neighborhood transformations, but Brownsville synagogues continued the numerical decline that would accelerate in the 1950s. The 1939 WPA Survey tallied seventy-three Brownsville synagogues; in 1951, the BNC counted fifty-one in the area. Several of the area's oldest congregations, including Thilim Keshet Israel, saw their buildings condemned to make way for the development of the Brownsville Houses. The congregants of Thilim Keshet, still several hundred strong, merged with Brownsville's other aging synagogue, Ohav Shalom. Other congregations did not continue services, choosing instead to disband. Many

of their members had already left the neighborhood, and those remaining found other synagogues.⁵⁴

The Hebrew Educational Society, however, maintained its large program of activities. In 1940, the HES celebrated its fiftieth year of operation, and it created a new program, in a separate facility, called the Young People's Fellowship to serve the area's young adults. HES staff were concerned about the increasing number of "Cellar Clubs" in the area. The clubhouse of the fictional "Amboy Dukes" in Irving Shulman's novel was more organized and sinister than most real clubs, but these informal associations of teens and young adults did often introduce members to alcohol and drugs, and incidences of sexual assault were common. The Fellowship program employed young social workers who sought to direct Brownsville youths toward more productive avenues. In 1948, approximately one thousand young people participated in weekly programs that included dance, theater, and arts and crafts, as well as socials, films, and dances planned specifically for them. Members of the Fellowship produced a monthly journal and governed themselves through an executive council that reported to the HES board. In their annual report to the board, Fellowship staff bragged that the program had provided opportunities to gain "knowledge and respect for American Jewish ideals and culture . . . a larger community perspective . . . development of leadership potentialities . . . and a permissive atmosphere to meet the young adult's needs for exclusiveness apart from other age groups." Also concerned about the expanding aged community in Brownsville, the HES staff in 1946 created the "Golden Age Club," which provided fellowship and activities for seniors. Like the Young People's Fellowship, the Golden Age Club sought to keep area seniors engaged in the community in which they had spent their lives. Members paid yearly dues of one dollar to participate in daily activities that included films, dances, and theater. More than four hundred people took part in 1948.⁵⁵

Other groups focused on the broader political needs of Brownsville residents. Jews continued to face racism and discrimination in the 1940s, and the rise of Hitler abroad was not the only concern of New York's Jewish community. Within the United States, Father Charles Coughlin and other anti-Semitic clerics proselytized against Jews, and synagogue vandalism occurred all too frequently. Even in an insular community like Brownsville, where Jews were the majority, anti-Semitism was a fact of life. In response to the continued discrimination, Brooklyn Jewish activists organized the Brooklyn Jewish Community Council (BJCC). The purpose of the group were to combat the "false stereotypes concerning different racial, religious and nationality groups" by "creating better intergroup understanding," and

to nurture Jewish traditions through education. In addition, the BJCC sought to "help member organizations with their cultural programs, and thus stimulate and enrich the cultural and organizational life of the community." With funding from the United Jewish Appeal and other national organizations, the BJCC provided organizational support and literature to local groups for special events, and acted as a clearinghouse for Brooklyn's Jewish community. BJCC also investigated incidents of anti-Semitism, and filed fifty-three reports on attacks against Jews between September 1946 and June 1947.⁵⁶

The BJCC also sponsored local councils to coordinate its activities. The first groups were located in Williamsburg and Flatbush, but in 1943 BJCC leaders met with Alter Landesman, Milton Goell, and other local activists to create the Brownsville-East New York Jewish Community Council. During 1946-47, the Brownsville-East New York branch created a Sunday School program for unaffiliated adults, organized special events at the Children's Library to celebrate Jewish Book Month, and held a concert at the HES for Jewish Music Month. The local branch also sponsored a "Brotherhood in Action" rally to support pending state antidiscrimination legislation, and participated in the reorganization of the Brownsville Boys Club. A 1948 BJCC evaluation concluded that, unlike many areas where the local affiliate was unresponsive to the guidance of the council leadership, the Brownsville-East New York council had been very active. The BJCC executive director asserted that under his guidance, Brownsville Jewish organizations had "become more willing to submerge their individual differences in favor of over-all planning for the welfare of the total community." Throughout the 1950s, the BJCC and its Brownsville affiliate continued to support the needs of the Jewish community.⁵⁷

Brownsville at midcentury suffered from a variety of problems, including decrepit housing, deteriorating schools, persistent juvenile delinquency, and troubling indices of disease. But residents were not lacking in hope, and Brownsville activists continued to work to better conditions within the neighborhood. The leaders of Brownsville's diverse and vibrant advocacy community, in particular the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, the Brownsville Boys Club, the Brownsville CIO, the Hebrew Educational Society, and the Brooklyn Jewish Community Council, all believed that postwar Brownsville would continue to serve the working-class Jewish population that had occupied the neighborhood for half a century. None of them were prepared to deal with the significant changes that the neighborhood would experience in the decade to follow.



Figure 10. Children on Brownsville street corner, 1940s. Courtesy Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library.

3

Blacks and Whites in the Optimistic Years

Reverend Boise Dent was born in Virginia but moved to Brooklyn in 1936 to become pastor of the First Baptist Church of Brownsville. Unlike many black ministers of the time, Dent was more interested in the practical concerns of his parishioners than their spiritual needs. "He takes his religion to the people, avoiding formalized dogma and creeds," wrote one *New York Amsterdam News* reporter. While the church grew under his leadership, Dent left First Baptist in a conflict with some members of the congregation. The deacons, according to Dent, were worried that he was spending too much time with the troubled youths of Brooklyn, and they fired him. Dent then established Tabernacle Baptist Church, and during the 1940s, he was a leader of Brooklyn's black community and extremely active in Brooklyn politics. From 1948 until his death in 1951, Dent served on the board of the BNC (and was chair of the Recreation Committee), as well as on the board of the Brownsville Boys Club. Dent was also a spokesperson for the BNC's efforts to improve sanitation in the neighborhood, and he organized several congregations for this effort. His main focus, however, was helping

children through recreational and educational activities. Dent created the Brownsville Neighborhood Interracial Community Center, a storefront operation on Livonia Avenue, and worked to expand the BBC program. As a leading minister, Dent was often called upon to intercede for youths who had been arrested, and he had many Brownsville youngsters released into his custody. According to the *New York Amsterdam News*, there was "scarcely a judge in Brooklyn that he doesn't know." Dent worked frequently with white leaders in the area, particularly Milton Goell and Judge Daniel Gutman.¹

Like other ministers, Dent's position made him valuable to local politicians, and he developed close ties to businessman and political aspirant Abe Stark. "Anytime there was an important event involving Stark, Reverend Dent was there," remembered his friend and former Brownsville resident Reverend Harold Burton. Stark appointed Dent the chair of his election committee for the city council presidency in 1949 and frequently called upon him to campaign in the black community. Because of his commitment and political connections, both of which extended past Brownsville, Dent became a leading figure in black Brooklyn. In 1947, Brooklyn readers of the *New York Amsterdam News* placed him second on the list of the most important blacks in the borough, behind the director of the Carlton Avenue branch of the YMCA and ahead of the leaders of Brooklyn's largest churches. In 1949, voters made Dent the unofficial "mayor" of Brooklyn in the annual poll. However, while Dent was increasing his political power, Tabernacle Baptist struggled to survive. "We could have had a good church if he had fought for the church. A man with his stature, they would have given him a church," argued Burton. Instead, the congregation moved from storefront to storefront. While Dent's church established several youth programs during the late 1940s, each failed because of lack of funding and staff. While many in the community praised his leadership, one critic argued that Dent "had little training" and was "autocratic and jealous of his own prestige."²

Dent's efforts were emblematic of the struggles facing Brownsville activists seeking to achieve integration in the postwar years. The Brownsville Neighborhood Council, the Brownsville Boys Club, the Brownsville CIO Council, and other neighborhood groups held firmly to the liberal values—equal opportunity and respect for individual rights—that were imparted by Jewish culture and reinforced by the war effort. Each made efforts, some more significant than others, to respect, if not embrace, the increasing number of black residents in the neighborhood. In comparison to other New York neighborhoods, and those in other cities, Brownsville was a

beacon of racial harmony. Many white and black activists struggled to bridge the gaps between the groups, and they were successful in fostering interracial acceptance. Race riots were a common occurrence in 1940s America, but in Brownsville blacks and whites, for the most part, "got along." Despite significant achievements, however, the efforts of these activists were limited by the long-standing barriers between blacks and whites. While black and white youths frequently played together, interaction between adults was less common. Blacks and whites did not often meet as equals in Brownsville organizations, and blacks did not participate in many neighborhood programs.

Black-led institutions in Brownsville were limited. Only a few blacks achieved a modicum of influence, and more established groups such as the NAACP and the Urban League were not prominent in the neighborhood. Brownsville was not an integrated community, but rather two communities resolved to avoid conflict. During the 1940s, when the percentage of blacks was small, such a strategy was possible. However, this posture could not survive the demographic, political, and social changes of the postwar years. In the late 1940s, Brownsville's black population expanded, and white residents' concerns about the neighborhood, particularly crime and juvenile delinquency, increased. Black Brownsville residents also had worries, specifically discrimination in local businesses, housing problems, and police brutality. The racial aspects of neighborhood issues, however, were frequently ignored by activists.

While Brownsville civic leaders pushed for community improvements, many whites took advantage of economic growth and found better housing in new neighborhoods. The exodus began just as Robert Moses commenced his efforts to redevelop the city, a plan that resulted in the construction of four thousand units of public housing in Brownsville. Although activists had lobbied for such developments, they were unaware that New York's postwar development would reshape the city's racial geography and direct thousands of blacks and Latinos to the neighborhood. Government policies would accelerate the transformation of Brownsville.

The Emergence of Black Brownsville

While the "Great Migration" of the late 1910s and 1920s holds the title, the second wave of African-Americans which hit northern and western cities during the 1940s was significantly larger than the first. Almost two million African-Americans moved north during the decade, and 221,000

settled in New York. Brooklyn's African-American population grew to 108,623 in 1940, and it exploded in size throughout that decade. Dislocation in the South's agricultural economy and the attractions of the booming industrial sector of the North and West both shaped the migration. In New York, while many defense industries discriminated against blacks, they were able to move into many other industrial and white-collar jobs previously closed to them. Many black women moved out of domestic service and into the factories (particularly the garment trades), and they also made inroads in the clerical, communications, and sales sectors. Black men were hired for skilled positions, were promoted to foremen in some factories, and also secured jobs as trolley and train operators. But economic advancement did not mean the end to discrimination in housing and other sectors. Blacks remained excluded from many New York neighborhoods and were forced to crowd into existing black areas in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville.³

Brownsville was home to 7,842 African-Americans in 1940 (up from 5,062 in 1930), just over 6 percent of the population. The overwhelming majority of blacks lived in the oldest section of the neighborhood. In a few places, most noticeably the area's two oldest public schools, blacks were prominent. PS 125 was 60 percent black in 1940, up from 33 percent in 1933. PS 84 went from 9 percent black to 28 percent black during the same period, and PS 178 experienced a similar increase. No other local school, however, was more than 12 percent black. Much would change in the 1940s, when the black population increased dramatically. As tens of thousands of African-Americans left the South during the war, Brooklyn's black population doubled to 208,478, and several thousand of these migrants settled in Brownsville. By 1950, the black population of Brownsville had almost doubled to 14,209. According to a 1948 Brooklyn Urban League report, many blacks were lured into Brownsville by landlords "hoping to cut cost and increase profit."⁴

As they had in previous decades, blacks lived in some of the area's most decrepit housing. On Osborne Street, the wood frame houses were "roach and rat infested," according to the *New York Amsterdam News*, and had lost most of the plaster on the walls and ceilings. Mothers in the buildings reported that their children frequently received treatment for rodent bites. The dwellings built for two families were subdivided to house up to six families, and one building had almost fifty residents. Yet the tenants in these buildings paid \$55 a month—almost twice the \$30 average for the area—and were forced to undertake repairs themselves without reimbursement. The problems in the area were so severe that they raised the ire of the normally reticent editors of the *New York Amsterdam News*, which noted that



Figure 11. Mother and child in front of typical Brownsville tenement, 1940s. Black residents lived in the oldest and worst housing in the neighborhood. Courtesy Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library.

"Brownsville does not have a reputation of being a good place to live," and asked the city to investigate the situation. Fires were also frequent in these dilapidated structures. In one typical incident, a mother and her three children perished in a fire that destroyed their building on Thatford Avenue.⁵

Other than Baptist churches, black institutions failed to grow commensurate to the population. Several new churches opened during the decade, and the existing congregations continued to be the focal point of the black community. St. Paul's Baptist Church grew steadily during the decade thanks to the efforts of Adolphus Smith. Chosen to lead the congregation in 1938, a position he held until his death in 1967, Smith expanded the church's membership and facilities. By 1944, the church had several hun-

dred congregants and its small storefront building was bursting at the seams. As the oldest church in Brownsville, St. Paul's membership included many of the black community's elite. According to Samuel Freedman, "St. Paul prided itself on its middle-class members, the teachers, lawyers, principals and police." St. Paul's congregation was a proper one where "no one would dare worship without shined shoes and a choked-up tie; women wore stockings, the seams had to be straight." The success of the church and its members enabled them to expand their operations, and in 1944, despite the limited building supplies available during the war, Reverend Smith announced a plan for a new facility. After two years of fund-raising through a weekly collection (men fifty cents and women twenty-five cents), chicken dinners, bake sales, and raffles, the church gathered \$60,000, enough to buy a lot on Osborne Street and construct a proper brick church with stained-glass windows.⁶

Mount Ollie's congregation was not as genteel as St. Paul's, but it was proud of its successful members, and of its pastor, Reverend R. D. Brown. Appointed in 1939 (he would serve for forty-six years), Brown too led his church on a fund-raising drive soon after his arrival. The congregation's efforts resulted in the construction of its new building on St. Mark's Avenue in 1943. Mount Ollie quickly became the leading institution in the working-class community that occupied the houses surrounding the warehouses and factories along Brownsville's northern border. Mount Ollie's members were primarily factory workers, dockworkers, or in the construction field, and a large number of the church's female congregants worked as domestics for families in Flatbush, Brooklyn Heights, and other wealthy communities. Many of these women lived in with their employers and were free only on Thursdays and Sunday mornings. For decades, the Mount Ollie Ladies Club met on Thursday evening so that everyone could attend.⁷

Universal Baptist Church, which purchased its own building in 1940, developed more slowly than the other congregations. Its founder, Reverend Scott, grew increasingly ill and was forced to retire in 1945. The church's second pastor, Reverend J. I. C. Montgomery, came from the prestigious Cornerstone Baptist Church in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and several members were added during his term, but he only served a short time. Lacking strong leadership, Universal did not attract large members of Brownsville blacks until the 1950s. Other Brownsville churches opened during the decade, including Pilgrim Baptist Church, Tabernacle Baptist Church, and First Baptist Church. Each of these congregations used storefronts to hold their services, but they quickly expanded to accommodate the hundreds of new members drawn to the community. First Baptist Church, founded in 1941,

grew from fifty members to four hundred by 1952. Like the other churches, Pilgrim originally occupied a storefront, but the congregation built a church at Stone and Watkins Avenues in the late 1940s.⁸

Black Baptist congregations in Brooklyn were relatively volatile. They organized and disbanded frequently, and the personality of a church was frequently established by the minister. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Baptist churches bloomed in Brooklyn, particularly in the growing Bedford-Stuyvesant area. Several of these churches, most notably Concord Baptist and Cornerstone Baptist, had more than a thousand members by 1940. Because of their influence over large numbers of parishioners, Baptist ministers were seen as community leaders—a role not all of them embraced. Historian Clarence Taylor criticized Brooklyn's black clergy for failing to respond to social and economic problems in their communities during the 1940s and 1950s: "Brooklyn's black led churches should have organized themselves into a much more cohesive group. . . . The ministers could have organized thousands of people inside and outside the churches and put pressure on city, state and federal officials to do something about the dire conditions of Bedford-Stuyvesant and other poor black communities," Taylor argued.⁹

