



Figure 16. St. Timothy Holy Church. Originally Chevra Torah Anshei Radishkowitz. Courtesy Jeffrey D. Hoeh.

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Racial Change in a Progressive Neighborhood, 1957–1965

Paul Chandler was born in Brooklyn and raised in Brownsville during the 1950s. As a black youth, he spent much of his time with the Jewish children in the neighborhood. “We used to play football in the area down near where the Jimmerson Houses are now, because there was a lot of open space. I made a lot of good friends there, and I was welcome in their homes.” Chandler remembered a vibrant, interracial community where people got along. “But when the public housing began to decline in the 1950s, the rest of the neighborhood began to change. Whites left the area in the early 1960s, and the neighborhood wasn’t the same.” Bea Seigel was one of the residents who left Brownsville during the 1950s. She was born and raised in the community, and she met her husband at a Brownsville Boys Club event. While Seigel continued to love the neighborhood, after World War II she felt it changing. “I used to take strolls with the carriage,” she remembered, “and after I had my second child I started to see things occurring where I wasn’t comfortable. I started to hear about incidents, and when I would walk with the two of them I would get flirtatious comments that were

not too comfortable." Seigel was sad to leave Brownsville, but she felt she had no choice.¹

Unlike other neighborhoods, there was no violent confrontation in Brownsville—the neighborhood transformation happened quietly but swiftly. "You didn't even see them go," recalled Chandler. "They just kind of snuck out and you'd look up and there was another black family." Change was particularly rapid in the large apartment buildings to the south and west of the oldest section. "We used to call them the 'Jewish Apartment Houses,' because only Jews lived in the large buildings." Blacks, by contrast, lived in the smaller, older frame houses. Chandler and his friends used to play handball on the walls of the large buildings. "On Sundays and evenings, they used to congregate in front of the building, and we couldn't play handball. But after a while we could play anytime we wanted to."²

Despite the efforts of local activists and the best intentions of community residents, in the early 1960s Brownsville became part of Brooklyn's black and Latino ghetto. Several Brownsville residents, like those involved in the Brownsville Neighborhood Council and other organizations, tried to adapt to the changes in the neighborhood. Many of these residents were raised as socialists and taught to identify with blacks and other exploited minorities. While significant numbers of whites remained, many of those who prided themselves on their liberal attitudes felt themselves forced out as they saw their neighborhood turning into what they considered to be a war zone. Emblematic was the story of one Jewish woman, a veteran of socialist politics, who remained in Brownsville public housing long after most of her contemporaries had moved out. Despite her active role in civil rights and community organizations, she felt compelled to leave after she was beaten by a black woman while doing her laundry in the basement of the project.³

In 1957, the Census Bureau conducted a special survey of the city. It found that Brownsville's total population had declined since 1950 by about 2,500 (to 85,328), but its black population grew by almost 50 percent (from 14,177 to 21,584). A year later, relying on the census report, the Community Council of Greater New York conducted an extensive survey of the city's neighborhoods. It noted the increase in black residents and discussed the more striking growth of the area's Puerto Rican residents. The 1957 census did not categorize Puerto Ricans (most of whom listed themselves as "white"), but using birth data and school records, the Community Council estimated Brownsville's Puerto Rican population to number 12,000. Whites, with about 60 percent of the population, were still a majority in the

neighborhood, but their dominance declined dramatically during this period.⁴

Other statistics also revealed a changing community. In all but one local school, blacks and Latinos were in the majority. Many white families with young children had moved out by the late 1950s, the parents afraid to send their kids to local schools that were decrepit in addition to being majority black and Latino. Other white parents sent their kids to private schools (a few small Jewish schools had opened in the late 1950s) or had them transferred to other districts. As a result of the departure of young families, the age gap between whites and nonwhites widened. By the early 1960s the majority of whites remaining were elderly. The Community Council estimated that 46,000 whites had left the Brownsville/East New York area between 1950 and 1958. Many more were to leave in the next five years. By 1962, only 80,000 people lived in Brownsville, and more than 75 percent of these residents were black or Puerto Rican. By 1970 Brownsville was 77 percent black, 19 percent Puerto Rican, and only 4 percent white.⁵

Other Brooklyn communities experienced similar transformations. As the Bedford-Stuyvesant ghetto expanded east into Brownsville, it also moved west, into Fort Greene. The south Brooklyn neighborhoods of Flatbush, Bensonhurst, and Bay Ridge remained closed to blacks and Latinos because of racial steering by realtors and violent attacks on minorities who ventured into these areas. As a result, the ghetto grew along the east-west axis of Atlantic Avenue into areas such as Crown Heights and East Flatbush. Brownsville, already declining, was particularly affected by the increase of the mostly poor minority populations uprooted from other areas of New York City. Urban renewal, public housing, and the development of affordable housing in other areas all played a part. Locally rising crime rates (as well as the perception of rising crime), declining housing stock, and deteriorating conditions in public schools made Brownsville increasingly unattractive to whites, who had other housing options.