But the black ministers in Brownsville were not militants, nor were they interested in grassroots organizing or protest. Among the most highly educated people in the black community (several, like Reverend Gardner Taylor, had graduated from elite seminary schools such as Oberlin), most black clergy were moderates by nature, and many had long-standing family ties to the Republican Party. Yet some black clergy were involved in Brooklyn politics, and they were courted by white politicians for their influence over registered voters. Reverend Benjamin Lowery of Zion Baptist Church headed the "Ministers and Citizens Committee to Re-elect Governor Thomas Dewey" in 1950, and Reverend Gardner Taylor of Concord Baptist Church developed close ties to Mayor Robert Wagner, who appointed him to serve on the New York City Board of Education. Black ministers sought to increase their influence within the Democratic and Republican Parties, and they often succeeded in creating relationships with powerful politicians. But these connections seldom resulted in practical advancements in black areas.¹⁰

While Brownsville ministers did not organize their congregations to protest discrimination or lobby for resources, they often worked together to support the interests of Brooklyn blacks. Reverends Dent, Smith, and Brown were leaders of the effort to get the Long Island Railroad to erect more secure fencing around the tracks, where many black youths were elec-

trocuted. They also responded quickly to incidents of police brutality, which occurred frequently in the late 1940s. All these ministers achieved recognition for their activities, and their efforts produced some practical results. "Reverend Brown saved many young black men from jail," remembered Reverend Spurgeon Crayton, current minister of Mount Ollie. Dent was an important part of the growth of the BBC. However, the clergy's successes were limited by the marginal role of Brownsville blacks in Brooklyn.¹¹

Most of Brownsville's black residents were poor, and black organizations like the NAACP or the Urban League were inactive. In 1947, Lillian Lampkin, supervisor of the Urban League's Group Work Department, conducted an informal study of the needs of Brownsville's black youths. After interviewing several black and white leaders in the area, Lampkin recommended that the Urban League initiate a program of social services in Brownsville to provide recreational and educational opportunities to local teenagers and young adults, and "actively involve indigenous community leadership in planning and executing this program." Lampkin's proposal was never adopted, and the Urban League's Group Work Department was closed in the early 1950s. Based in Bedford-Stuyvesant like the Urban League, the Brooklyn branch of the NAACP was not a participant in the Brownsville community during the 1940s. The NAACP was controlled by the borough's black elite and did not focus on grassroots organization. Its activities were generally nonconfrontational, taking the form of voter registration drives, political lobbying, and campaigns against police brutality. Although the NAACP expressed an interest in working with Brownsville organizations, the local branch avoided movements supporting the interests of working-class blacks. During the 1940s, several groups agitated for an end to employment discrimination and other forms of racism, but, according to one critic, the local chapter was "distinctly aloof on these matters." For example, the Brooklyn NAACP did not participate in a 1940s program, led by the National Negro Congress and the Harlem Labor Committee, to end employment discrimination in New York's transit system.¹²

Rather than worshipping at the storefront congregations prevalent in Brownsville, the majority of Brooklyn's NAACP members belonged to the borough's most prestigious churches, including Bethany Baptist and Concord Memorial Baptist (home of Reverend Gardner Taylor, chairman of the National Council of Baptist Churches). The gap in perceived social status between Brooklyn's middle-class and poor black communities was much wider than it would be in the 1960s, and, as a result, the Brooklyn NAACP was reluctant to reach out to Brownsville blacks. Neither the Urban League

nor the NAACP, both of which had credentials recognized by whites, seemed interested in helping to bridge the gap between the black and old white residents in Brownsville.¹³

Many Bedford-Stuyvesant residents perceived black Brownsville as low-class, and criminal incidents did nothing to decrease these prejudices. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported frequently on violent crime in Brownsville during the late 1940s. In May 1946, police arrested one Brownsville man for shooting a bartender at a saloon on Christopher Avenue during an attempted robbery, and a Livonia Avenue woman was slain that same year. Intruders killed the caretaker of a local social club for blacks on Bristol Street in August 1947, and prosecutors charged another man with homicide in the beating death of a man on Livonia Avenue in October 1948. Police also reported a significant number of thefts and burglaries in the area during the later years of the decade. Violent confrontations between husbands and wives, which often ended in death, were a staple of the *Amsterdam News* crime reports of the neighborhood. Black crime in Brownsville was almost exclusively intraracial, but crimes by blacks against whites also occurred. In July 1947, two black men were arrested for burglarizing the synagogue of the Congregation of the People of the City of Bo-briusk, where they stole religious articles worth \$250.¹⁴

The New York Police Department destroyed the precinct-level crime statistics for the years prior to 1970, so it is impossible to assess the extent to which these incidents represented an increase in area crime, but several reporters noted an expansion of black gang activity in Brownsville. The two most significant black Brownsville gangs were the "Saints" and the "Socialists Gents," and they frequently battled in the area between Rockaway and Stone Avenues, where many blacks lived. In November 1949, eighteen gang members were arrested after a police sweep initiated by a shoot-out in which three teenagers were injured. The gangs were small according to local police—each had fewer than twenty members—and most of the gang members were between the ages of fifteen and twenty. While these groups usually did not engage in other criminal activities, many local residents were caught in the middle of gang battles, and Brownsville citizens told the police that they were afraid to walk the streets at night. Reverends Dent, Smith, and Brown and others saw the problem as serious enough to request additional police presence in the area. They particularly wanted more black police officers to deal with the gangs and to work with the black community.¹⁵

Brownsville's black population wanted protection from criminals, but police actions were aimed not just at violators of the law but at all area blacks. As Brownsville's African-American population increased, police

brutality did as well. Harlem activist Algernon Black reported that in Brownsville it was "impossible for men to be walking the streets at night . . . without being stopped for questioning or being searched." In his citywide investigations of police abuse, Black found that police frequently beat Brownsville residents in custody with baseball bats and rubber hoses. The problem intensified for black Brooklynites after a report on Bedford-Stuyvesant by a 1943 Kings County grand jury. The report, released after interviews with more than one hundred residents, most of them white, concluded that "gangs of hoodlums" had taken over the area, attacking, robbing, and murdering the inhabitants. The grand jury recommended a dramatic increase in police in the area to suppress the criminal element. While the Kings County District Attorney adamantly argued that race played no factor in the area's problems or in the deliberations of the jury, many Brooklyn blacks believed that white civic leaders blamed the increasing crime rate on recent migrants to Bed-Stuy. Concern about black crime coincided with fears of juvenile delinquency and resulted in increased police activity in Brooklyn neighborhoods where blacks lived.¹⁶

In July 1945, one Brownsville policeman attacked five area teens, sending them to the hospital for treatment. According to reporters, the police officer was coming out of a bar when he spotted the boys carrying window shades and accused them of theft. When the boys denied the charge (they were asked to return the shades to the store by one of the boys' mothers), he beat them with his nightstick. In another serious case of brutality, two officers hit a twenty-two-year-old black man with a rubber hose, blackjacks, and their fists, all with the aim of securing a confession from him that he had stolen a car and committed several other robberies in the area. The *New York Amsterdam News*, which frequently praised the police for their swift response to Brooklyn's criminal element, criticized the police in this instance, stating, "respect cannot be demanded if it is not practiced." In 1948, local police attacked two black couples, one of which included a pregnant woman, when they were loading their car to go on vacation. The police accused them of stealing the articles, and when one of the men protested, they beat him unconscious. Another officer pushed the pregnant woman to the ground when she tried to help her husband. The incident created such a fury in the neighborhood that the normally reticent black clergy, including Ministers Smith, Brown, and Dent, organized a mass rally at Mount Ollie Baptist Church to protest the attacks on law-abiding citizens. Conflicts between black residents and local police were a consistent problem that most whites chose to ignore. Many argued that the incidents did not represent the views of most Brownsville citizens; and, despite evidence to the con-

trary, both black and white residents remembered the 1940s and 1950s as a time of racial harmony. Former residents argued that, for the most part, there was seldom any racial conflict in Brownsville.¹⁷

Blacks and Whites in the Optimistic Years

The Craytons moved to Brownsville in 1929. Spurgeon, who would later become pastor of Mount Ollie, and his brother Leroy were born in the neighborhood in the late 1930s. They lived on Dumont Avenue and then moved to Stone Avenue during the early 1940s. Spurgeon and Leroy's father worked as a garment cutter in Manhattan, and when the industry declined during the depression, he found employment with the Works Progress Administration. One of the small number of blacks to secure construction jobs through the WPA, Crayton worked on several highway projects, including the Interborough Parkway. The Craytons were among the first members of Mount Ollie, and the family members remained leaders of the congregation for decades. On their block, Spurgeon and Leroy Crayton had many white friends. "Race relations were very good," said Spurgeon. "We remember growing up with them in our neighborhood." Blacks and whites played together and went to school together without conflict. The community was, Leroy remembered, "very provincial. We seldom left our street, and we only went to Pitkin Avenue on special occasions," such as a birthdays or holidays. While individual relationships were often successful, informal segregation certainly existed in Brownsville. The Craytons, however, were too young and too poor to be aware of it at the time. "We didn't even know that the Concord Restaurant was closed to us, because we didn't have the money to go anyway," said Leroy. Blacks were relatively comfortable in the small areas of the community in which they lived, but in many parts of Brownsville, blacks were less than welcome. The Loew's Pitkin often refused admittance to blacks, who instead frequented the Stone Avenue Theater.¹⁸

Some older blacks were more forceful in demanding access to community facilities. Harold Burton moved to Brownsville in 1948, after serving in the army during World War II. In Brownsville, he lived with his brother, who had migrated several years before and secured employment at a garment factory on Linden Boulevard in the southern tip of the neighborhood. By the time Harold arrived, his brother was a foreman of the shop, and Harold began to work for him. A young man who had seen much of Europe and the United States, Harold Burton did not accept the informal exclusion

of blacks from certain facilities. "You weren't really welcome in Betsy Head Park or the Ambassador Theater on Hopkinson Avenue," he remembered. Many of the restaurants on Pitkin Avenue also refused to serve blacks. "I went to the Pitkin Theater, and I made them let me in," Burton said. Living on Bristol Street, Burton also remembered having many white friends, but most of them left during the 1950s. Despite evidence of discrimination, other former residents recalled a close-knit society in the mixed-race community. According to Danny Culley, "On Jewish holidays everything in this town closed down . . . everything. We used to have to go and help them light the stoves, and they couldn't touch money. And it was things that were just accepted. It wasn't done demeaningly. I guess at that time everybody was poor and they just got along." Contact often occurred at commercial institutions shared by poor whites and blacks. Dudley Gaffin's father bought a bar on Rockaway Avenue in 1940. Gaffin remembered spending time with many black customers.¹⁹

But fifty years of experience can easily cloud the memory, and at least some aspects of Brownsville race relations were less positive. Many Brownsville whites ignored the increasing black population, just as they had done in Alfred Kazin's time a decade earlier. Police and merchants were among those whites who had the most consistent contact with blacks, and their relations were not always amicable. While it cannot be determined whether the police involved in the aforementioned brutality cases were Brownsville residents, the efforts of local cops to control the movements of blacks was clearly one response to the increasing number of residents of color. In addition, while stories of interracial cooperation were more typical in the pages of the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *Brooklyn Eagle* than stories of conflict, the *Amsterdam News* published several accounts of racial hostilities during the summer of 1946. In June the paper reported a "riot" that began when a "Jewish merchant struck and used abusive language" on two black women who had come into his store to make a purchase. The women asked to buy some stockings, but were told none were available. When a white woman subsequently bought stockings the black women protested and the conflict quickly escalated into violence. Several area blacks gathered outside the store, and police called in Reverend Dent to moderate the dispute.²⁰

Later that summer, a fistfight between black and white gangs escalated when the whites returned with guns. They shot two bystanders, a black man and an eight-year-old black boy, who were not involved in the conflict. Reporters of the story noted that "tension between the races had been holding away for quite some time." In response to the gang violence, local police raided the Bombay Café, a saloon owned and frequented by Brownsville

blacks, later that week and arrested sixty-six people for disorderly conduct, all but one of them black. According to the reports, "women and men were tossed about like cattle, and the area went into an uproar and just fell short of a riot." Police said they were trying to get information on the gang battle, but in reality they arrested blacks indiscriminately and let whites go about their business. Despite this serious conflict, according to former residents, gang violence between blacks and whites was infrequent. "You go into their area and they chase you back," remembered Arthur Lawrence, a black youth at the time. Brooklyn papers reported no similar events in the years following. Lawrence's memory, however, points out the reality of race relations in 1940s Brownsville—for the most part whites and blacks lived separate lives.²¹

Despite the isolated nature of the two groups, Brownsville's white activists made constant reference to their "darker populations." In every publication produced by the Brownsville Neighborhood Council in that decade, the situation of African-Americans was featured prominently. Activists described their black neighbors as the "poorest of the poor," those most in need of government assistance. The fact that Brownsville residents welcomed them and acknowledged the needs of the black community was proof, to BNC leaders, of Brownsville's goodwill. The BNC pamphlet "For Better Health in Brownsville" noted that "Negroes did not come to dwell here from choice: they came here because they were poor. There are other hovels in New York, but not even the hovels of New York are all available to Negro poor people." Before the civil rights movement emerged as a national cause, Brownsville residents were aware of the severe problems that racial discrimination caused for blacks. Brownsville activists vocally protested racism in the South, holding rallies against "Jim Crow" laws and other discriminatory practices there. In the fall of 1943, dozens of local leaders—including Rae Glauber, Milton Goell, Councilman Peter Caccione, and Reverend Boise Dent—held a dinner at the Parkway Restaurant on Pitkin Avenue at which they signed a petition to Congress demanding that it outlaw poll taxes. More than 150 people attended the event. BNC leaders were organizers of local unity rallies, and the BNC held its own annual "Goodwill Dinner," which it hoped would cement "unity and friendship among Negroes and white churches and synagogues and political, social and fraternal groups." White activists, however, neglected to address more practical concerns of local blacks, including police brutality and discrimination, and they failed to confront the fact that several restaurants on Pitkin Avenue refused to serve blacks.²²

Brownsville leaders emphasized their progressive politics when they

demanded consideration of their requests for communitywide resources like housing, recreation, and schools. They argued that Brownsville, unlike other New York neighborhoods, welcomed blacks, and that the city should support their liberal attitudes in this regard. The BNC prided itself on racial understanding and never missed an opportunity to preach on the subject. "Our people must learn to live with one another," argued one BNC press release, "to work with, and for one another, to fight side by side against ignorance and darkness and for knowledge and betterment." The stated goal of the BNC was a society of equal rights for all. "There must be a place for all in work, play, government and culture—for all Americans, regardless of race, color or creed," declared the group's organizing principles. The BNC put actions behind its words, requesting facilities for the areas of Brownsville where blacks lived. Realizing that many black mothers worked, the BNC also fought for nursery facilities in the black areas of Brownsville.²³

Often, however, the BNC's statements reflected the conflicting feelings of some whites toward their new neighbors. In its "Post-War Plan for Brownsville," the BNC lobbied for recreational facilities for African-Americans, and argued that with a building in the black area of Brownsville, "they [blacks] would not be admitted by sufferance—they would be admitted because the building belonged to them as citizens." This request was either a sincere effort to secure better facilities for black children or a cynical attempt to keep blacks away from the parks and playgrounds frequented by whites by providing separate-but-equal facilities. Undoubtedly both motives were present in the minds of Brownsville residents. In general, however, through their words and deeds, BNC leaders promoted integration in housing, schools, and other activities. In private, Brownsville residents may have lamented the migration of blacks and Latinos to their neighborhood, but in public, through their community organizations, they did not voice such views.²⁴

Brownsville ministers participated in neighborhood unity events, but their congregations were not active in BNC functions. A staff member of the Brooklyn Council for Social Planning, speaking for a black minister, noted that the BNC appeared "to have only spasmodic and limited support from the Negro population." The staffer argued that blacks, "because of educational and other social handicaps, have not felt able to compete with the white leadership," and therefore "tended to withdraw from activities sponsored and initiated by the white leaders rather than play a secondary and somewhat inactive role." He additionally concluded that blacks were skeptical about the success of the BNC's efforts, because blacks did not play a

major role in the formulation of BNC policy. The BNC solicited the advice of black leaders like Reverend Dent and relied on ministers to convey information to Brownsville's black population, but black and white residents did not meet frequently to discuss issues of common concern.²⁵

Black and white youths, by contrast, had intimate daily contact. During the 1940s, the Brownsville Boys Club emerged as the most important organization dealing with race relations among Brownsville youths. Unlike the BNC, the BBC was by definition a grassroots organization and faced racial questions every day in the operation of its program. By 1947, blacks were a significant component of BBC membership, and BBC staff members called the BBC headquarters a place of interracial cooperation where young people reached "better understanding through working and playing together." Remembered Irving Levine, "This was a very idealistic organization," and "the idea of racial integration was one of the great ideals." The BBC clubhouse on Christopher Avenue became a haven for many black youths. "It was a rescue operation for them," Levine said. Two black children who became very active in the group were Raymond and Arthur Lawrence. "Hooker Levine, he came and recruited us more so than we going down to them. They came on the block and asked our parents did the kids want to join the boys club," said Raymond Lawrence. The Lawrence brothers practically lived at the clubhouse. "You'd go down to the BBC, stay down there all day, all night. Because at that time you knew when you got out of school, you had some place to go," remembered Raymond.²⁶

While segregation was typical for Brownsville adults, the BBC sought integration among its members, and BBC leaders worked to calm racial tensions within the neighborhood. "Once they came into the boys club, they were members of the same group. Now it was no longer that they were outsiders, they were insiders," said Levine. In 1947, Reverend Boise Dent joined the BBC Board of Directors and a black program director, Vincent Tibbs, was hired to work out of the BBC office on Christopher Avenue. The BBC also helped organize communitywide events, like a Halloween youth dance at the newly opened Brownsville Houses, attended by black and white teenagers.²⁷

Although the headquarters and the staff of the BBC were integrated, most of the sports teams, social clubs, and other groups that made up the organization were organized along racial lines. BBC leaders argued that while teams were frequently segregated, club meetings were open to representatives of all teams and block clubs. In addition, the BBC teams that competed in citywide tournaments were integrated. This created problems for black and white members, who felt hostility directed at them from outside. "The



Figure 12. Brownsville Boys Club softball team. The BBC was one of the most integrated organizations in the neighborhood. Courtesy BBC Alumni Association.

hate was extraordinary," remembered Irving Levine. "It came from the stands, it came from the teams." The animosity against the boys brought them together. "There was a fusion of blacks and Jews—we were both very conscious that when we went out of the neighborhood we were together targets," Levine argued. BBC staff themselves were often active in civil rights causes, and they encouraged BBC members to participate. The BBC worked with the Brownsville Neighborhood Council in its pursuit of interracial cooperation, and organized discussion groups of BBC members on what they called the "Race Question." As the BBC grew, it opened its facilities to younger groups of children; and many black children, who had working mothers and few recreational opportunities, participated.²⁸

Efforts to integrate the BBC were not viewed favorably by some Jewish institutions. Since 1946, the East New York YMHA had provided assistance to the group in recognition of the YMHA's failure to serve the predominantly Jewish community of Brownsville. When BBC leaders asked YMHA leaders to donate funds toward their new building, the charity rebuffed them, citing the diversity of the BBC's membership. YMHA leaders wanted the BBC to develop a more narrow program that supported Jewish cultural preservation. When BBC leaders declined, the contact between the organizations decreased. The Federation of Jewish Philanthropies also denied the BBC's request for support. According to Gerald Sorin, the Federation stated that "Brownsville's declining Jewish population made that neighborhood a low priority for them." Despite the skepticism of New York's charitable organizations, throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, BBC leaders worked to bring black and white youths together. The efforts of BBC leaders, however, were exceptional, and most Brownsville organizations ended the decade ill-equipped to deal with the racial transformation to come in the 1950s.²⁹

Public Housing Comes to Brownsville

Most requests by Brownsville residents received little consideration from city politicians during the 1940s. The demands from more powerful communities superseded the needs of the politically weak Brownsville area. The only city agency that did give attention to Brownsville was the New York City Housing Authority. After World War II, Robert Moses and his associates saw Brownsville as an area where the program could serve both its mandates: clearing slums and providing needed housing to the poor. The Brownsville Houses opened in 1948. The project contained ten three-story buildings and seventeen six-story buildings, and its configuration was an early example of the compromises necessary to make public housing economically viable. Community groups and housing advocates had asked for buildings no larger than three stories, to fit with existing neighborhood structures, but NYCHA planners determined that the project would not be economically feasible without the larger, denser buildings that would produce more income. Housing developers also wanted to replace the number of units demolished, so as not to diminish the total number of apartments in housing-starved New York. Housing advocates argued that one of the purposes of slum clearance was to lower population densities in areas such as Brownsville, but NYCHA officials were more concerned with building as

many units as was efficiently possible. Even though the project that opened in 1948 was different than that proposed eight years before, it was celebrated by the whole community and was viewed as a significant improvement in the housing of Brownsville residents. According to the *New York Times*, the NYCHA received more than sixteen thousand applications for the thirteen hundred apartments.³⁰

At their opening in 1948, the ratio of whites to blacks in the Brownsville Houses was 52 percent to 48 percent, and, as a racially integrated project, the Brownsville Houses were an exception for public housing in New York. Like public projects in other cities, NYCHA housing during this era was strictly segregated—projects in black neighborhoods (as determined by the NYCHA) accepted only black tenants, and projects in predominantly white neighborhoods accepted only whites. According to historian Joel Schwartz, Robert Moses “regarded talk of dispersing black ghettos as quixotic blather” and did not believe that public housing should be used to advance social goals. From its inception in 1934, civil rights leaders complained about the need for additional housing for blacks; the NAACP’s Walter White protested “the barring, or at least the non-admission of Negroes to any of the existing housing projects in Brooklyn.” NYCHA leaders argued that they did not discriminate; they only gave preference “to applicants having lived on the site so as to avoid, as far as possible, the dangers inherent in disturbing an established community pattern.” Since the early Brooklyn housing projects at Red Hook and Williamsburg were in predominantly white neighborhoods, argued the NYCHA officials, they obviously should have a predominantly white tenancy. In fact, less than 1 percent of the tenants in both these projects were black, a smaller percentage than that of either neighborhood.³¹

Despite their protestations of color blindness, the NYCHA’s own correspondence and internal memoranda revealed that all projects were defined by the projected race of the tenant body. According to Joel Schwartz, “these agglomerations were defined by race. . . . Moses would casually [refer to] the Rockaway [Queens] colored project or the Bronx colored project.” In his 1942 response to Walter White, NYCHA Chairman Rheinstein acknowledged the same: “We are planning a housing project in a colored slum district in Brooklyn. The location of this project cannot now be made public as approval has not as yet been given thereto by the U.S. Housing Authority.” The “colored project” to which Rheinstein alluded happened to be in Brownsville. In 1939, Moses recommended Brownsville to the NYCHA for a “colored project,” but NYCHA staff, in an internal memo titled “Report on Survey for Brooklyn Negro Project,” rejected the recom-

mendation. Staffers felt that the Brownsville site should “be eliminated for future study because of low Negro population,” which was less than 20 percent in the clearance area. Despite the staff’s concern about the placement of a project for blacks in a predominantly white neighborhood, the NYCHA executives selected the site. The correspondence among Moses, his staff, and the housing authority staff did not reveal the specific reasons behind their decision to place a “colored” project in Brownsville, but the fact that Brownsville’s Jews were less likely to protest the inclusion of blacks than the Italians and Irish in other Brooklyn neighborhoods also probably affected their decision making. Moses, fearing a political backlash, soon thereafter decided against projects in the mostly Italian Bushwick and Greenpoint sections of Brooklyn. The BNC advocated for integrated housing as early as 1940, and housing planners did not have to fear a violent response to Brownsville’s selection.³²

After World War II, the U.S. Housing Authority eased its “neighborhood composition” rules, and statistics on NYCHA projects built after World War II reveal a changing policy on racial matters. Before 1948, only two out of eleven projects (Kingsborough and South Jamaica) were integrated. However, between 1948 and 1954, the NYCHA opened forty subsidized housing projects, and thirty of them were integrated (no less than 20 percent and no more than 80 percent white). The move to a more “enlightened” policy was made possible by new rules for public housing site selection. After World War II, almost all of the NYCHA projects were located in either black majority neighborhoods like Harlem, or in “changing” neighborhoods such as Brownsville, Fort Greene, and the South Bronx. These areas were chosen to relieve the pressure from other neighborhoods fighting black incursion. Moses and his staff viewed places like Brownsville as the most likely location for future expansion of the black ghetto. Demand for housing was extremely high in Bedford-Stuyvesant and few New York politicians supported the passage and enforcement of fair housing legislation, so new, segregated areas for blacks were required. To the north of Bedford-Stuyvesant lay the Italian working-class section of Bushwick, and to the south were the middle-class neighborhoods of Crown Heights and Flatbush. Blacks were excluded from all these areas by racism and economics. To the east was Brownsville, a relatively open-minded community with a somewhat upwardly mobile population and a large stock of deteriorating housing that no one wanted. Considering all the alternatives, Brownsville certainly presented the least contentious area for expansion of Brooklyn’s black ghetto.³³

After visiting several possible sites in 1945, Moses’s assistants Arthur

Hodgkiss and George Spargo designated Brownsville and nearby East New York as the worst sections they had seen. They wholeheartedly recommended additional public housing developments there, and argued that the area "will not lend itself to satisfactory development." In 1945, Brownsville still had no public housing, but it did have in the works not only the 1,300 units of the Brownsville Houses, but also a massive \$18.5 million "Brownsville Houses Extension," later renamed Van Dyke Houses. The extension included twenty-two high-rise buildings with 1,603 units constructed on two master blocks. In addition to the Van Dyke project, conversion of the Howard Houses, a military housing project in the northeast edge of the neighborhood, was transferred from the Department of Defense to NYCHA ownership; its rehabilitation in 1951 added ten more buildings and 815 more apartments to northern Brownsville.³⁴

Like Moses' proposals on the Lower East Side, the Brownsville extension resulted in a higher concentration of public housing than many housing advocates considered acceptable. Many questioned the need for such large developments and raised concerns about concentrating public housing in a few areas. Moses brushed these criticisms aside, stating that projects in Lower Manhattan existed side by side without any problems. Regarding the huge Brownsville development, Moses conceded that the density was high, but he rejected arguments for combining them with middle-income housing. He responded, "here again we have a neighborhood which needs to be cleared and apparently can be rehabilitated in no other way." Mayor La Guardia echoed Moses in stating that all the projects "are in undesirable areas where there is not the slightest possibility of rehabilitation through private enterprise."³⁵

Brownsville at Midcentury

On March 27, 1948, the BNC, with the assistance of the BBC and several other organizations, held an "Easter/Purim Festival" at the newly opened Brownsville Houses. The purpose of the party was to celebrate the opening of the project, welcome residents to the community, and acknowledge the "brotherhood of man." BNC leaders hoped that the party would stimulate the interest of the new tenants in the BNC and therefore increase the membership of the group. A planning meeting several days prior to the festival had attracted more than two hundred residents to discuss the "inter-cultural aspects" of the housing project. BNC staffer David Suher felt that "the tenant's council co-chairmen will be good leaders" and hoped for an

"excellent relationship between the tenant's council and the neighborhood council." During the spring of 1948, BNC leaders also focused on developing recreational programs for the project's youths, and they were successful in creating several small summer programs in the Brownsville Houses and the surrounding neighborhood. However, these programs were discontinued because of lack of funding. Glauber, Goell, and other activists also stepped up their efforts to replace public schools in the area, arguing that Junior High Schools 66, 84, 109 and Public School 125 were all too decrepit to be used. According to the *Brooklyn Eagle*, nearly one thousand people attended a March 1948 rally to protest conditions at local schools. The protesters also called for the appointment of an African-American to the New York City Board of Education, and for greater resources to fight juvenile delinquency.³⁶

The year 1948 was, in many ways, the high point of optimism regarding American race relations. For the first time in the twentieth century, a major political party, the Democrats, made equal rights a significant part of its platform. Prodded by Clark Clifford and other policymakers, President Truman promoted antidiscrimination legislation on the basis of race, and he campaigned for the votes of black Americans. This effort was the result of several years of advocacy by liberal groups like the American Jewish Congress and the NAACP. In 1946, the American Jewish Congress created the Commission on Law and Social Action (CLSA) to promote equal rights among all Americans. The CLSA worked to protect the rights of all citizens, but it focused on fighting bigotry against Jews and blacks. While African-Americans suffered severely from job, housing, and other types of discrimination, Jews in the 1940s were also frequently denied their civil rights. Forty-three percent of complaints to the New York Fair Employment Practices Commission were filed by Jews, many of whom were excluded from white-collar jobs and professional opportunities in health care and law. The struggle against discrimination was not an abstract issue for second-generation immigrant Jews, and the comity of interest between Jewish and black advocacy groups formed the basis of the civil rights coalition that would last for several decades.³⁷

Brownsville residents, white and black, celebrated the Brownsville Houses for what they represented: the possibility of integrated neighborhoods and the support of government for the housing and social needs of all Americans. However, economic and social trends constrained these ideals. Working-class whites, and Jews in particular, benefited from the economic expansion of the postwar years. Second- and third-generation Jews broke down barriers in education and the professions and secured positions in the

expanding service economy. When Brownsville's youths achieved success, they, like their predecessors in prior decades, left the neighborhood to find better housing and surroundings. The departure of upwardly mobile whites opened desperately needed accommodations to New York's expanding black population. African-Americans, while they too benefited from post-war growth, continued to be excluded from many occupations and restricted to certain New York neighborhoods. In 1950, more than a quarter of the buildings in Brownsville's oldest section (the area surrounding the Brownsville Houses) were dilapidated, according to census takers (only 8 percent of buildings boroughwide were in similar condition). These units were among the least desirable in the city, but they were taken by blacks, who had few other options. The northeast section of Brownsville became increasingly black and Latino in the early 1950s, as did the Brownsville Houses, and this racial transformation doomed the hopes of Brownsville activists.³⁸

The response of Brownsville activists to neighborhood decline and racial change differed greatly from other, similarly situated neighborhoods. Robert Fisher, a historian of community organizations in America, recognized the era 1946–60 as one of “conservative neighborhood organizing.” In this period, Fisher argued, “radical organizing weakened under intense pressure,” and “conservative efforts at building support for the Cold War and ‘protecting’ middle- and upper-class communities became the dominant forms of neighborhood organizing.” Tom Sugrue, similarly, in his study of postwar Detroit, located at least 192 neighborhood organizations operating during the 1940s and 1950s to “protect” their communities from the “invasion” of blacks. “The threat of a black influx became the *raison d'être* of community groups” in the 1940s, Sugrue argued. One such group stated in their history, “originally we organized in 1941 to promote better civic affairs, but now we are banded together just to protect our homes.” These organizations used the language of “rights” in protesting change in their neighborhoods. Detroit homeowners believed that they had a right to segregated neighborhoods, and they fought all perceived attempts to infringe upon this prerogative. Whites in Chicago responded to blacks in similar fashion. Blacks and whites in the city's South Side engaged in dozens of skirmishes along the area's changing racial borders. Often blacks won these battles, and whites receded farther south. However, in the most publicized incidents, such as the conflict at the Chicago Housing Authority's Airport Homes, white violence drove blacks out of the area. Opened in 1946, the Airport Homes admitted just a few black families to the small bungalows at Chicago's southern border as an experiment in integration. The male heads

of these households were veterans of World War II, but this made no difference to the whites who pelted them with eggs, stones, and bricks. After several death threats and gunshots, the black families moved out.³⁹

Extreme cases of violence such as those in Detroit and Chicago happened in every northern city in the postwar years, but within Brownsville blacks and whites coexisted relatively peacefully. Activists from the Brownsville CIO, the Brownsville Boys Club, the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, and other groups worked to foster understanding and cooperation among residents, and in doing so they provided a positive contrast to other neighborhoods. However, local organizations could not combat the broader economic and social changes sweeping New York City in the postwar years. In the 1950s, these changes were exacerbated by the policies of New York City government, and this brought about a swift racial transformation in Brownsville.



Figure 13. Brownsville street scene at midcentury. Trash was a constant problem on Brownsville's high-density streets. Courtesy Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library.