Every family that moved from Brownsville considered many factors in making its decision. Change began at the level of the family but quickly affected Brownsville's social and religious organizations. Synagogue closures accelerated during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Several old congregations were demolished in the expansion of the city's public housing program, while others sold their buildings to the burgeoning Baptist and other Christian congregations in the area. At the same time, the Hebrew Educational Society (HES), the neighborhood's predominant educational and re-

ligious institution since the 1910s, struggled with changes in Brownsville's racial makeup. HES leaders debated for more than a decade whether to leave Brownsville, and when the organization did close, the Jewish community was officially extinguished. For six decades the HES served as a community center, a linchpin for community organizing, and a resource upon which residents depended for bringing badly needed social services to the area. Its departure in 1965 formally marked the end of the old neighborhood.

Though social scientists have been interested in neighborhood racial transition for more than fifty years, theories explaining the process are extremely speculative. Few researchers have attempted detailed studies of neighborhood transformation, and most theories are untested. Social scientists in the 1950s posited an inevitable process of neighborhood change typified by four stages: (1) "penetration," the initial entry of blacks; (2) "invasion," the subsequent settlement of a large number of blacks; (3) "consolidation," the departure of whites from the neighborhood; and (4) "piling-up," the subdivision of units by landlords taking advantage of continuing demand by blacks to increase profits. This four-step process, and the pejorative terms describing the stages, was widely accepted by academics in the early postwar years. Racial prejudice certainly shaped early theories of racial succession, but even those who supported integration accepted the inevitability of the four-stage process. Sociologists argued that racism was frequently a secondary factor in neighborhood transformation, but even areas with liberal views toward blacks experienced racial change. Social scientists asserted that white residents typically left neighborhoods because of "natural mobility" resulting from increases in income and opportunities for better housing. Racial change occurred, according to theorists, when neighborhoods were no longer able to attract new white residents.⁶

Studies of racial change in the 1950s often focused on middle-class neighborhoods where middle-class blacks seeking to escape the ghetto attempted to buy homes. Brownsville, by contrast, was designated a "slum" long before blacks entered it in significant numbers. Citing inadequate facilities and better housing opportunities in newer neighborhoods, Brownsville's second-generation residents were moving to better parts of Brooklyn and to the suburbs for more than two decades. This migration simply accelerated in the 1950s as new areas opened in Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island. Large numbers of Brownsville whites moved to Canarsie, whose population swelled from 47,000 in 1958 to 104,000 in 1963. Often

purchasing houses for the first time, Brownsville residents moved to new, more luxurious dwellings.⁷

The most frequent cause for departure from the neighborhood was social mobility. "The minorities were used as a scapegoat by a younger generation ready to cut its ties to the past," argues sociologist Jonathon Reider. Brownsville housing and facilities did not compare to the newer areas of Brooklyn and Long Island. When people secured the resources to improve their material situation, they took advantage of the opportunity. However, as the 1950s ended, increasing numbers of residents left for racial reasons. As more and more neighbors moved out, the pressure on those who remained increased. In many communities the term "block-busting" became common in this period, as unscrupulous real estate agents used white fears and black demands for housing to reap profits in changing neighborhoods. The impact of direct racial appeals was not as significant in Brownsville as it was in other areas, because the majority of the dwellings in Brownsville were apartments. Most Brownsville residents were not concerned about declining property values because they did not own their own homes.⁸

Blacks and Latinos moved into buildings that were rapidly deteriorating. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, fire deaths occurred more frequently than ever. In August 1959, four people were killed and more than forty made homeless by a fire that destroyed two buildings on Watkins Street. Officials determined that vagrants had accidentally set the fire, but the deteriorated condition of the building exacerbated the damage. In February 1960, a fire on Powell Street that began in the middle of the block and quickly spread in both directions destroyed seven buildings. A *New York Amsterdam News* reporter found decrepit conditions in several Brownsville tenements. "There are rows of run-down, wooden buildings which would, if a fire broke out, make the Chicago fire look like a bonfire," the paper said. Many had no running water or heat.⁹

By 1960, whites were the minority in the oldest sections of Brownsville. Only the areas to the west and the extreme south contained a white majority. In the early 1960s, most whites in these places also departed. As vacancies arose in apartments and houses, landlords rented to blacks and Latinos desperate for affordable units. Crime and juvenile delinquency in the area combined with an expanding black and Latino presence to push more whites out of the neighborhood. Most crimes in Brownsville occurred to the north, along East New York and Saint Mark's Avenues as well as in the public housing complex. But white residents had to travel through these troubled areas, and they feared that violence would spread into their blocks.



Figure 17. Abandoned apartment on Powell Street. Courtesy BBC Alumni Association.

As a result, in a period of five years, Brownsville went from being two-thirds white to 80 percent black and Puerto Rican.

The Unholy Trinity: Race, Crime, and Public Housing

In 1960 Jack Feinberg, a white tenant of the Van Dyke public housing project in Brownsville, wrote to his congressman, Emmanuel Celler, requesting assistance in getting a transfer to the Pink or Breukelen Houses in East New York. Although the letter complained about the asthma and other diseases of his children that were exacerbated in the troubled project, Feinberg's main problem was that Van Dyke was "80 percent minority." Feinberg clearly struggled with this request. "I have collected money for CORE, NAACP, Jewish charities . . . and many others. I am a Democrat and I believe in the rights of all people," he said. However, because of the transformation the project was undergoing, he believed that the addition of the Tilden project to the area would make it "impossible to properly bring up a child." Feinberg's dilemma was created by two decades of government pol-

icy that reshaped New York into two separate societies—one white, the other black and Latino.¹⁰