4

Activism and Change: Brownsville, 1950–1957

Henry Fields, a married black man with four children, was a longtime resident of Brownsville. On May 26, 1951, Fields was driving down Osborne Street in Brownsville when he lost control of his automobile and ran into a parked car. Fields got out of his car, but, finding no damage to the other vehicle, he drove away. A police officer named Sam Applebaum witnessed the incident, and he chased Fields down in his police cruiser. When Fields again got out of his car, Applebaum shot the unarmed man in the head, killing him. Several Brownsville residents witnessed the unprovoked shooting and protested the case of clear brutality. Reverend Boise Dent, called immediately to the scene, counseled residents against the “sort of mob violence [that] would not solve nor tend to prove any injustice.” Dent and NAACP leaders were extremely concerned about “leftist influences” in the community, and they bragged that their swift action had “wrested the case away from the Communists.”¹

But many residents, including the Fields family, were not satisfied with the response of Brownsville's conservative leadership. With the support of the Brooklyn Ameri-

can Labor Party, they organized the Brownsville Citizen's Committee for Justice in the Case of Henry Fields, Jr., led by Bishop Reginald Barrows of Christ Church Cathedral on Watkins Street. They called a mass rally to protest the shooting. Dent and the Brooklyn NAACP refused to work with the group, citing its Communist affiliations, and asked Brownsville residents to "exercise caution" and allow the legal process to investigate the matter. Fear of association with Communists, combined with fear of a race riot, also limited the participation of white organizations in protests against police abuse. American Labor Party leaders solicited the support of the Brownsville Neighborhood Council (BNC), the American Jewish Congress, and the Brooklyn Jewish Community Council (BJCC), but they were rebuffed. While these groups expressed their concern about police brutality and the intransigence of the department, they refused to participate in the mass protest. Local police attempted to undermine the protest by raiding meetings of the Brownsville Citizen's Committee and recording the names of participants.²

Though Mayor Vincent Impelliteri personally promised Dent that the case would be fully investigated, police officials stalled for more than two months, blaming all community protest on "Communist agitation." Despite the testimony of several eyewitnesses, two grand juries failed to indict the officer, and anger within the community increased. In protest of the judicial system's failure, the Brownsville Citizen's Committee held its own "Community Public Trial," which indicted Applebaum for the "wanton killing." The committee criticized city officials whose "indifference to the most recent instance of police murder of an innocent Negro has been emphasized by . . . inertia." In response, the Brooklyn NAACP attempted to organize a rally to protest the continuing brutality against the borough's black citizens. NAACP officials only took this stand after it was clear that the obstruction of political leaders was providing the ALP and other groups a platform for agitation. The leaders of the American Jewish Congress and the Brooklyn Jewish Community Council supported continued legal action but refused to participate in the rally. Despite several months of demonstrations, no charges were filed against the officer. The Fields family struggled for more than a decade in legal battles before receiving a \$30,000 settlement for the murder.³

The Fields case was just one example of many in which the politically charged climate of the 1950s inhibited the activities of civil rights organizations in responding to institutional racism. Throughout the decade, racism and anticommunism shaped the failure of New York's political and institu-

tional leadership to respond to neighborhood change. The inability of New York's liberal groups to support Brownsville activists inhibited the efforts of neighborhood organizations to secure badly needed resources and accelerated the departure of upwardly mobile white residents.

To New York's planners and politicians, Brownsville's racial transformation was accepted as fact. For that reason few had any misgivings about selecting the neighborhood as one of the city's major sites for dumping the poor and dislocated. Brownsville activists had a different perspective on the future of their community, and throughout the 1950s these residents advocated positive changes, focusing in particular on the development of middle-income housing and new schools, social services, and recreational opportunities that would make the neighborhood more attractive to young New Yorkers. However, Brownsville activists failed to convince city leaders and private institutions to support their efforts. Public housing projects were funded without difficulty—new schools were another matter.

The Fields case also reveals the difficulties of interracial cooperation in the 1950s. Brownsville's activists were liberals, and they prided themselves on their progressive attitudes toward minorities. But the BNC and most Brownsville organizations continued to be overwhelmingly white even as the neighborhood's population changed. Other than the Baptist churches, which continued to flourish, black and Latino residents did not have their own institutions. The BNC was open to them, but few white activists made significant attempts to incorporate these new residents. Although Brownsville groups were often successful in limiting racial conflict in this period of change, most never became truly integrated because they focused on abstract, global issues of race relations while ignoring the specific concerns of local residents. A few black ministers participated in local organizations, but their role was limited by their focus on the growth of their churches and their desire to avoid connection with leftist groups. As a result, areawide, interracial actions were infrequent, and serious issues like police brutality failed to receive the attention they deserved. Brownsville in the 1950s comprised two communities: one white, older, and declining; the other black and Latino and growing.

Robert Moses's efforts to revitalize Manhattan during the decade resulted in the dislocation of hundreds of thousands of people, the majority of whom were black or Latino. Many of the uprooted settled in Brownsville's declining tenements. Civil rights leaders were successful in achieving the passage of a New York City fair housing law in 1957, but the enforcement of the statute was sporadic at best. As a result, blacks and Latinos were se-

verely limited in their housing options. Brownsville, adjacent to Bedford-Stuyvesant, became part of an expanding ghetto, the largest in the United States according to some observers.

Through action and inaction, New York's municipal government played a major role in the transformation of Brownsville. Public housing and urban renewal became the battlegrounds for complaints about racial change that were really caused by a complex set of factors. Brownsville's public projects, like many across New York City and other cities, became increasingly black and Latino, and they were the focal point for complaints as these neighborhoods became darker. Urban renewal received deserved blame for uprooting people and pushing them to declining areas, but the program was only part of the problem. With housing shortages extreme and racial barriers high, blacks and Latinos found shelter where they could. Most often these dwellings were in public housing or in other parts of "changing neighborhoods" like Brownsville. Activists blamed the city for sending blacks and Latinos to the area, and policymakers were culpable in the creation of this new ghetto. But government officials faltered in a much broader sense. By failing to open housing across the city to blacks and Latinos and by reinforcing segregation in the selection of sites for upper-class Title I housing, middle-class cooperatives, and low-income public housing, New York City's leaders further entrenched the racism of the private market and sealed the fate of transitional neighborhoods such as Brownsville.³

In 1950, Brownsville's black population was 14,177, 22 percent of the total population. By 1957, the total number of residents had declined by almost 12,000 (to 87,936) while the number of blacks increased to 21,584. Brownsville also became an area of settlement for New York's Puerto Rican population. According to the Community Council of Greater New York, in 1950 only 732 persons of Puerto Rican origin lived in Brownsville, but the council estimated that there were 12,000 Puerto Rican residents in Brownsville by 1958. The council based its estimate on the number of Puerto Rican youths in local public schools. The school numbers were not taken from an actual census but rather from the estimates of school principals, and for this reason, these numbers are somewhat suspect. Many Puerto Ricans uprooted by urban renewal in Manhattan did move to Brownsville during the decade. The neighborhood's racial transformation limited the ability of Brownsville activists to secure new resources. The area's inevitable racial change, in the minds of city leaders, lessened or eliminated the need for new community facilities. Spending scarce funds on new schools and services for Brownsville was seen by the city's bureaucrats as a waste—all the worthy poor were leaving anyway.⁴

Americans' great optimism following World War II infused the activities of community groups like the BNC. But the dramatic economic and social changes of the postwar years created a severe financial crisis for cities in the United States. Neighborhoods across New York required aid in repairing and rebuilding their infrastructures. At the same time, the manufacturing base contracted and city tax revenues stagnated. In the most favorable political atmosphere, Brownsville activists faced a difficult task in revitalizing their community. But the particular racial and ideological climate of the 1950s placed additional burdens on Brownsville community organizations and contributed greatly to neighborhood decline. Other areas in New York received government and private assistance to create modern communities, but the support Brownsville received paled in comparison to the community's needs.⁵

The Rise and Fall of the Brownsville Boys Club

Abe Stark's was a paradigmatic "rags to riches" story. Born in 1894 on the Lower East Side, Stark's parents were poor like most Jewish immigrants, and he received only an elementary school education. Forced to work at age eleven, Stark became a helper at a Brooklyn clothing store. A decade later, Stark and two associates opened up a store on Pitkin Avenue. A year later Stark founded his own business, and over the next thirty years it grew to be one of the most profitable operations in Brownsville. Stark became known for his flamboyant advertising, and his most famous sign was on the outfield wall of Brooklyn's Ebbetts Field, home of the Dodgers: "Hit Sign, Win Suit." As a wealthy businessman, Stark became a confidant and major contributor to many Brooklyn politicians, and in 1945 he managed William O'Dwyer's successful mayoral campaign. Appointed commissioner of commerce in 1946, Stark told many that he planned to be mayor of New York.⁶

"Abe Stark was a driven man," remembered BBC member Dudley Gaffin, who worked with Stark on several campaigns. "He really thought he would be the next mayor, after O'Dwyer." Stark ran on the Republican-Liberal-Fusion ticket for borough president in 1949, but he lost to Democratic incumbent John Cashmore. Stark's political base lay in the Brownsville area, particularly its business and civic leaders. During the late 1940s, he increasingly focused on youth programs as a way to draw media attention and political support, and the Brownsville Boys Club became an extension of Stark's political club. Stark installed his affiliates on the BBC board and

used the successful program to shrewdly position himself as a man concerned about the average New Yorker. Recreational programs in the 1950s helped needy teenagers while reassuring New York adults concerned about increasing rates of juvenile delinquency. His success in developing the BBC supported Stark's political aspirations, which were achieved in 1953 when he was elected city council president. Running mate of reform-minded, Democratic mayoral candidate Robert F. Wagner, Stark was selected because he brought the support of both the Jewish and the Brooklyn voting populations.⁷

When Stark was elected BBC president in the late 1940s, he embarked on an ambitious campaign that allowed the BBC to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars, greatly expand its facilities, and hire a professional staff of recreational and social workers. With the support of other local business leaders and government officials, as well as the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and the Charles Hayden Foundation, the BBC purchased a summer camp in Queens and created other programs. But Stark's main goal was to build a state-of-the-art recreational facility for local boys. Brownsville had only one significant play area, and Stark believed that a major program was necessary to cure the juvenile delinquency problem. To further these ends, the BBC bought a property on Linden Avenue at the southern extreme of Brownsville and adjacent to the growing white community of Canarsie. For this site, they planned a building with a complete gymnasium, pool, and classrooms. Stark's connections in the business and political worlds made such a development possible, and with the Hayden Foundation as its primary benefactor, Stark's efforts culminated in the opening of a new \$1.5 million recreational facility in October 1953. The new building enabled the BBC to expand its program even further, making it the leading youth program in eastern Brooklyn.⁸

But these developments were not completely positive. The fund-raising activities of Stark and the board caused changes in the operation of the BBC, many of which were not welcomed by the membership. Support from large foundations required greater reliance on professional social workers, most of them from outside the community. A grant from the Hayden Foundation required the BBC to turn over all management of the organization to the social workers and board members; teenagers could participate only as advisers. But the success of the BBC, according to its founders, was very much due to the fact that it was run by its members, who were teenagers. Irving Levine remembered the BBC as "a kind of confederation of boys with very little adult leadership. Matter of fact, we're anti-adult—the adults pushed us out of the community centers." The boys and staff members felt

that the reason the BBC could attract so many "problem juveniles" was because it empowered these teenagers to control their own organization. By giving members the responsibility over policymaking and operations, the BBC presented a unique model, one that BBC founders worried was being diluted by outsiders.⁹

As Stark gained influence in setting BBC policy, conflicts with Baroff, Levine, and the other BBC founders increased. And no sooner was the new facility complete than the organization began experiencing financial difficulties. Because the new BBC clubhouse was larger, the operating costs increased dramatically. In 1951, the BBC budget was \$35,000; it had escalated to \$185,000 by 1954. Since the BBC received funds from so many organizations to build the clubhouse, it was difficult to raise the money necessary to manage the facility. Citing these financial problems, in March 1954, six months after the new building opened, the BBC board voted to lay off five staff members, including BBC alumni Irving Levine and Lenny Dryansky, and to curtail many of the group's programs. Stark, who by then had been elected city council president, described the retrenchment as "a step in rounding out the program of activities at the clubhouse."¹⁰

In reality, the financial difficulties provided an opportunity for Stark to redirect the program away from the more radical ideas of the staff members. "The new professionals with their quest to educate the whole boy," argued Gerald Sorin, the BBC's historian, "and with their aggressive integrationist direction and involvement in community organizing, were going well beyond 'keeping kids out of trouble.'" Stark felt that he was losing control of the program, and during this era of heightened concern over leftist activities, he was worried about being tarred with accusations of Communism that could ruin his political career. Although it is true that the majority of the BBC staff were leftists and at least a few were socialists, staff claimed that they never used the clubhouse to advance political ideas. Although none of the BBC staff were Communists, their activities clearly worried BBC directors. Stark and the board were particularly concerned that the new facility would increase opportunities for interracial interaction among boys and girls. According to Sorin, BBC staff planned coed, interracial activities such as dances and swim parties. "Fear over the reaction to 'mixing the races' was intensified by fear over the consequences of 'mixing the sexes,'" argued Sorin. In the context of the times, an integrated facility was radical in and of itself.¹¹

The staff did not accept dismissal without a fight. BBC workers had significant relationships within the neighborhood, not only with the boys but also with the adult leaders of Brownsville. Baroff, Levine, and the others

went public with their allegations and were joined by Brownsville residents who picketed Stark's office. Protesters argued that the BBC center had become an armed camp, as the fired workers were replaced not with other professionals but with plainclothes policemen directed to maintain order. The staff further alleged that the layoffs violated their employment contracts, and they demanded due process in their dismissal. As a result of community protest, the board rehired all the professional staff. Ultimately, however, each of them was released within the next year, as soon as their individual contracts expired. Though the activists defeated Stark in the first skirmish, Stark won the war. In 1954, the board voted to turn over the BBC clubhouse to the New York City Department of Recreation. With city control, the board no longer had to worry about fund-raising to keep the facility open. In addition, with the Department of Recreation in charge, Stark no longer had to be concerned about radical, interracial programs. With the building complete, the BBC's political value to Stark declined, and he moved on to other causes.¹²

Even after the facility was transferred to the city, the BBC did not disband. The founders created the BBC Alumni Association, which continued to give financial support to the center and was responsible for several additions to the building. However, after 1955, the center's new employees were hired by the Recreation Department, and the program was drastically curtailed. The center continued to provide recreation programs for Brownsville youths, but the decline of the BBC damaged Brownsville in many ways. As an organization working to improve race relations and offer opportunities for Brownsville youths, the BBC was irreplaceable. The BBC represented the possibility of community empowerment and interracial cooperation. The facility that Stark and the board built was a modern asset to the neighborhood, but it was not as significant as the psychological uplift that the BBC had provided Brownsville. Furthermore, unlike the Recreation Department, which had a very narrow mandate, the BBC had been serving many youths with emotional problems and was working to prevent juvenile delinquency. These youths were not served by the Recreation Department, which did not hire social workers at that time.¹³

In addition, the city takeover of the BBC center caused a net loss in recreational resources for Brownsville in that it replaced a planned rehabilitation of the facilities at Betsy Head Park. In the early 1950s, the Parks Department began to design a new facility that was to contain a refurbished swimming pool, gymnasium, game rooms, and classrooms for domestic science, vocational training, and arts and crafts. This project had been demanded by Brownsville residents since the 1930s, and the BBC had coordi-

nated with the Parks Department to ensure that the facilities planned for the rehabilitation of Betsy Head Park were not duplicated at the BBC's center. However, the Parks Department's plans to enhance Betsy Head Park were shelved when the BBC transferred its facility to the city. In accepting the BBC clubhouse, Mayor Wagner stated that the facility would result in "substantial saving to the city." As a result of Stark's decision, Brownsville, which had never had enough facilities for its youths, remained underserved.¹⁴

The transfer of the facility also accelerated the departure of young activists from Brownsville. Men like Doc Baroff, Irving Levine, Dudley Gaffin, and others, represented a generation of educated and committed leaders sorely lacking in working-class Brownsville. In reality, these men were moving on before they lost the BBC. Baroff, Levine, and Gaffin went on to receive professional degrees in the mid-1950s (Baroff and Levine in social work, Gaffin in law) that took them out of the neighborhood. Professional ties drew them away from Brownsville, and there were no family ties to bring them back. Baroff's family moved to Sheepshead Bay in the late forties, and in the 1950s Levine's and Gaffin's families moved out—Levine's family to East Flatbush and Gaffin's to Canarsie. Economic and professional opportunities provided these men and thousands of others the chance to find better living conditions, and they took advantage of them as had previous generations. All three men continued to support the Boys Club, but their careers left them little time to spend in Brownsville.¹⁵

Sociologist Gerald Sorin celebrated the commitment and intellectual capacity of the BBC founders. These young men saw a problem and developed a program that met the needs of hundreds of Brownsville teenagers. Sorin traced the roots of this success to the cultural milieu in which the BBC founders were raised, and argued that BBC leaders were "powerfully influenced by Jewish religious culture and by 'the secret treasures of family and Jewish togetherness.'" While the young men who created the BBC were in many ways unique, the BBC was also made possible by the particular political and economic atmosphere in which it evolved. World War II and the postwar economic expansion created unprecedented opportunities for young, white Americans, and many second-generation immigrants took advantage of them. But these new possibilities also weakened attachments to old communities. Thousands of whites moved out of Brownsville in the postwar years. The young adults were the first to do so. The BBC was an engine of upward mobility for its predominantly white clientele, and it had fulfilled that function by the mid-1950s. Blacks and Latinos were excluded from many of the same opportunities, and when they moved to Brownsville,

the few institutions that could have helped them in creating a community were either gone—like the BBC—or, as in the case of the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, unable to adapt to neighborhood change.¹⁶

Public Housing and the Brownsville Community

Residents rejoiced at the opening of the Brownsville Houses and celebrated the groundbreaking of the extension in 1952. Within two years, however, they became increasingly concerned about the negative impact of public housing on their neighborhood. Activists worried in particular about changes in the racial composition of local developments. According to BNC leaders, approximately ten thousand African-Americans moved into the area after 1950, most entering Brownsville's projects or crowding into the tenements surrounding them. Residents attributed an increase in crime to these new neighbors. In 1951, citizens were disturbed to hear that several heroin rings operated in the area. One drug racket was on Saint Mark's Avenue, where ten black teenagers and young adults were arrested for manufacturing and distributing the drug at a local tailor shop. A second heroin ring was located on Stone Avenue, and a third market operated out of a candy store on Legion Street, where a white seventeen-year-old known as "Yankee" sold to area teens. Police arrested a fourth distributor, a white man nicknamed "Husky," for selling drugs to area youths out of his store on Christopher Avenue. Robberies and burglaries of local stores were also a common occurrence in the early 1950s. In one six-month period during 1951, the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported more than twenty-five robberies of local stores. Two men were responsible for at least twenty of them, and they hit several appliance stores along Rockaway and East New York Avenues. In the fall of that year, the New York Police Department initiated a special program to combat the crime wave, flooding the area with rookie cops.¹⁷

Gang violence also increased in the 1950s. One 1950 gang fight on Chester Street resulted in the stabbing of a sixteen-year-old white youth who had gone out to get a newspaper for his father. "Gang wars broke out often in our midst," remembered Bernard Lewin, a former resident of the Howard Houses. "We would scurry for cover in the midst of zip gun fire, and hurtling bricks and chains between the warring factions. There was mayhem, blood, screams and tears, but rarely did anyone die." Because of gang violence, juvenile arrests doubled in the eastern half of Brownsville between 1953 and 1957.¹⁸

In the early 1940s, Brownsville residents hoped that public housing



Figure 14. Brownsville gangs at Seventy-third Precinct. Courtesy Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library.

would save the neighborhood, but in the 1950s they blamed the projects for the decline of the area. The major problem with the existing projects, as community members saw it, was that they were quickly becoming overwhelmingly black. In June 1955, BNC President Irving Tabb wrote NYCHA Chair Philip Cruise to complain that "It has become widely known, recognized and discussed, that the percentage of white and Negro tenants in the Brownsville and Van Dyke Projects is about 10-90." Tabb's numbers were incorrect, but in the mid-1950s the tenant body in Brownsville public housing did change significantly. The population of the Brownsville Houses was 52 percent white when the project opened in 1948, but by 1955 the number of white families had shrunk from 701 to 402, constituting only 30 percent of the 1,337 units. The newly completed Van Dyke Houses were immediately affected by changes in public housing's racial composition. When the first phase of the project opened in the spring of 1954, there were 300 white families (31 percent), 503 black families (57 percent), and 79 Puerto Rican families (9 percent) in the 882 units. The second phase of the project, opened just one year later, had just 182 white families (25 percent), 367 black families (51 percent), and 170 Puerto Rican families (24 percent).¹⁹

The BNC's research had determined that the ratio of whites to blacks was "substantially higher" in other Brooklyn projects, particularly the Breucklen, Albany, and Kingsborough Houses. In fact, only one of these projects, Breucklen, had a white majority, and the population at Albany and Kingsborough was similar to Brownsville's public developments. Brownsville projects were not the only ones to change during the 1950s. Across the city, public housing was becoming increasingly black. Two-thirds of the New York public housing tenants in the 1940s were white; that number dropped to one-half in 1955 and one-quarter by the end of the decade. The changing racial makeup of public housing was the result of several factors. During the 1930s and 1940s, the NYCHA maintained strict racial guidelines for its projects, but in the late 1940s, the authority relaxed these rules.²⁰

Furthermore, the projects developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s were more likely to be in racially changing areas in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Upwardly mobile whites were already leaving these neighborhoods, and NYCHA planning exacerbated the changes these communities experienced. For example, when Brownsville whites were dislocated for the development of public housing in the 1940s and 1950s, many chose to leave the neighborhood even though they had first priority in the new projects. Whites across the city and in Brownsville were also more quick to leave public housing as their incomes increased because they had greater options. Because some whites found housing in the private market, the percentage of whites applying for NYCHA units declined. Over time, as public housing became more identified as minority housing, this became a self-reinforcing process.

The racial makeup of many New York projects changed, but Brownsville residents' concerns increased when they were told that blacks and Latinos were steered toward local projects. An officer of the Urban League who investigated the matter told them that prospective housing officials informed black and Latino tenants that there were waits of a year or longer at projects in white areas but that they could move into Van Dyke Houses immediately. Unaware of the broader changes in public housing, BNC leaders asked that the NYCHA initiate programs to maintain diversity in local developments, arguing that segregation was "un-American, and is harmful to the entire community." They demanded swift action to rectify the situation, asserting that to ignore the problem would "only serve the purpose of those who oppose public housing." BNC members additionally questioned whether the Brownsville projects were receiving their fair share of attention

by maintenance employees, because the projects had shown a "marked deterioration." While BNC leaders continued to demand that the NYCHA integrate public housing across the city, authority officials blandly responded that they had no control over the racial composition of projects.²¹

Historians of public housing argue that the program strayed from its original intentions during the postwar years. Early public housing was lavish by working-class standards. The First Houses, the Lower East Side precursor to the federal public housing program, was small compared to those that followed and combined the rehabilitation of existing tenements with new construction. Unlike later projects, early developments were carefully planned to fit into existing neighborhoods, often copying the architectural styles of the surrounding buildings. In the 1940s, as a result of funding cuts and increased costs, the height and density of public housing grew dramatically. The NYCHA attempted to house more people for less money, and projects like Brownsville's suffered accordingly. The Brownsville Houses, at six stories, did not blend in with the community, but the project was much less disruptive than the Van Dyke or Howard developments, in which the majority of the buildings exceeded fifteen stories. These immense projects drastically changed the character of the neighborhood. Architectural critics like Catherine Bauer argued that the new developments were sterile and foreboding, and that they cast a pall over the surrounding neighborhoods.²²

The Van Dyke and the Howard Houses were more dense and less luxurious than the Brownsville Houses, but they marked a dramatic improvement in the area's housing stock, and the demand greatly exceeded the supply. New Yorkers, particularly working-class and middle-class blacks and Latinos, did not look upon public housing with disdain. Rather, they clamored for it. There were over 10,000 applicants for the 1,603 units at Van Dyke, and several thousand applied for the 881 apartments at the Howard Houses. These applicants were not the poorest of the poor. The majority of the residents in these new buildings were employed persons in two-parent families. For example, 74 percent of the initial occupants of Van Dyke (in 1955) were families comprising a husband, wife, and children. Another 9 percent were married couples without children. Almost 40 percent of the families were headed by a veteran of World War II. These residents were members of New York's massive industrial class. Only 20 percent had professional, sales, or skilled occupations—the remainder were classified as semiskilled, unskilled, or service workers. But few of them relied on government assistance to pay their bills, and only 13 percent were considered "broken families."²³

According to several histories of public housing, during the 1950s, as a result of growing industrial wages, many public housing tenants exceeded the maximum allowable income, and they were forced to leave. Those evicted were often replaced by very poor families, many of whom were refugees from slum clearance areas. The departure of working families, the argument goes, had a negative impact on projects, because those who left were often community leaders, responsible for organizing tenant councils, pushing for repairs and maintenance, and providing an atmosphere of stability. These people set the standards to which others aspired. Those they left behind faced much more entrenched poverty and were less capable of providing the tenant leadership necessary to the success of the public housing program.²⁴

In reality, while many projects did change in the 1950s, the impact of the eviction policies on the operation of public housing is ambiguous at best. In 1954, 683 families were evicted from NYCHA units. This number included all families removed involuntarily (for example, for criminal activity or for providing false information to the NYCHA), but most of these people were pushed out for exceeding income limits, which varied between \$3,000 and \$6,000, depending on family size and type of project. While these evictions certainly affected the families forced to move, they represented less than 3 percent of 25,775 units in the NYCHA portfolio. Throughout the 1950s, total turnover in the projects, voluntary and involuntary, was relatively low—varying between 7 and 9 percent—while turnover in private housing often exceeded 10 percent. The changes within the projects were much less significant than in New York's private market, where thousands of people moved annually from the city to the burgeoning suburbs of Westchester, Long Island, and New Jersey.²⁵

Eviction was a significant hardship for many families, and income limits certainly caused the eviction of some tenant leaders (and at least one in Brownsville). And one reason for the demise of tenants organizations during the 1950s was the departure of activists due to income limits, but several other factors decreased their viability. The rise in anticommunist agitation in the late 1940s also placed many tenant advocates on the defensive. As these activists were investigated and blacklisted, they lost their ability to organize New York apartment dwellers. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the NYCHA worked aggressively to cut contact with tenants unions and even accused some tenant organizers of Communism. The authority also curtailed support for indigenous groups for fear that they would affiliate with citywide groups. While NYCHA administrators publicly bemoaned the

loss of tenant leaders, they had no desire to support residents demanding better services and greater management accountability.²⁶

Despite assertions to the contrary, NYCHA statistics showed that eviction was not a significant problem. In 1958, 452 families (out of almost 40,000) were forced to leave because their income exceeded the acceptable limit. The concern over income limits masked the real fear of NYCHA officials: that public housing was becoming minority housing. The changing racial composition of public housing, however, had less to do with income limits and more with the dynamics of the city's housing market. While New Yorkers still faced a housing shortage in the 1950s, a variety of options were available to whites during these years. With savings and increasing wages, a white Brownsville family could afford some of the new developments in places like Sheepshead Bay and Canarsie. Blacks and Latinos saw their wages go up too (though not as much), but these areas remained closed to them because of racial discrimination. Between 1946 and 1955, private developers completed 200,000 units of housing in Brooklyn. Only 900 of these units were sold to nonwhites. As a result, a greater percentage of minorities applied for and were admitted into public housing, and the racial balance of the projects began to change. This transformation was a nationwide phenomenon. In 1952, 38 percent of public housing tenants across the country were nonwhites. By 1961, the percentage was 46; by 1965, nonwhites constituted more than half of the nation's public housing population.²⁷

The economic status of public housing tenants changed much more slowly than the racial makeup of city projects. Popular critiques of public housing conclude that urban renewal caused a significant increase in the number of very poor people in public projects, but the percentage of poor tenants did not rise dramatically during the decade. In 1948, 10 percent of the residents in subsidized projects were on welfare. By 1962 that percentage was only 15. Only 24 Van Dyke tenants (out of 1,603) were on welfare in 1956. In fact, few urban renewal dislocatees found themselves in public housing, often because the rent was too high. While Robert Moses frequently stated that uprooted New Yorkers would receive preference in public housing, only those uprooted by public housing projects were guaranteed a preference at NYCHA sites. Those affected by Title I projects like Lincoln Center did not get much assistance. By 1956, with the urban renewal program in full swing, many blacks and Latinos who were uprooted had moved into Brownsville tenements, but they did not move into area projects. Seventy-four percent of the initial tenants at Van Dyke came from

Brooklyn, and most were from Brownsville. They were not, on the whole, Title I refugees.²⁸

Although the projects received a great deal of attention from Brownsville residents, they were much better managed than the crumbling tenements that surrounded them. Arthur Lewin and his family moved to Brownsville in 1955. They had shared an apartment with Arthur's grandmother in Harlem, but they were drawn to the Howard Houses, situated in the extreme northern section of Brownsville, by the prospect of modern facilities and more space for their expanding family. "We used to call [the nearby tenements] 'The Stand,'" remembered Arthur, "because they were like Custer's Last Stand." Most of the people in the Howard Houses were employed, and they lived in modern facilities. Those in the tenements lived in little more than shells that provided only marginal protection from nature. In many cities these tenements would have been abandoned as unsafe. But in New York during the 1950s they served as desperately needed housing for the city's black and Latino poor, thousands of whom were dislocated by Robert Moses's urban renewal "machine."²⁹

The renewal of New York began slowly in the 1930s with a few small housing projects on the Lower East Side and in Brooklyn. By the 1940s, the program expanded to middle-income housing in Stuyvesant Town and in Harlem, and by the 1950s, upper-middle-income dwellings like those surrounding Lincoln Center were also a part of the plan. Progressive housing developers, tenants rights advocates, and union supporters all downplayed the extent of dislocation and supported the efforts of the New York City Housing Authority to revitalize slums. However, the extent of Moses's post-war plan made the relocation issue unavoidable, and caused some liberals, particularly those representing African-Americans (by 1950 already a disproportionate percentage of relocatees) to protest the lack of planning in this area. Moses responded that dislocated persons would be eligible for the public housing that was under construction at the time, and this soothed the fears of liberals enough that the issue declined in importance.³⁰

Despite public protestations of concern, Moses looked at relocation as an administrative problem to be handled by the private sector. He had no sympathy about the impact of his program on the dislocated and faced little pressure from the organizations that typically would have considered the problem. The unions, the tenants organizations, and a wide spectrum of liberal groups, including the American Jewish Committee and the Urban League, all agreed that New York had to be renewed, and dislocated tenants were left to fend for themselves. The expansion of the urban renewal program exacerbated the relocation problem, and across the city, from the

Lower East Side to Harlem to central Brooklyn, New Yorkers were being uprooted by redevelopment. In 1954, City Planning Commission staffers estimated that 170,000 people had been dislocated between 1946 and 1953, and forecasted an additional 150,000 dislocations between 1954 and 1957. Those evicted were disproportionately from minority groups. Thirty-seven percent of those evicted were black or Puerto Rican, even though these groups constituted only 12 percent of New York's population at the time.³¹

Many of these dislocatees, according to Planning Commission staffer Walter Fried, were "dumped by the hundreds into vacant tenements in a section of Brooklyn called Brownsville." Moses in fact had planned for the dislocated to move to Brownsville. In responding to questions about relocation, he frequently referred to areas such as Brownsville when asked where clearance-area residents were going to settle. When he unveiled his plans for the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Moses' staff prepared "elaborate charts showing the flow of site refugees" to the neighborhood. Brownsville's crumbling tenements had been losing their white residents for years, and they were a readily available source of housing for the city's poor. New York City had a severe housing shortage in the 1950s, estimated by city planners to be 430,000 units in 1950—and tens of thousands of African-Americans and Latinos migrated to the city throughout the decade. So nine years later, despite all of the housing built, New York's housing shortage was unchanged. Because there was nowhere else for them to go, slum renewal continued to force poor residents into other declining neighborhoods, accelerating their demise. "Soft" communities like Brownsville, where vacancy rates were higher than most parts of New York, were expected to absorb urban renewal refugees. Thousands of these relocatees replaced the old residents in Brownsville's crumbling tenements. As a result, the neighborhood in the late 1950s underwent an ethnic transformation, from a white majority to predominantly black and Puerto Rican residents.³²