Former Brownsville residents often cited increasing crime as the main reason for their departure. Scholars of neighborhood change argue that "once individuals decide that their neighborhood has begun to decline, they become more generally helpless and more generally fearful, and they select evidence around them that reinforces this view." Indicators of neighborhood health—crime, conflict in public housing, deteriorating schools—all told whites that Brownsville was not a good place to live. According to a 1962 report for the first six months of the year, the Seventy-third Precinct, which was contiguous with Brownsville's borders, witnessed 8 homicides, 8 rapes, 147 assaults, 73 robberies, and 166 burglaries during that period. Brownsville suffered 990 felonies (placing it fourteenth out of eighty-three precincts), and had 2,653 misdemeanors, the fifth highest number in the city. Brownsville's total of 4,015 crimes was also the fourteenth highest in the city.¹¹

Both New York City and the borough of Brooklyn experienced a dramatic increase in crime during this period. In 1957, there were 314 murders in the New York City. That number rose to 390 in 1959, to 483 in 1961, and to 637 in 1964. The number of murders in Brooklyn more than doubled from 88 to 206 during the same period. The total number of felonies and misdemeanors in New York City was 173,830 in 1957. By 1964, the figure jumped to 375,155. Among the boroughs, Manhattan had the highest crime rate, but Brooklyn was a close second. Brooklyn reported 111,346 crimes in 1964, 30 percent of the city total. Brownsville was part of a much larger trend that grabbed the attention of New York residents.¹²

The New York Police Department destroyed almost all precinct-level data for the years prior to 1970, making a full examination of the impact of crime on Brownsville impossible. But other statistics revealed a rise in disorder during the late 1950s. Between 1957 and 1963, juvenile arrests increased significantly, rising by 20 percent in the northeast corner of the neighborhood where the Howard Houses were located. They climbed by more than 15 percent in and around the Brownsville, Van Dyke, and Tilden Houses. In 1963, Brownsville ranked first in the city in juvenile crimes, and the area's rating of 130 offenses per 1,000 juveniles was substantially higher than the statistics for Harlem and more than twice the citywide rate of 50.6. These data are not an entirely reliable guide to criminal activity—juvenile delinquency rates often fluctuated not according to increases or decreases in crime but in relation to the changing attitudes of the adult population—but the rise in youth arrests strongly affected many white residents.¹³

The largest percentage increases in juvenile delinquency were in the western and southern sections of Brownsville—areas where whites were still a majority. In these sectors, the offense rate more than doubled between 1957 and 1963. It remained lower than in the minority sections, but the increase in delinquency exacerbated the fears of Brownsville whites over the area's changing racial composition. The section south of the Brownsville Houses was shifting most rapidly from white to black during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Conflicts between white, black, and Latino youths resulted in desperate demands by residents for additional police protection.¹⁴

While they were responsible for only a small percentage of total crimes, gangs attracted increasing attention from residents, journalists, and politicians. In the late 1950s, city newspapers reported a constant stream of gang conflicts, particularly in the changing areas of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Whites continued to join gangs in the 1950s, but the black and Puerto Rican youths who crowded into the city's declining ghettos formed the majority of the serious gangs. Gangs battled over turf, for scarce resources such as parks and swimming pools, and for the respect of their peers, but they rarely preyed upon adults. Gang violence was targeted against competing groups of youths. These struggles seldom resulted in death, but an increase in gang violence coincided with rising crime rates to heighten fears in racially changing neighborhoods.¹⁵

A 1960 investigation by reporters from the *New York World Telegram and Sun* found sixty-two "active" gangs in Brooklyn, eleven of which were in Brownsville. While many of them were involved in criminal activities, most of these groups, said reporters, were "organized primarily for street fighting" among themselves. In response to increasing concerns over gang violence, the New York City Youth Board announced a special project to spend \$250,000 to send workers into Brownsville and a few other hot spots to calm gang tensions. The Youth Board called Brownsville a "high hazard" area. "The problem of drugs, excessive drinking, gambling, and sex parties is seen in the Brownsville area as a community problem which, at times, involves a great many youngsters," asserted Youth Board officials. The biggest gangs were the "Roman Lords," a predominantly Puerto Rican gang; and the "Frechmen" and "Johnquils," predominantly black gangs. Both were based in the northern section of Brownsville, along East New York Avenue, Saint Mark's Avenue, and Prospect Place. Another major gang in the area was the "Corsair Lords," based in the nearby Kingsborough Houses. These groups battled for turf and over the expanding drug trade, particularly heroin.¹⁶

Gang violence usually involved only gang members, but innocent bystanders also became victims. In July 1959, a father of ten was fatally stabbed

trying to protect others from harassment by the Corsair Lords. Whites had long before vacated the areas contested by the gangs, but many white Brownsville residents worked in the area in factories along East New York and Atlantic Avenues, and in commercial businesses along Fulton and Rockaway Avenues. Many others had to cross the area from the Fulton Avenue subway line to their homes in the southern section of Brownsville. Robberies and muggings along the Rockaway Avenue corridor were a daily occurrence. In March 1960, police charged one local man (not identified as a gang member) with thirteen armed holdups in just a few months. In the remaining white sections, violent crime was less frequent, but neighbors complained about vandalism and other petty crime. One landlord on Powell Street complained that a "gang of Puerto Ricans ages 10–15 have broken windows, doors, tiles, bulbs, roof tops, poles, [and] set fires to fences, ash cans, [and mattresses]." Because of the gangs, the anonymous complainant continued, some landlords were giving up on their buildings, allowing the youths to take over. Since the police did nothing to stop the boys, "they have become so brazen that they have even thrown rocks and bags of water off the roof at everyone that passes by." Police officials responded that they were well aware of the problem and had taken steps to increase police presence in the area, but they did not consider the situation serious.¹⁷