Brownsville Demands Middle-Income Housing

Brownsville responded to the changing racial composition of its public housing in several ways. Many white residents requested transfers from Brownsville projects to those in other parts of Brooklyn, particularly the nearby areas of East New York and Canarsie. The white residents who lived in the tenements surrounding the projects quickly moved farther south in Brownsville or to neighborhoods like Canarsie, and northern Brownsville

rapidly became part of the Bedford-Stuyvesant ghetto that adjoined the neighborhood. Within the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, members were divided over how best to approach the issue. A minority of the membership thought the organization should continue to fight to integrate the Brownsville public housing projects. But the majority of the group decided that racial change in Brownsville projects was inevitable, and the best way to maintain the economic and racial diversity of the community was to push for the development of new middle-income housing that would provide an incentive for white residents to remain in the area. "We do not want economic ghettos in our community, and we are in danger of having Brownsville become such a ghetto," argued Tabb. "There is a great need in our neighborhood for middle-income projects," he continued. In addition to writing to the NYCHA, the BNC organized a special subcommittee that sought to rally the community behind a middle-income project. The group lobbied insurance companies, labor unions, state and federal officials, and foundations like the United Housing Foundation to support the development.³³

In an open letter to progressive labor unions around the city, the BNC wrote that "thousands of labor union members live in our area. They face a grievous problem, one which is faced by the community as a whole as well—that of adequate housing." Noting that several unions, among them the Garment Workers, Butchers, and Electrical Workers, had sponsored projects that "have brought good housing to their members and others too," the BNC asked the unions to consider such activity in the Brownsville area. "Thousands of our citizens are ineligible for low-cost housing. They live in crowded, inadequate apartments of 3–4 rooms paying high rentals when their needs require 5, 6, 7 rooms," the letter continued.³⁴

Private investors did not jump at the opportunity to invest in New York's postwar redevelopment. In fact, Moses had to beg, plead, and cajole major banks, insurance companies, and other private institutions to support his program. Stuyvesant Town, the city's first major middle-income project, was an unqualified success for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, but Moses struggled for years to secure the private funding necessary to build it. Many investors were convinced that New York City could not be revitalized, and several had a policy against supporting any urban development. Developers argued that profitability required lower land costs and higher rents than the city program allowed. Institutional investors like Metropolitan Life also opposed mixing upper-income buildings with low-income projects, and they often refused government support because city funding required that admissions be nondiscriminatory. Securing private

investment for housing anywhere in New York City was difficult in the 1950s. Brownsville residents, living in a poor, dilapidated, and racially diverse neighborhood, faced almost insurmountable obstacles to their plans.³⁵

New York's labor unions were not much more receptive to Brownsville's plight than the city's insurance companies. While several unions, most notably the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, built successful projects on the Lower East Side, in the Bronx, and in Queens for their workers, labor unions—like private companies—rested their development decisions on "sound business principles." Brownsville was not attractive to most union investors, because the housing they produced was too expensive for most of the neighborhood's residents. Racial concerns also limited the interest of labor unions. While most of the Brownsville residents eligible for middle-class housing were white, blacks and Latinos also would have clamored for the opportunity to secure modern accommodations in a relatively accepting neighborhood. Like other investors, unions were not inclined to undertake the headaches that came with the then still radical idea of racial integration. Accordingly, they determined that the risk was too high. Despite continued rejection, council members persevered in their efforts to secure middle-income housing in Brownsville, and went so far as to choose the most appropriate location. "We favor this site: former car barn at Rockaway and New Lots Avenues. The property is owned by the city; it requires no relocation of tenants."³⁶

In both Greenwich Village and the Upper West Side, liberal groups pushed for slum clearance that had the additional "benefit" of decreasing the area's minority population. Community associations often used the term "racial balance" to conceal efforts to reduce the number of blacks and Latinos in their neighborhood. Like their counterparts in areas such as Hyde Park in Chicago, liberal leaders argued that open housing laws would allow blacks and Latinos to disperse throughout the five boroughs, and that this would be better for everyone involved. Planners often proposed to build low-cost housing only after middle-income projects were completed. Typically the public projects were never realized. Liberals on the Upper West Side and in other urban renewal areas were often active in the American Jewish Committee, and that organization involved itself in renewal efforts. The American Jewish Committee's history as a longtime advocate for civil rights often muted criticisms about relocation. While many clearance advocates were sincere in their efforts for open housing, the immediate impact of urban renewal efforts was the dislocation of yet more blacks and Latinos.³⁷

Undoubtedly, many Brownsville residents wished to halt the migration of minorities to the area, and any middle-income housing they could secure would likely be predominantly white. On the other hand, for a decade the BNC counseled interracial understanding and bragged that blacks and whites lived peacefully in the neighborhood. Like the liberal communities of the Upper West Side, the BNC actively supported civil rights causes, including fair housing and school integration. Although the majority of the BNC leadership was white, the board also included several black members, distinguishing the organization from neighborhood groups hostile to integration. BNC leaders did not address the issue of racial balance directly, but their choice of location for the proposed middle-income project reveals the complicated role of race in neighborhood development. The selection of an industrial site, which would not require the relocation of Brownsville residents, suggests that BNC leaders were sympathetic to the plight of newly arrived refugees. At the same time, the recommended site was in the extreme southern section of Brownsville, still overwhelmingly white, next to the white neighborhood of Canarsie and as far as possible from Brownsville's public projects. BNC leaders were clearly aware that a middle-income project would be more likely to succeed in an area where the majority of the residents were white. They were also concerned with maintaining the stability of the southern half of the neighborhood. In the end, BNC leaders advocated for a middle-income project that, while still in Brownsville, actually increased segregation within the neighborhood.³⁸

Notwithstanding the significant obstacles, the BNC's campaign was successful. In March 1956, Abe Stark announced that the Amalgamated Meat Butchers had agreed to build a cooperative middle-income housing project in southern Brownsville at Linden Boulevard and Rockaway Avenue. The BNC's press release stated that this project was "only the beginning of more of the same type, so that the community can develop into a fully integrated one, both socially and economically, as advocated by the Council for so many years." Unfortunately, that was not to be the case. The Jimmerson Houses, as they were later renamed, were one of only two middle-income projects ultimately built in Brownsville. BNC leaders celebrated their victory, but they were saddened by the fact that press releases announced that the project was located in East Flatbush, not Brownsville. "In the interests of upgrading our area, we would like all concerned to know that the project is strictly one in the Brownsville area," the BNC release stated.³⁹

Even after their victory in obtaining middle-income housing, BNC members continued to be concerned about the changing atmosphere within

the area's public housing projects. They were particularly worried about plans for an additional public housing project, called Brownsville Houses South (later renamed Tilden Houses), which the NYCHA in 1954 decided would be for low-income residents (contrary to what it had originally told Brownsville activists). Later that year, BNC members requested that the housing authority reconsider the middle-income project. The Citizens' Housing and Planning Council (CHPC), a housing advocacy group, was also concerned about the concentration of public housing in Brownsville. The organization had supported the original plan of the housing authority for the Brownsville Houses South to be developed as a middle-income project, because they were pleased the "proposed new project would result in a wide range of incomes among the tenants in the various projects in the area." In May 1955, however, a CHPC staff member talked to BNC board member Clara Tabb, wife of BNC president Irving Tabb, to solicit the group's opinion on the project. Tabb said that the BNC had changed its position, petitioning the housing authority to make Tilden a low-income project because the BNC agreed that the "families on site would not be able to afford such [middle-income] rentals and that the area was so bad as not to attract middle-income families." Another CHPC representative visited the site several days later and declared it "as bad a slum as he has ever seen," and agreed that a middle-income project was unlikely to succeed there.⁴⁰

CHPC executive director Ira Robbins, however, objected to the development of Tilden as a low-income project because it would result in a total of 3,791 low-income families in the area. On May 16 Robbins wrote to the City Planning Commission to argue that the project would result in "an undesirable concentration of low income families in one area." Robbins recommended that the housing authority redesignate this project as a middle-income development and attempt, "over a period of time, to increase the rents substantially in the present Brownsville Houses, in order to provide for some variation in the income groups."⁴¹

The next month, the BNC, or at least some of its members, changed its mind again. On June 7, 1955, BNC president Irving Tabb told the housing authority that "in view of the fact that there are no middle-income projects in Brownsville and no others proposed . . . we ask that the original plans be restored." Tabb argued that because Brownsville already had "three large low-income projects," the BNC, "together with the business and community leaders of our area, feel that middle-income projects should be built together with low-income projects to make for a healthy, diversified community, one that would truly reflect the various groups in our area." BNC members were obviously conflicted regarding racial change in their neigh-

borhood. Between 1954 and 1956, BNC leaders argued among themselves about whether they wanted a low-income or middle-income project on the site; many asserted that a middle-income project could not succeed next to predominantly minority public housing. While it is unlikely that a united organization would have been able to influence the NYCHA, the ambivalence of BNC members over the viability of a middle-income project so close to the concentration of public housing resulted in their exclusion from the decision-making process.⁴²

BNC members were concerned with both the changing racial composition of local projects and specifically the impact that the concentration of public housing had on perceptions of the neighborhood. Later in 1955, Rae Glauber, chair of the BNC's housing committee, wrote to the housing authority requesting that Tilden be changed to a state-funded project with income limits of \$14 per room per month. Such a project would house families with incomes somewhere between the \$9 average in public housing and the \$20 average in middle-income projects. She also asked if it would be possible "to eliminate from the signs erected, the words, 'low-cost' as these words, in our opinion, do not coincide with a \$4,500 income level." What many BNC leaders really wanted was a project accessible to people with relatively low incomes but without the stigma of a "low-income" project. Irving Tabb argued also that the term "low-income" should be eliminated from all project signs, since "with rents and income varying constantly, these words do not fit the situation." As activists interested in keeping whites in the neighborhood, BNC leaders were acutely aware of the impact that public housing had on the success for their efforts. Closely identified with blacks and Latinos, public housing was considered a negative development by many whites. Even though the criticisms were often unfair, many blamed the projects for increasing crime and creating other problems. Fifteen years earlier, in the context of the New Deal, the BNC demanded publicly funded projects, but in the changed climate of the mid-1950s, such developments were considered a community liability.⁴³

The black members of the BNC were not actively involved in the debates over the Tilden project. In 1955, there were three black members of the board of directors: Reverend U. B. Whitfield of the Friendship Baptist Church, Reverend R.D. Brown of Mount Ollie Baptist Church, and Reverend Carter Pope of Universal Baptist Church. None of these men served on the housing committee. All three ministers represented changing congregations that drew their attentions away from the BNC. Universal Baptist Church would soon move to Bedford-Stuyvesant with its upwardly mobile, middle-class congregants, and Friendship Baptist Church was already lo-

cated closer to Bedford-Stuyvesant (at Howard and Fulton) than it was to the heart of Brownsville. These ministers represented upwardly mobile congregations, and they most likely supported the BNC's demands for the development of middle-income housing. Many of Brownsville's oldest black residents also benefited from the economic expansion of the 1950s. They remained excluded from other parts of Brooklyn, and new middle-income housing within Brownsville was as attractive to them as it was to whites.⁴⁴

Tabb and other leaders continued to demand the project be changed to middle-income status. In pursuit of their goal, Tabb, Assemblyman Alfred Lama, and several businessmen from Pitkin Avenue met with NYCHA staff to voice their concerns over the impact of low-income projects on the neighborhood. The group "expressed its fears that the building of another low-rent public housing project in the area would accelerate the already noticeable trend of bringing families of low economic status into the area." Area businessmen were primarily concerned about the decline in white customers, and they blamed the projects for their negative impact on the business climate. The members of the Pitkin Avenue Merchants Association worried about "losing old customers" and felt that the "newcomers, particularly the Puerto Ricans, did not buy quality merchandise or patronize the general shopping areas of the district." The group stated that they wanted a "thoroughly integrated neighborhood," and they pointed out that "there had been a number of Negro families who had been in the area for many, many years." Housing officials informed the group that, as the project had already received all the city and federal approvals, it was too late to redesignate the Tilden Houses.⁴⁵

After meeting with housing authority officials, Tabb and the businessmen undertook another campaign to reclassify the project. According to Tabb, "the response in support of middle-income housing was amazing," and they had secured hundreds of signatures on petitions supporting the position that "many residents of Brownsville were anxious for better and larger quarters in the price range of \$20.00 to \$24.00 per room. . . . Literally hundreds of small and medium businesses were questioned regarding the reclassification and the response was practically unanimous." These efforts were to no avail. On January 16, 1960, the Samuel J. Tilden Houses opened. Combined with the Brownsville and Van Dyke houses, the complex was the largest in the city. The project housed 998 families in eight sixteen-story buildings adjoining the already occupied Brownsville Houses and Van Dyck Houses. Together, this complex provided a contiguous community of 3,939 apartments, with approximately 17,500 residents. Tilden Houses' ini-



Figure 15. Brooklyn public housing complex. The Tilden Houses are in the foreground, the Brownsville Houses in the middle, and the Howard Houses are in the background. Courtesy Jeffrey D. Hoeh.

tial rentals averaged from \$12 to \$14 per room monthly. These rentals were near the level requested by the BNC, and they were higher than rentals in some other public housing projects. The NYCHA did this in the hope that the Tilden Houses would be more integrated than its other projects, and in the early years of its operation this was true. However, in the face of the neighborhood's transformation, slightly higher rents were not enough. Like Brownsville's other projects, Tilden's residents would soon be overwhelmingly black and Puerto Rican.⁴⁶

Brownsville Demands New Schools

Housing and schools, more than any other components, influence perceptions of a neighborhood. New schools and housing signify positive growth; dilapidated buildings represent decline. As they had advocated for public and private housing, Brownsville residents worked to secure government resources for new schools. All of Brownsville's schools were at least thirty years old by 1950, and several were much older. Unlike residents in working-class Irish and Italian neighborhoods who could send their children to parochial schools, public schools were the only option for

Brownsville Jews. Local activists realized that many parents would leave the neighborhood if significant improvements were not made to Brownsville schools. Throughout the 1950s, Brownsville residents fought for new facilities to educate their children, viewing the existing junior high schools as the most serious problems. Young parents, they believed, were satisfied with the area's elementary schools, but the junior high schools were so decrepit that many families left Brownsville when their children reached those years.⁴⁷

In the early 1950s, officials at the City Planning Commission and the board of education informed Brownsville residents that new school facilities were not needed because the neighborhood was losing people. Neighborhood leaders countered that while Brownsville's overall population was declining, large numbers of new residents had settled in the area's public housing and neighboring tenements. These inhabitants were on average younger than those who had departed, and their children increased the enrollments at many of the area's elementary and junior high schools. Overcrowded schools were a citywide problem—the last serious wave of school construction had occurred more than thirty years before, and communities across the city were lobbying for new buildings. The increasing demands placed on the board of education by more politically connected neighborhoods, coupled with the bureaucrats' lack of concern for poor whites and blacks in Brownsville, resulted in the neighborhood's designation as number 168 on the priority list for new construction.⁴⁸

Brownsville whites were a majority in all but one local school, but race shaped the response of the board of education to community demands. Most white New Yorkers compared their racial climate favorably to that in the South, especially in light of the convulsions that region was experiencing in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision. But New York's schools were almost as segregated as those in the South. In addition, black schools were consistently neglected in the distribution of resources, making them the worst and most crowded of the city's schools. A 1955 report found that almost all the elementary schools in predominantly black neighborhoods were full or exceeded capacity, while eighty thousand seats were vacant in predominantly white schools. However, the school board refused to enroll black students in schools in white neighborhoods, choosing instead to move students among overcrowded schools. Bureaucrats also relieved overcrowding by increasing enrollments in fringe areas, such as Brownsville, that bordered on black ghettos. Despite constant pleas that it draft a plan to balance the disparities within the district, throughout the 1950s the school board delayed action by continuing to study programs for integration. Unlike par-

ents in several other neighborhoods, Brownsville whites did not organize to oppose the enrollment of blacks in local schools. Many Brownsville residents, including Rae Glauber, were active in the efforts to integrate Brooklyn's public schools, and they argued that Brownsville's mixed population was tailor-made for such efforts. New schools in Brownsville, they argued, would help a needy population while at the same time furthering other societal goals by providing a positive atmosphere for interracial education. However, racism and bureaucratic inertia within the board of education undermined these efforts.⁴⁹