Although crimes occurred throughout New York City, public housing projects became a lightning rod for attention. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, NYCHA officials deflected accusations that their buildings were crime-ridden. Newspaper articles frequently described gang battles and other criminal activities in public housing, which became increasingly identified with violence at the same time that they were becoming predominantly occupied by minorities. NYCHA officials argued that the stories were not true—that the projects were among the safest areas in the low-income neighborhoods that most frequently surrounded them. "There is not, and there never has been, any crime wave in public housing in New York City," argued NYCHA Chairman William Reid. "Captains of various precincts in the city have consistently reported that there are fewer crimes and incidents in public housing developments than in the surrounding areas making up the balance of the precincts." According to NYCHA staff, the 1961 crime rate for felonies and serious misdemeanors was 3.8 per thousand persons in the projects, almost half the 6.3 crime rate for the city as a whole. In 1961, there were 23 homicides at authority-managed projects (out of 483 citywide), 660 assaults (out of 11,021), 124 burglaries (out of 483), and 67 rapes (out of 1,211). While denying the existence of a major crime wave, the NYCHA expanded security measures across the city. The housing author-

ity police force more than doubled from 313 officers in 1958 to 712 (plus 200 private "security officials") in 1962. The NYCHA also added over 500 paid staff and 750 volunteers during the summer of 1962 to operate recreational programs designed to combat juvenile delinquency.¹⁸

Crime might have been lower in projects across the city, but in Brownsville the NYCHA's units were among the city's most troubled. According to 1961 statistics, the arrest rate at the Van Dyke Houses was the highest in the city at 14.1 per thousand persons. The arrest rate at Brownsville Houses was 9.5, the third highest in public housing, almost triple the NYCHA average of 3.8. Both the recently opened Tilden Houses and the Howard Houses had arrest rates lower than the city average (2.7 and 3.1 respectively). For many Brownsville residents, the Van Dyke Houses became the emblem for all of the neighborhood's problems, and housing authority staff constantly reported to high-level officials about small and large conflicts at Van Dyke. Numerous confrontations between black and Puerto Rican youths and housing police officers occurred, especially during the summer months when teenagers and young adults congregated outdoors. On three separate occasions in July 1961, local youths assaulted police officers attempting to disperse crowds. In one incident, according to NYCHA security, "large groups of Negroes and Puerto Ricans became disorderly at Livonia and Powell Street." A "riot call" was sent to New York City police and twenty-three people were arrested. Security officials argued that most of the troublemakers were not public housing tenants—that they lived in the neighborhoods surrounding the projects. "Large groups of adults loiter about in the daytime, many of them drinking in the streets and engaging in drunken brawls. There also seems to be wide-spread drug addiction," the report concluded.¹⁹

By 1962, just eight years after the Van Dyke Houses opened, federal officials raised concerns about the project, and they frequently questioned the NYCHA about its plan to quell disturbances. Authority officials responded that the New York City Youth Board was working with the gangs, the Youth Employment Service with other area teens, and that they initiated a "special consultant team of social workers" to organize tenants associations and "related self-help programs." NYCHA staff assisted "multi-problem families" and worked with Brownsville organizations to coordinate the response of social service agencies. NYCHA officials acknowledged that their plan "may not bring immediate radical change to the conditions" in the area, but they had no better response. Racial tensions in the project increased along with crime during the early 1960s. Many minor and several more significant

incidents between black and Latino youths and elderly white persons drew the attention of housing officials. Often, according to housing officials, the seniors would reprimand the youths for being loud and inconsiderate, and the incident would escalate from there. "There are no sitting areas exclusively for the use of the aged and teenagers playing don't look where they throw the ball," reported one staff member. "When the oldsters scold them, they retaliate with insults." After one such confrontation, three elderly white women residents were "bombarded by a group of fifteen teenagers with rocks, old shoes," and other projectiles. One woman asserted that when she tried to flee to the elevator, one teenage girl held the door while others pelted the woman.²⁰

Managers of the projects downplayed the incidents with such comments in their reports as "things aren't quite this bad." But white residents at Van Dyke actively sought transfers to other projects, and the number of requests skyrocketed in the early 1960s. One family requested a transfer after their son was beaten up in the stairwell of their building by "Negro boys who called him 'poor white trash' and 'dirty Jew.'" A mother in another white family wrote repeatedly to authority staff and other government officials, asking for a transfer out of Van Dyke. The tenant argued that the conditions were "deplorable" and stated that "bottles came flying out windows, balloons filled with water from the roof and my children get bombarded with them from undesirables here." Black youths, according to the tenant, also threw rocks at her husband. "When we moved in six-and-a-half years ago," she said, "I made up my mind to get along with all. Now the Negro children feel they outnumber us completely and they pick on us Jew whites and call us filthy names. . . . The project itself is causing racial wars here."²¹

Authority staff argued that these differences could be overcome by a tenants organization "to teach understanding for others." But most white residents had little faith in the ability of housing officials to increase understanding and respect within the projects. One elderly tenant requested a transfer even though "the services were excellent." The tenant argued that "she was fearful of leaving the apartment for fear of being hurt by youngsters while playing." The woman said she had been very active in the community, but that she saw no point in remaining in the area. Another tenant felt that she was a "prisoner in a golden cage. The apartment is lovely, but she is afraid to go out," reported NYCHA staff. The tenant argued that only an increase in white tenants would make it possible for her to stay. "If there were enough families no one group would feel the project belonged to them. However, when there were so few whites the Negroes seemed to resent their presence."²²

Many families, black, white, and Latino, left public housing for private accommodations in this period; people on public assistance or social security, however, had fewer options and so they hoped to move to other projects. White residents at Van Dyke in the early 1960s tried several avenues to achieve their goal of a transfer. According to housing officials, the white tenants' first request often noted the changing racial character of the projects. A subsequent request would state a medical condition with a "vague diagnosis" and later statements would involve "unkind remarks hurled at them by Negro adults and children, or about the lack of playmates for their children, or of incidents that have taken place which make them feel unwanted." Project officials realized that eventually the families would find an acceptable argument for transfer and that when a unit became available they would leave. By 1963, only twenty-five white families (there were additional elderly single persons) remained at Van Dyke Houses, and all of them were trying to get out.²³

White families were not the only ones desirous of leaving Van Dyke. Many black and Puerto Rican families also requested transfers in the early 1960s. One black family of five that was crowded into a four-room unit complained that they and other minority tenants were denied transfers to the same projects where whites were approved. Another tenant argued that the NYCHA offered black tenants "only segregated projects in areas with bad schools." Project managers responded that large families had longer waiting periods because of the lack of large apartments. They noted that "because of the greater availability of small apartments, small (usually white elderly) families are more likely to be successful in getting apartments in projects of their choice (Pink, Breukelen, Marlboro)." While a small number of large apartments were available in new buildings, these were most frequently in segregated areas, and many blacks rejected them. "Most tenants," staffers acknowledged, "white and non-white, who transfer . . . also wish to live in a better neighborhood." But because the NYCHA continued to develop in slum areas, this was frequently impossible, especially for blacks and Puerto Ricans.²⁴

Forging a New Ghetto

The same year that Jack Feinberg wrote to request a transfer out of the Van Dyke Houses, the tenants of the Brownsville Houses organized a protest at the New York City Housing Authority. The tenants looked at the new Tilden project through the jaundiced eyes of those who had already

witnessed racial transformation, and they demanded that the Tilden Houses be integrated. "Segregated housing," they argued, "naturally brings about segregated schools, and the children who attend these segregated Negro and Puerto Rican schools are receiving an education of very low quality. Their chances for a bright successful future are being sabotaged. This disgraceful situation cannot continue." Brownsville tenants believed that the NYCHA planned a segregated community. At the time, Tilden was the most integrated of the housing projects. Over 30 percent of its tenants in 1962 were white. By 1970, however, Tilden was as segregated as the Brownsville Houses.²⁵

While it was widely praised in its early years, by 1960 public housing was a failure in the minds of the American public, where the unholy trinity of racial minorities, crime, and public projects became intertwined. In fact, the majority of housing project tenants (in New York City and across the country) were white, the crime rate in projects was lower than outside, and these units provided desperately needed housing to the "worthy poor" (working, two-parent families)—but these data were lost in the increasing animosity against these programs. Statistics for Brownsville projects during the early 1960s revealed that public housing continued to serve the working poor, even though they were of a different color. At Brownsville and Howard Houses, only 18 percent of tenant families received public assistance. At Van Dyke Houses, 16 percent were on welfare, and at the higher-income Tilden project only 8 percent received aid. The overwhelming majority of tenants in Brownsville public housing were from working families.²⁶

Despite the fact that new tenants were also the "worthy poor," the increasing number of blacks and Puerto Ricans was the constant concern of New York politicians and bureaucrats. Brownsville was not the only community to experience neighborhood transformation in the late 1950s. Many areas were witnessing similar changes, and, like Brownsville, they often blamed the New York City Housing Authority for their problems. In the spring of 1957, in consideration of neighborhood complaints but primarily in response to allegations of corruption and mismanagement at the housing authority, Mayor Robert F. Wagner directed the city comptroller, Charles F. Preusse, to prepare an in-depth study of the operations of the NYCHA and to make recommendations for reform. Although Preusse cited no statistics to back his claim, his opinion was that the increase in minority tenants was directly related to the increase in "problem families": "We find the entrance of undesirable families into the projects, creating a hard-core of problem tenants which, while small in number, are the root of deep troubles

both to their neighbors and to the Authority." In order to alleviate the concentration of troubled tenants, his report recommended "A far more careful screening of applicants" and an effort to create a "more balanced population, economically, which would tend to remove any existing stigma from low-income public housing and would also tend to raise the standards of social conduct within the projects."²⁷