To secure the needed facilities, activists gathered data and organized school PTAs, teachers, and other Brownsville organizations to lobby school officials. In meeting after meeting with education bureaucrats, BBC director Ruben Bennett, BNC board member Blanche Gittlitz, and other residents showed that Brownsville schools were filled to capacity and were crumbling. The inventory of Brownsville schools revealed obvious deficiencies. At PS 125 (the school with the highest percentage of black students in the neighborhood) the lavatory facilities were unsanitary and the lunchroom was so inadequate that "dishes and floor mops are washed in the same tubs." PS 125 was built to accommodate six hundred children, but in 1950 its enrollment topped one thousand. As a result, small children were rotated throughout the day to the auditorium to allow their rooms to be used by other classes. Children always carried their belongings with them because desks and closets were overflowing. At PS 66, the teachers' lounge was part of a partitioned bathroom and maintenance area, forcing teachers to prepare for their classes in a foul-smelling space. Originally built as an elementary school, PS 66 had been converted into a junior high school, where more than 750 adolescents shared twenty-four classrooms built for young children.⁵⁰

Junior High School 84, which had the second highest percentage of blacks in Brownsville's schools, was the worst of all the facilities. The principal of the school, the teachers, and the PTA all agreed in 1954 that it should be demolished. Of the building's sixty-eight rooms, only thirty-two were usable; the others were closed as imminently dangerous. Committee members reported that broken and peeling ceilings and walls were "a continuous hazard to children and teachers." The three wings of the school were built at different times and were not evenly aligned, forcing children to walk down and then up several flights of stairs to reach rooms technically on the same floor. The lunchroom in the basement was next to a "stinking, reeking, inadequate lavatory," and the students ate in triple shifts. The school had no cafeteria, no gym, and an enrollment of 1,200. An additional

500 students were expected to enroll when the Van Dyke Houses project was completed.⁵¹

The major reason for overcrowding at these schools was the opening of the area's first public housing project, the Brownsville Houses. As a result of the new public housing tenants, each school had enrollments far in excess of capacity, and children were often shifted from one school to another during the year to achieve a semblance of balance. Brownsville residents argued to city planners and local politicians that the imminent openings of the Van Dyke and Howard Houses would increase the burdens on local schools and that new structures were desperately needed. In 1953 the school committee sponsored a concert, supported by liberal organizations across Brooklyn, to raise funds for a new school. Congressman Emmanuel Celler, who once taught at PS 84, also provided assistance, recommending to Mayor Vincent Impelliteri that PS 84 be demolished and a new junior high school be funded. Several hundred people turned out at the concert to demand more classrooms.⁵²

Race shaped the way that activists lobbied for resources. To gain support for their plans, community members pointed out that the influx of new, mostly minority, residents had placed extra burdens on the Brownsville community. BNC President Landesman argued that Brownsville was "a high tension area and now a veritable melting pot of many nationalities." According to Landesman, Brownsville could be a place where children of different faiths and backgrounds "learn to live with each other," but at present its "rate of juvenile delinquency is on the upsurge." Brownsville leaders publicly worried that discrimination by the board of education against Brownsville blacks and whites would exacerbate tensions within the changing neighborhood.⁵³

In 1954, the efforts of neighborhood leaders were rewarded with the opening of the David Marcus Junior High School, a three-story building with thirty-four classrooms, ten workshops, an auditorium, and a gymnasium. But because it replaced another school, the new junior high did little to alleviate overcrowding, and the school population continued to grow as more public housing units were occupied. In 1955, PS 156 had 1,823 pupils, 500 over its limit; PS 184 housed 1,300 with an expected increase to 1,700 by September 1955. In addition, the Brownsville Neighborhood Council reported that more than 600 non-English-speaking children in these schools were not being served by programs necessary for their success. Council members worried publicly that because of overcrowding, Brownsville schools were losing their best teachers in addition to many local families. In 1956, despite all their efforts, Brownsville activists found

themselves demanding a new junior high school and a new elementary school, just as they had been doing since 1950. Without additional facilities, the BNC leaders argued, "this seriously aggravated area will progressively deteriorate into the worst spot in the city." But Brownsville continued to suffer neglect from the board of education, and Brownsville's schools remained overcrowded and underfunded throughout the 1950s and for decades to come. Like the efforts of Brownsville activists in other areas, the fight for better schools saw Brownsville take one step forward and several steps back.⁵⁴

Blacks, Whites, and Latinos in 1950s Brownsville

During the 1950s, as they had in the past, the majority of Brownsville's new residents moved into the northeast quadrant of the neighborhood, some to the newly opened Howard and Van Dyke Houses but most to the tenements that surrounded them. As the oldest sections of Brownsville became completely black and Latino, the predominantly white areas south of Livonia Avenue and west of Rockaway Avenue started to lose their white populations; blacks and Latinos then moved into these areas as well. Uprooted by the urban renewal program, or desperately seeking relief from the crowded ghettos of Manhattan, blacks and Latinos took advantage of Brownsville's relatively high vacancy rate.

Black and Latino organizations did not grow commensurately with the new population. Local churches expanded, and the Carlton Avenue branch of the YMCA opened a small extension in the area, but resources for Brownsville blacks remained limited. Brownsville's existing churches responded in different ways to the expansion of the black community. Some, like Mount Ollie, increased their programs, and Reverend R. D. Brown worked with the BNC and BBC to provide recreational opportunities for local youths. But most of the local congregations remained insular and focused on their internal development. Class differences also affected relationships within Brownsville's black population. While blacks continued to suffer discrimination in spite of much civil rights activism, during the 1950s a significant number of blacks benefited from the booming economy and new fields opened to them. Black lawyers, teachers, and a few doctors were able to move into the mainstream of their professions, and working-class blacks also saw their opportunities expanded. The majority of blacks continued to suffer exclusion from middle- and upper-level management, but lower-level white collar positions became attainable for an educated minor-

ity. Work in the growing service sector, particularly health care, provided new types of stable, better-paying jobs. Many Brownsville blacks who completed their education during the 1940s were hired for these positions, and, like their white neighbors, they aspired to better surroundings. Reverend Spurgeon Crayton remembered that several members of Mount Ollie's congregation moved out to Long Island and Queens during these years.⁵⁵

The members of Universal Baptist Church saw their congregation expand during the 1950s, growing from fewer than fifty members to more than one hundred. In 1951, the church welcomed a young, energetic pastor, Carter N. Pope, who had apprenticed at Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Over the next six years he would become a leader in the Brownsville community. According to Alice Book, one of Universal's founders, "Reverend Pope knew everyone in the black community, and he always remembered where you came from. He would say 'here's brother so and so from Richmond, Virginia.'" Born in Northumberland County, Virginia, Pope migrated to Brooklyn with his family. He attended Julius Rosenwald High School, and received his training from Shelter College in New York City. In Brownsville, the minister supported the BNC and served on its board of directors, but he was not an active member, and his efforts were focused primarily on building his church and congregation. A member of the Eastern Baptist Association, the NAACP, and several other organizations, Pope did not have time to devote to the BNC's neighborhood revitalization efforts.⁵⁶

Maintaining Universal's growing congregation was a full-time job in itself. From 1952 to 1956, Pope led Universal on a fund-raising campaign to purchase a building to replace its outmoded facility on Thatford Avenue. In 1956, with the support of several other congregations, Universal bought a former synagogue on Jefferson Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant for \$65,000. The minister chose to move the congregation for several reasons. First of all, the building was available, and there were not any comparable buildings on the market in Brownsville. Second, the area in which the building was located had recently become a black middle-class neighborhood, but it had few churches of its own. Pope realized that this building would enable him to expand Universal's membership and reach out to an underserved community. Third, many of Universal's members were also leaving Brownsville at this time. The *Souvenir Journal* commemorating the church's new facility reveals the changes in the congregation and in Brownsville's black community. Of the forty-four families that advertised in the journal, twenty-six lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Only fourteen lived in Brownsville. One family had moved to Queens, another to New Jersey, and a third to the suburbs

on Long Island. The economic expansion that benefited white Americans also supported the dreams of a significant number of black New Yorkers. As had churches and synagogues for decades, Universal moved to support its upwardly mobile clientele. By 1960, the church had over two hundred members. A large number of Universal's members continued to live in Brownsville, and, as the church was less than two miles away, it served them easily. But Universal was no longer an important institution in Brownsville, and Reverend Pope resigned from the BNC board in 1956.⁵⁷

Saint Paul's Church also underwent changes during the 1950s. In 1953 the church that the congregation had struggled for a decade to build was bought and demolished by the city as part of the construction of the Van Dyke Houses. The financial settlement allowed the church to purchase and renovate a building on Prospect Place just north of Brownsville in the Ocean Hill section, but it also removed the church physically from the heart of the community. Saint Paul's pastor, Adolphus Smith, was also a leader in Brooklyn's black Baptist organizations, and he supported Universal and many other local congregations. But he was not active in Brownsville community organizations. In Bedford-Stuyvesant, an increasing number of churches supported recreational and educational programs for youths and adults, but church resources and facilities were limited in Brownsville.⁵⁸

Puerto Rican institutions were even smaller and had fewer resources. According to the Protestant Council of New York, in 1960 twelve Protestant churches served less than seven hundred Puerto Ricans. Most Puerto Rican residents were Catholic, and area congregations, including Our Lady of Loreto in East New York, experienced significant increases in their Latino population. None of these institutions provided leadership or organization to the neighborhood's new black and Latino residents; only Saint Luke's Congregational Church participated in community affairs. Citywide Puerto Rican organizations were not active in Brownsville.⁵⁹

As was evident in the Fields case, anticommunism also inhibited the activities of black organizations within Brooklyn and Brownsville. In 1950 the national NAACP undertook a purge of all Communists and Communist sympathizers from the organization. W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson were only the most famous African-Americans blacklisted as a result of this crusade. The hunt for "reds" within the organization narrowed its focus and weakened the organization's ability to create coalitions between working-class and middle-class blacks. It also isolated the organization from other civil rights groups. The Brooklyn NAACP, like the national organization, was obsessed with uprooting Communists within its ranks. The group often refused to participate in local protests because of the political orientation of

the organizers. According to one historian, the Brooklyn NAACP was "a militantly anti-communist organization, suspicious of its leftist members." In 1955, Reverend R. D. Brown and the BNC worked successfully to create a Brownsville branch of the NAACP. However, it received little support from the Brooklyn branch and as a result did little to organize area blacks. "Brownsville teemed with people and troubles," argued Rae Glauber, "such troubles as outside of New York would bring NAACP running with help." But in Brownsville the group did very little and "much resentment was felt and voiced by Negroes" against the organization.⁶⁰

New York City government was constrained by both a political and a fiscal crisis in the 1950s. The death of Fiorello La Guardia left a void in the city's political landscape, and the Tammany Hall machine, which deteriorated significantly during La Guardia's term, no longer had the ability to play broker to the diverse interests of New York's residents, businesses, and institutions. At the same time, declining federal support after World War II, coupled with deindustrialization, resulted in severe pressures on city finances. In this context, a poor, politically marginal community like Brownsville was ignored by city leaders. Political and fiscal turmoil provided the background for community neglect, but no issue shaped relations between Brownsville residents and greater New York more than race. The migration of blacks and Latinos influenced the shape and scope of the assistance that Brownsville received from government and private institutions, and limited the effectiveness of Brownsville organizations to combat the transformation of the neighborhood. Racial issues also strongly influenced the tactics of Brownsville activists, shaping the language of their appeals for support to politicians and elites as well as their statements to Brownsville residents. Brownsville liberals prided themselves on their progressive attitudes towards blacks and Latinos, and Brownsville community organizations boasted of their efforts at "intergroup relations." The efforts of white activists to incorporate new minority residents were sincere but flawed. Neither Brownsville nor its organizations ever became truly integrated.

In December 1950, the Brooklyn readers of the *New York Amsterdam News* elected Reverend Boise Dent the unofficial "mayor" of Brooklyn. This annual poll measured the popularity and commitment of Brooklyn's black leaders, and Dent's selection—over people such as Brooklyn's first black assemblyman, Bertram Baker, Reverend Gardner Taylor, and several other nationally known figures—was a testament to Dent's work in the borough. As one of the few Brownsville blacks involved in the BNC, and the only Brownsville black with any claim to political power, Dent served an im-

portant role as a liaison between Brownsville's white community and the area's new residents. However, several months after his election, Dent died of a heart attack at age fifty-six. His death severely hampered the ability of the BNC to reach out to Brownsville's new population, leaving it especially ill-equipped to deal with racial change in Brownsville projects and the area surrounding them.⁶¹

Although the presence of black leaders in the BNC increased somewhat during the 1950s, black residents remained less likely to participate in the organization than whites. There were almost no Puerto Ricans in the BNC, and none on the board of directors. Rae Glauber found that blacks were active in local unions at much higher levels than they were in the BNC. Glauber credited this lack of participation to the fact that most blacks were relative newcomers to the community, and their struggle to acclimate themselves left them with little time for group meetings. She further concluded that several other factors contributed to the low turnout of black residents at community meetings: for example, unlike many white Brownsville women who were active in community groups, most black women worked during the day and tended to household duties in the evening. Nor could many black families attend meetings held at night, because they were caring for very young children or they lived in the projects and felt uncomfortable leaving that area after dark.⁶²

The executive committee of the BNC in 1956 was certainly more community-based than the BNC of the 1940s. Three of the four vice presidents, both of the secretaries, and the treasurer were women living in Brownsville and active in local PTA's. The fourth vice president, a white male doctor, was a strong proponent of civil rights. But although local politicians continued to serve on the board, Brownsville blacks (except for two black ministers) were conspicuously absent. The racial composition of the neighborhood changed dramatically during the 1950s, but this had little influence on the organizational structure of the BNC. Nor did the ministers who served on the BNC board. "Baptist ministers in the 1950s were primarily concerned with the advancement of religion," said Universal Baptist Church minister James Green. "Unlike today, they were not involved in social programs." Reverend Carter Pope, according to Green, saw community organizations like the BNC as a way to protect and promote his church, but he did not include himself in the daily activities of the group. The ministers of First Baptist Church, Pilgrim Baptist Church, and Saint Paul's Baptist Church, the largest churches in the center of the neighborhood, did not participate in the BNC at all.⁶³

Black ministers and white activists came to the BNC with different

goals, and they often failed to connect. "The relation of white leaders to the Negro ministers was patronizing though brotherly," Glauber argued. "Each had motives—the intellectual whites, to be their brother's keeper, and to do something about the poverty all around; the Negro leaders out of concern for the issue, out of desire to gain advantages for their churches." The average black person was not invited into the BNC coterie, and the lack of formal organizations among blacks weakened their position in the group. "The ministers were leaders, and they were very good people," said Irving Levine, "but they were not organized. Brownsville lacked a viable black leadership in the 1950s." In reality, Brownsville ministers were very organized and active in their own associations. Reverends Pope, Brown, Smith, and Whitfield were all leaders in the Eastern Baptist Association, a coalition of Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island Baptist churches, and that is where they concentrated their efforts. Through this organization, they frequently protested discrimination in employment and in housing, and they participated in other civil rights activities. But their focus was on the broader interests of Brooklyn's blacks, not on the needs of Brownsville.⁶⁴

The BNC was liberal in ideology, but the organization's structure was not particularly amenable to the incorporation of new residents. The BNC made only sporadic attempts at grassroots organization, relying instead on its member groups to marshal community support for their efforts. Blacks were less likely to participate in other neighborhood organizations, so they were not as active in the BNC. Like many communities, Brownsville had a fairly well delineated leadership hierarchy. Businessmen, politicians, and institutional leaders were at the top, and these men and women served on neighborhood boards and committees. Professionals, particularly social workers and teachers, made up the activist core of these groups, administering the organizations and running local programs. Black residents, however, were unlikely to be professionals or to hold positions of leadership in the community; as a result, their participation in groups like the BNC was limited.