The changes in income rules proposed by Preusse served as a proxy for concerns over the racial makeup of public projects. For more than two decades, the NYCHA denied that race should play any role in housing decisions, but in February 1959 the housing authority initiated a new program that established goals for the racial composition of the projects and a plan to achieve greater racial balance in public housing. Under the plan, whites received preference for admission into predominantly minority projects, and blacks and Latinos had priority in projects with a white majority. In adopting the NYCHA's plan, Race Relations Consultant Madison S. Jones argued that "We're trying to kill the idea that public housing is minority housing. If we can get into this thing sensibly with the community groups, we can reverse the tendency towards segregation."²⁸

In 1960, Bernard Roshco, a former NYCHA staff member, wrote an article criticizing the little-known integration plan. The policy, he argued, resulted in the housing authority holding apartments vacant, sometimes for months, in search of white applicants when eligible black and Puerto Rican applicants were in need of shelter. In several instances, four-room apartments, usually reserved for families with one or two children, were rented to childless white couples willing to accept them. "Whatever the long-range benefits that may accrue from the integration program," argued Roshco, "the immediate result for non-white applicants is a sharp reduction in the number of apartments available."²⁹

The NYCHA, arguing that it had not made the plan public because "it might be misunderstood," quickly responded to Roshco's article by defending its integration efforts. Chairman Reid, within the same month as the release of Roshco's article, discussed the program with civil rights leaders, journalists, and the State Commission Against Discrimination. In his public statements, Reid asserted that the program had not drastically changed the composition of any project. Housing managers were authorized to hold apartments vacant only when applicants whose occupancy would further integration were in the process of approval. The number of apartments kept vacant for this purpose was very small. Only sixty-five apartments were reserved as of June 30, 1960, according to NYCHA statistics. "Race does not take priority over the criterion of housing need. There has been no reduc-

tion in the number of apartments available to non-whites. No apartments are restricted to whites only. There are no quotas on the number of families in any racial group which may be admitted to any project," Reid asserted. The chairman's statements only confirmed that the NYCHA program was having little effect. The majority of the housing authority's projects were, and would remain, segregated.³⁰

The revelation of the integration program resulted in a flurry of interest within the city's liberal community. Because they were directly involved in crafting the plan, most of the city's civil rights organizations came to the support of the NYCHA. On August 27, 1960, twenty-six organizations, including the NAACP, New York State Conference, the New York Chapter of the American Jewish Committee, the New York Office of Labor Migration of Puerto Rico, the National Conference on Christians and Jews, and the Department of Social Relations of the Protestant Council of the City of New York, held a news conference to endorse the program. Said the organizations, "We fully support the objectives of the New York City Housing Authority, under the chairmanship of William Reid, in its efforts to achieve actual racial integration in the housing facilities it operates. We have worked with the housing authority to advance that objective in the past and will continue to do so in the future." Happy that the NYCHA finally accepted its social responsibilities, civil rights organizations chose to ignore thirty years of intransigence on the issue of integration.³¹

The actual effect of this program was negligible. Except for a few projects, the segregation of New York's public housing projects continued unabated. During 1960, twenty white families moved out of the Brownsville Houses—only two moved in. Forty-two white families left the troubled Van Dyke Houses, and fourteen moved in. Only in the Howard Houses, which already had the highest percentage of whites in Brownsville projects (35 percent), did the program have some success. There, twenty-three white families moved out during 1960, and sixty-four were admitted. These new families clearly took the place of black and Latino applicants—only six black and one Puerto Rican family were admitted. Several of the minority families rejected from the Howard Houses undoubtedly ended up in Brownsville or Van Dyke. Fifty-eight black families left Van Dyke in 1960, while seventy-three moved in. At Brownsville, sixty black families left, while seventy-four were admitted. The number of Puerto Rican families increased by a similar amount. Public housing in New York remained segregated, and by 1964 the NYCHA de-emphasized the program.³²

The housing authority's integration program was handcuffed by two decades of indifference and active segregation on the part of project plan-

ners. By placing public housing in segregated neighborhoods or, as in the case of Brownsville, in areas on their fringe, the NYCHA ensured that its population would be racially divided. The relocation of thousands of poor blacks and Latinos by the urban renewal program also made the development of integrated, middle-income housing difficult. Despite the efforts of the BNC, when housing officials argued that middle-income projects were not viable, they were probably right. Given the NYCHA's policies, it was a risky investment to build such housing. White, middle-income New Yorkers had many housing options. Even the black middle class had options better than Brownsville. Why would they choose Brownsville, an area that the city had so clearly directed toward decay?

Moses and his staff had called Brownsville Houses a "Negro project" even when it was integrated. By 1962, their forecast had come true. At its initial 1949 occupancy, Brownsville Houses' population was 52 percent white and 46 percent black. In 1962 the project's tenantry was 81 percent black, 12 percent Puerto Rican, and only 7 percent white (almost half of the white population were older than sixty). The Van Dyke Houses' population experienced a similar change. In 1954, the first year of its operation, the project's population was 43 percent white and 57 percent black. In 1962, this project's population was 72 percent black, 15 percent Puerto Rican, and 16 percent white (60 percent of them older than sixty). Statistics were not available for the initial occupancy of Howard Houses, but in 1962 the population was 50 percent black, 19 percent Puerto Rican, and 30 percent white (this percentage would be cut in half by 1964). By 1965, all of Brownsville's projects, like the rest of the community, were segregated.³³

Despite the promises of a new philosophy for project siting embodied in the 1957 Preusse Report, the NYCHA's plans for Brownsville were little different in the 1960s than they were in the previous decade. In 1963, after the Kennedy administration increased funding for the public housing program, the NYCHA announced plans for three additional public housing projects in Brownsville: the Seth Low Houses, with four high-rise buildings containing 536 low-income units; the Langston Hughes Apartments, with three high-rise buildings including 509 apartments; and Glenmore Plaza, a project of four high-rise buildings with 438 units of housing. These projects, thus comprising 1,483 units, were located in the industrial and tenement wasteland between the Howard Houses and the Brownsville Houses complex, creating a wall of public housing that stretched almost a mile from the northern end of Brownsville straight through the community. As before, city planning officials acknowledged the extreme concentration of units but argued that no other redevelopment was possible. "It does not ap-

pear to be feasible to utilize this area for middle-income housing and the only alternative to a continuation of the present deplorable conditions would appear to be redevelopment with public housing," they argued.³⁴

Unlike the reaction to earlier projects, there was little opposition to the NYCHA's plans from the community or the Citizens' Housing and Planning Commission (CHPC). While CHPC staff continued their philosophical objections to such concentrations of low-income units, a staff memo argued that "occupancy in public housing is considered to be a step upward in this neighborhood; and the leadership of the Negro and Puerto Rican groups in the area were tenants in public housing projects." Many Brownsville leaders did support the development of additional housing. Some saw it as an answer to the significant housing needs of the community; others agreed with city officials that public housing would be much better than the squalid slums that existed in the area to be redeveloped. While some activists continued to lobby for the development of middle-income housing, groups like the BNC and the Brownsville Committee on Youth had dissolved, and new organizations that would emerge during the War on Poverty were yet to coalesce. As a result, the economic and racial segregation of Brownsville's housing continued. Swift change in Brownsville housing combined with increasing segregation within local schools to accelerate neighborhood transition.³⁵

New Yorkers viewed Brownsville's public projects as minority housing by the late 1950s, and local schools were not far behind. Debates over integration in New York's public schools were fierce in the 1950s and 1960s, and they affected Brownsville's transformation. In the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision invalidating segregated schools, the New York NAACP and other civil rights organizations in the city increased their efforts to integrate the public school system, which at the time was almost as segregated as those in the South. The Brooklyn NAACP chapter, working with an association of liberal organizations called the Intergroup Committee on New York's Public Schools, lobbied the board of education to use its new school construction program to build schools that would draw from diverse populations. They fought for the placement of schools in fringe areas that bordered Bedford-Stuyvesant, particularly Flatbush and Brownsville. In 1956 a heated battle ensued when the board of education chose to locate the planned Junior High School 258 within the Bedford-Stuyvesant school district and refused to adjust the boundaries of the district to support integration by drawing on the surrounding communities. The board did promise advocates that in the future integration would be made a priority. However, despite the work of these groups, school officials remained op-

posed to planned integration, and Brooklyn's public schools by the late 1950s were more segregated than they had been at the beginning of the decade.³⁶

Brownsville residents were a significant part of the school integration movement. These activists did not use the Brownsville Neighborhood Council as their medium, however, because it was almost defunct, and its remaining energy was devoted to preventing any further damage to Brownsville's remaining white population. While a few BNC members continued to live in Brownsville, most had moved out or to the extreme western end of the neighborhood. Even Irving Tabb, the last BNC president, had moved to East Flatbush, and under his continued leadership, from 1958 until it disbanded in the early 1960s, the BNC served primarily to protect the interests of whites on the borders of Brownsville. The group made no attempts to reach out to or organize the blacks and Puerto Ricans who had recently moved to the area, and in fact the minority membership of the group declined during this period. One Youth Board worker argued that most white activists "think only in terms of the problems of their area," and not about the concerns of the larger community. In 1958, only two of thirty-four BNC directors were black, and neither was active in the group.³⁷

Despite Brownsville's negative atmosphere and the feeling among most whites that racial change was inevitable, in the late 1950s a small number of progressives, including BNC members Rae Glauber, Sarah Goldstein, and Irene Eisenberg, joined with African-American and Puerto Rican activists, including Winnie Coalbrooke and Fanette Uργο, to form the Brownsville Council on Youth (BCY). This organization, affiliated with the New York City Youth Board, was founded to combat juvenile delinquency, but it took on an expanded portfolio of activity with the primary goal of maintaining integration in the neighborhood. To this end, the BCY devised a project to coordinate the activities of public and private agencies and prominent individuals to actively promote the idea of an integrated community in Brownsville. The group proposed that the NYCHA make special efforts to integrate the Tilden project by focusing on attracting "normal families (both parents in home, mother not working)" and assigning an intake person to the Hebrew Educational Society "since maximum 'push' needs to be to encourage white families to apply." Activists planned a large campaign with mass mailings, posters, films, and newspaper articles to generate interest in the community and to convince white people to move into the projects and to remain in the area. And in an effort to decrease racial tensions, the program also included the distribution of instructional materials to local schools. However, despite the efforts of Brownsville activists in planning

their program, they were unable to convince local or citywide institutions to support the project, and it was never initiated. While NYCHA officials in 1958 had pledged to increase their efforts to integrate projects across the city, housing administrators made no specific promises to BCY members.³⁸