Like liberals in other communities, Brownsville whites often looked at racial concerns as a regional or national problem rather than a local issue, and this may have contributed to the failure of these neighborhood organizations to attract black residents. In 1950 the BNC boasted that the group had sent representatives to the National Fair Employment Practices Conference in Washington, D.C., had contributed to the American Civil Liberties Union, and had supported the campaign of the New York City Schools Council for interracial camps. A 1955 report of the BNC Community Relations Committee cited several of the group's activities regarding legislation at the city, state, and federal levels—particularly regarding Fair Employ-

ment Practices—but few programs addressing issues within Brownsville. BNC members also supported the work of the NAACP, in particular its efforts to desegregate schools in the South. Community residents took part in several BNC-organized civil rights campaigns—for example, protesting the murder of Emmett Till and backing the Powell-Diggs Congressional Resolution to refuse to seat representatives elected in states that denied voting rights to blacks. Yet the BNC frequently ignored issues such as police brutality and delinquent landlords that directly affected Brownsville blacks.⁶⁵

In 1954, the BNC organized a “Brotherhood Meeting” that included representatives from the Brownsville Parent-Teacher Association, the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish War Veterans, the Brownsville Fair Employment Practices Committee, the American Labor Party, and several leaders of black Brooklyn churches. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss race relations in the community. In the end, this meeting focused more on issues of citywide and national importance, in particular the issue of employment discrimination. The BNC membership resolved that “by discriminating against any group of our citizenry the well-being of all people is endangered. By relegating the Negro people to a position of second-class citizenship, we were undermining our democratic way of life.” The BNC board resolved unanimously “that the state law against discrimination because of race, color or creed or national origin, must be changed and strengthened.” There was little recorded discussion on the daily concerns of Brownsville blacks or relations between neighborhood blacks and whites. The group dealt instead with relatively distant cases and activists could feel good about their support without making substantial personal sacrifices.⁶⁶

In the mid-1950s, when black and Puerto Rican migration to Brownsville increased, the BNC organized several meetings to foster interracial cooperation. In 1956, the BNC invited representatives from citywide Puerto Rican organizations to discuss issues of Puerto Rican history and culture and to describe the problems facing Puerto Ricans in New York. A second meeting that year, titled “Integration in Our Schools and Housing: What Does This Mean for Brownsville?” focused on efforts of Brooklyn activists to support racial integration in New York. The advertisement for the meeting stated that “this is one of the most important problems on the American scene” and that the “development and extension of civil rights will depend upon the resolution of this problem.” However, these actions to support interracial dialogue were among the last significant programs undertaken by the BNC. By 1957, the organization was almost defunct in Brownsville. BNC President Irving Tabb had moved to East Flatbush by

this time, and other activists had also left the community. They left Brownsville at the beginning of the great exodus that would, by 1963, create a wholly black and Latino neighborhood. The BNC’s efforts to foster interracial understanding softened the impact of racial change in Brownsville but did little to reverse the trends.⁶⁷

As in the 1940s, while children of different colors often played together, black, white, and Puerto Rican adults did not mix. “Brownsville whites were proud that they were liberal on race,” remembered Irving Levine, “but most were not liberal on interpersonal relations. Most whites did not hang out with blacks.” Bernard Lewin recalled that most of the white families in the Howard Houses moved out “within two or three years of our arrival,” and the remaining whites were elderly. Lewin remembered playing with white children when they were young, but those families left when their children grew older. Brownsville activists of all colors struggled to deal with the migration of blacks and Latinos into the neighborhood. Compared to other areas where racial violence was the norm, Brownsville groups were extremely successful in alleviating tensions between residents of different races. However, Brownsville during the 1950s never achieved the level of integration among the different groups that local activists advocated. Despite the efforts of Brownsville organizations, social, cultural, and economic barriers continued to separate whites, blacks, and Latinos.⁶⁸

While Brownsville’s black churches expanded, Brownsville synagogues continued to dwindle during the 1950s as their congregants passed on or moved out. Second-generation Jews were much less likely to join a synagogue, and most congregations lacked a full-time rabbi to solicit membership. A 1950 survey listed 51 congregations, 22 fewer than in 1939 (although many of the synagogues in the survey existed in name only; they did not have regular services). Urban renewal also disrupted Brownsville’s religious life. The NYCHA demolished two of the neighborhood’s largest and most venerable synagogues, Beth Hamedrash Hagodol and Thilim Keshet Israel, to make way for public housing projects. Thilim Keshet’s four-story building on Thatford Avenue was torn down in 1946 for the Brownsville Houses, and Beth Hamedrash lost its limestone synagogue on Sackman Street to the Van Dyke project. Like other Orthodox congregations, these synagogues were not active in community affairs, but they provided anchors for the Jewish community, and when they closed they left one less reason for the Jews who belonged to them to stay in the area.⁶⁹

The Brooklyn Jewish Community Council (BJCC) was unique in that during the 1950s it became increasingly concerned with civil rights activities while also involving itself in domestic issues, including religious perse-

cution, promotion of religious education, and fostering "understanding and mutual respect between Christians, Jews, Negroes and whites." The BJCC was active in several coalitions that advocated for fair employment, fair housing laws, and integrated education. In addition, the group sought to alleviate racial tensions and strove, in its words, to "achieve a community free from race hatred, fear, suspicion and prejudice." The BJCC was one of the leading forces—with the American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, and the Anti-Defamation League (but not the NAACP or the Urban League)—that brought about the creation of the New York City Human Rights Commission, and it was involved in statewide and national legislative efforts to pass antidiscrimination laws. To further racial and ethnic harmony, the BJCC worked with churches, civic organizations, and public agencies "to develop intercultural and intergroup programs, initiate adult education programs in new housing centers, establish more non-sectarian community centers, secure greater recreational facilities and summer playgrounds," and curb juvenile delinquency.⁷⁰

Operated primarily on a boroughwide basis, the BJCC also had several local branches, including the Brownsville JCC. Although it is likely that the Brownsville JCC members shared the liberal ideals of their Brooklyn brethren, the group became increasingly concerned with protecting Jewish residents from the violence they believed was increasing as more blacks and Puerto Ricans moved into their neighborhood. In 1954, the Brownsville JCC reported that it was working on the following "local problems": "a) Brownsville interracial housing project in predominantly Negro neighborhood. Negroes organize gangs and launch attacks on residents in projects; b) influx of Negroes into area—their resentment against Jewish businesses highlighted by Field's case and exploited by Communists; c) Talmud Torahs must be consolidated with increasing Negro migration in and Jews moving out." The organization viewed Brownsville as a neighborhood in transition and was working to see this change occur as peacefully as possible.⁷¹

Throughout the 1950s, the Hebrew Educational Society ran a vibrant and extensive program of social, recreational, and educational activities for all age groups. The society's weekly program listed all the following children's activities: a playschool, an after-school game room, a library, a gym, a cooking class, an art class, a social dance group, ballet classes, a crafts group, Sunday day camp, and scout activities. Among HES's teen programs were a community service league and events such as weekly dances and competitive sports leagues. Activities for adults included art programs, dance lessons, literary discussions, drama, and religious discussion groups. The seniors in the HES "Golden Age Club" participated in bingo, crafts,

sewing, dancing, and music programs. In addition to all these activities, members could participate in the HES Hebrew School, the HES Sunday School, the HES Music School, the HES Day Camp, Camp HES, and the Young People's Fellowship.⁷²

Despite changes in the neighborhood after World War II, the HES continued to play a vital role in the Brownsville community, as a partner in the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, as a participant in the School Council and the City Youth Board, and as a community representative to the board of education and the Parks Department. HES staff and board members insisted that the organization was needed by the community to help develop "well integrated personalities who will find pride in their Jewish heritage, while contributing to the preservation and expansion of the finest of American principles." However, outside financial supporters began to question the utility of the HES to Brownsville. In 1948, the Brooklyn Jewish Federation, HES's main contributor, merged with Jewish organizations in the other boroughs to form the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York/United Jewish Appeal (UJA). Over the next fifteen years, UJA administrators consistently doubted the viability of the HES program and pushed HES staff to relocate from Brownsville.⁷³

In the early 1950s, UJA representatives began to question HES staff about the impact of urban renewal and public housing on the society's operations. At this time, the population of the Brownsville Houses was approximately 50 percent Jewish, and HES members believed that the completion of the new project would "stabilize the number of Jews in the area." While they remained tentatively confident about the Brownsville Jewish community, as early as 1954 changes in the neighborhood affected the HES program. The Young People's Fellowship, a program for Jews in their late teens and twenties, was started in the early 1940s amid concerns that men and women were straying from their Jewish roots. Many of the people who participated in this program had moved out of the immediate area after World War II and therefore commuted to Fellowship activities. In 1954, HES staff decided to find a new facility to house the program because many of its members, particularly the women, would not venture through the neighborhood surrounding the building on Stone Avenue. In addition, "young people did not find it attractive to have their program run in an old and crowded building and it was felt that the program would be more appealing if it could be operated in a newer facility." HES staff argued that moving the program to a facility west of the headquarters, and closer to East Flatbush, would enable it to continue to flourish, gaining "additional members who wanted to be served but could not because there was no facility in that area

for young adults," and they secured a building on East New York and Ralph Avenues, in the extreme western section of Brownsville, an area that was still white. This early relocation of an important HES program foreshadowed the increasing pressures on the organization during the 1950s as the neighborhood's racial balance changed. In the mid-1950s, HES staff also abandoned plans to build an addition to their main facility. While HES staff argued throughout the following ten years that the organization was still relevant to the community, they did not have enough confidence in the future of the neighborhood to make any new investments.⁷⁴

Brownsville and Racial Change in Urban America

In the summer of 1955, the *New York Times* published a series of articles titled "Our Changing City" that described the transformation of the five boroughs. Much of the series focused on the construction of skyscrapers, cultural facilities, and new housing that signaled the city's growth. When the series described Brownsville, however, its focus shifted. "Desperation is the mood of most residents in the Brownsville-East New York section. The vast majority of inhabitants in this predominantly tenement area would, if they could, gladly follow tens of thousands of others who have gone," the article stated. Unlike other areas discussed in the series, no new development, other than public housing, was being undertaken in Brownsville. In this declining area "condemned buildings are not uncommon and many tenements seem ready to have boards hammered across the windows." Even though the area was still "eighty percent Jewish," the article noted that blacks and Puerto Ricans had been streaming into it. "In five years, ten at most, this will be another Harlem," stated Councilman Sam Curtis. Throughout the 1950s, Brownsville activists had worked to secure resources and create a positive atmosphere in the community. But, as the *Times* series revealed, their efforts had failed. Brownsville was viewed by New Yorkers as a future black and Latino ghetto.⁷⁵

In American cities across the country, racial animosity among white working-class residents shaped urban development. Whites reacted violently to the arrival of blacks in their neighborhoods, and this response influenced the placement of public housing and other government programs in these cities. While many neighborhoods "fell" to black "invasion" despite the efforts of whites, public and private agencies restricted the opportunities of African-Americans to obtain housing, and black ghettos expanded around the central city.⁷⁶

Housing options for black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers were extremely limited, and local realtors prevented minorities from buying or renting in several neighborhoods by informal but strict practices. These racially motivated restrictions placed increased burdens on neighborhoods like Brownsville, where whites responded peacefully to the arrival of new residents and attempted to create an atmosphere where the races could co-exist. The efforts of Brownsville leaders were successful in the sense that there was almost no racial violence in the area. But public policies continued to reinforce segregation across the city and denied the resources necessary to make Brownsville attractive to whites. Brownsville activists hoped to create a viable, integrated community, but they had neither the organizational infrastructure nor the influence to achieve their goals.

Advocates of segregated neighborhoods could easily support their position by reference to then prevalent social science theory, which, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, posited that cities were "naturally" divided by race. Most academics argued that diverse areas were inherently unstable, and well into the 1950s, the majority view was that integrated neighborhoods were an impossibility. Diverse neighborhoods were those "in transition" from white to black, and once the process commenced it was irreversible. Attempts at integration, according to this theory, were futile. At the same time, the federal government supported and deepened racial segregation through its lending policies. Federal Housing Administration guidelines established in the 1930s divided city neighborhoods by race and refused mortgage insurance to banks that lent to mixed areas. Federal guidelines reinforced the separation of the races and provided economic incentives to segregate. This "redlining" did not change until the early 1970s.⁷⁷

Religion also played a role in Brownsville's transformation. Moses and other politically aware planners kept public housing out of Catholic areas in Brooklyn because they feared a backlash from those constituencies. In fact, recent studies have confirmed the planners' belief that Jews were more upwardly mobile and would leave their old neighborhoods more easily than Catholics. John T. McGreevy, for example, argues that much of Catholic identity was based in the parish community. The Catholic Church made major investments in Catholic neighborhoods, building schools, hospitals, and recreation centers. As a result, Catholics had more incentives to remain in their neighborhoods, and they often violently opposed the incursions of blacks and Latinos. Brownsville's Jews had fewer physical ties to the community than Brooklyn's Italian and Irish populations. There were few significant institutions, and most of the synagogues were small and decrepit. But the emotional ties to the community were strong for many Brownsville

residents, as evidenced by the intensity of social activism during this period. Although Jews were more willing to leave aging neighborhoods, government hastened these decisions through its neighborhood improvement policies. In the 1950s public housing was considered a negative investment, while new schools and parks were viewed as positive resources. Brownsville received much of the former and almost none of the latter. Even assuming that policymakers were correct in their views that Jewish neighborhoods could turn over less violently, their decision making contributed to a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁷⁸

New York's liberal communities also played a role in Brownsville's transformation. With the exception of the American Labor Party, few of New York's advocates for the poor questioned Moses's urban renewal plans. Organizations like the Upper West Side's American Jewish Committee attempted to mute criticisms of renewal programs by labeling opponents of slum clearance Communists. The city's labor unions were too embroiled in factional politics to give the plight of Brownsville residents much consideration. Even organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League, whose mandates were to support integration, were slow to appreciate the impact of urban renewal. The Brownsville Neighborhood Council enlisted the support of all these organizations in its efforts to revitalize the community, but it received little assistance.

Compounding the problem, as the case of Henry Fields shows, the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s had a powerful influence on activism for progressive causes in New York. Throughout these years, hundreds of the city's established community organizers were accused of Communist sympathies, party affiliation, or worse and were excluded from New York's social and political life. The repressive atmosphere fostered by this inquisition silenced alternative views and narrowed the political debates over the shape of postwar America. The anticommunist crusade in New York, even more than most other cities, paralyzed liberals and their institutions, rendering them unable to cope with community change. Brownsville's history as a leftist community contributed further to its marginalization in the context of McCarthyite hysteria. Brownsville was, since its founding, labeled a Red district, and as a result, Brownsville leaders were unable to gain the support of local government or private institutions for their efforts. "During the Korean War and McCarthyism," according to Rae Glauber, "fear was so great that many organizations disappeared. . . . Fear crippled everything. People were afraid to sign any statement."⁷⁹

Powerful forces shaped urban communities in the 1950s. The half-century-long dispersion of the urban middle class, and the businesses they con-

trolled, accelerated in this decade, causing fiscal crises in many cities. The massive migration of African-Americans from the South to the North, coupled with the migration of Puerto Ricans to cities like New York, taxed city services in a period of political turmoil. City governments were unprepared to deal with these unprecedented changes. Even without the disruption caused by public housing and urban renewal, Brownsville faced serious problems in the 1950s. Its infrastructure was crumbling, and successful residents had been leaving for more than two decades.

Unlike organizations in Chicago, Detroit, and other cities across the country, most Brownsville institutions endorsed integration as a positive goal rather than viewing it as a threat to community viability. Through the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, the Brownsville Boys Club, and other organizations, Brownsville residents worked to develop coalitions between black, white, and Latino residents. Many Brownsville activists were social workers, and many more were familiar with the then prevalent philosophies of the discipline. They believed that with cooperation the community could overcome its problems, and they worked hard to organize Brownsville residents. However, despite significant efforts, Brownsville in 1960 was worse off than in 1940. The schools were more deteriorated, the streets dirtier, and the recreational facilities more decrepit. Most Brownsville leaders realized that the difficulties facing the neighborhood were not primarily the fault of the new residents, but of a government that failed to respond to their needs. Decades later, many former Brownsville residents, their memories clouded by nostalgia, pointed to the migration of African-Americans and Latinos as the cause of their neighborhood's deterioration. The reality was more complicated.

The failure of New York's political and institutional leaders reveals the limitations of postwar liberalism. The Democratic Party platform of 1948 recognized civil rights as an important issue for the first time in the history of the party, heralding a significant change in the government's treatment of blacks and other minorities. Yet fears of Communism combined with racism to overwhelm movements toward integration. In contrast to Brownsville activists, most whites in the United States were opposed to integration in the 1950s. But because of the inaction of political elites, interracial cooperation failed even in the comparatively favorable racial climate of Brownsville.