The integration struggle continued in the early 1960s when Brooklyn civil rights groups joined with Brownsville residents to lobby the board of education to build a planned junior high school, JHS 275, in an area where it would draw students from Brownsville, East New York, and Canarsie. Reverend Helen Archibald of Saint Luke's Congregational Church, Alex Efthim of the Jimmerson Houses Committee for Cooperative Living, and Thelma Hamilton, president of the Brownsville Houses Tenants Council, joined others to create the "Emergency Committee for the Integration of Junior High School 275." They argued that an integrated school could support their efforts to maintain diversity in Brownsville housing, but many white residents in the area opposed the plan. In an ironic twist, these parents organized through the near-defunct Brownsville Neighborhood Council to oppose the development of JHS 275 in a fringe area between the communities and argued that it should be built in the heart of Brownsville. BNC President Irving Tabb asserted that the immediate need for new facilities in Brownsville outweighed the longer-term goals of integrated schools, but the real motive behind the BNC's lobbying was to keep Brownsville's black and Latino students separate from the white youths of Canarsie and East Flatbush. These former Brownsville residents wanted a separate junior high school built in Canarsie.³⁹

The local school board also opposed the integrated site. Thelma Hamilton argued that the board was unrepresentative (it was made up entirely of residents from Canarsie and East Flatbush) and that twenty-five hundred residents had joined her committee in favor of the fringe site. Rae Glauber, who had been a leader of the BNC, was in 1962 a member of the Brownsville Council on Youth. She remembered that the conflict over the location of the new junior high school lasted two years and sharply split the community. "The integrated site won, for those who favored it were the new, emerging forces, the Negroes and Puerto Ricans; and the new white people planning to remain in Brownsville, who were the Jimmerson Cooperative residents." The Jewish War Veterans and the local American Jewish Congress also supported integration. Succumbing to this pressure, the board of education finally agreed to build at the site proposed by integration advocates. During its construction, however, education officials decided to change the district that the school would serve. Integrationists once again organized to protest that the school as planned would be 90 percent

black and Latino instead of the intended fifty-fifty ratio between whites and the other ethnic groups. After a long debate with education officials and white parents, a zoning plan was drafted to create a school that was more integrated than most Brooklyn schools—but the majority of its student body continued to be blacks and Latinos. The failure of local activists to achieve integrated schooling ended the possibility of a diverse Brownsville. For more than a decade, many Brownsville residents worked to secure resources that would promote the neighborhood as a place of racial and economic integration. But the combination of bureaucratic inertia and opposition from white former residents denied this possibility.⁴⁰

Religious Institutions and White Flight

Neighborhood change affected all Brownsville institutions, including its religious organizations. As they had for the previous two decades, Brownsville synagogues continued closing during the 1950s. The staff of the Brownsville branch of the Brooklyn Public Library listed eighteen Brownsville congregations in their 1959 community survey. While most congregations lost significant membership and were on their last breath by the late 1950s, urban redevelopment contributed to their demise. Congregation Chevra Thilim Keshet Israel, one of the oldest synagogues in the neighborhood, was uprooted by the Brownsville Houses in 1946. When the city condemned their building, they merged with Ohev Sholom, another neighborhood institution located down the street. The city condemned that synagogue in 1963 for the construction of the Langston Hughes Houses. “We were very sad to lose our building,” remembered Ronald Kantrowitz. “My father was President, and he continued to worship every morning, even after we moved to East Fifty-seventh Street in East Flatbush in the early 1950s.” Unlike others, Thilim Keshet Israel was still active, with more than seventy-five members in the late 1950s. While many of them had moved out of Brownsville years before, they continued to return for Sabbath and holidays. “My father walked from East Flatbush, and towards the end we yelled at him to stop,” Kantrowitz said. “We said he was taking his life into his hands, but he didn’t listen.” While members returned for special services, few were as committed as Kantrowitz’s father. “Not many people went to morning services,” his son remembered, “and often my dad had to go around the corner to the Belmont Avenue Market to pull together a minyan [ten people necessary to worship]. He had to offer the pushcart ven-

dors breakfast to get them in the synagogue.” When the synagogue was taken by the city, the remaining congregants disbanded.⁴¹

Other religious groups followed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The synagogues of Congregation Austrian Gemilath Chasidim and Congregation Tifereth Aaron V’Israel were demolished for the construction of the Tilden Houses. Founded in 1902, Austrian Gemilath had a three-story building with a large sanctuary. While the congregation once had more than one hundred members, few remained by the late 1950s. When the city bought the building, the congregation put the funds in its account to use for the burial society and other purposes. There were not enough people left to purchase another building, recalled Jack Baum, president of the congregation’s burial society, “so we had meetings at the Young Israel of Eastern Parkway Synagogue.” The few remaining members of Tifereth Aaron were “happy at the time that the city bought their property because they couldn’t get anything for it,” said Abraham Reiss, its burial society president. The synagogue was a branch of a larger congregation that also had facilities on the Lower East Side and in Williamsburg. During the 1950s, all these groups merged into the synagogue in Borough Park, Brooklyn, which is still active today. “There were only three or four members left in Brownsville when the building closed,” Reiss recollected. “They had left long before the synagogue was sold.” Agudath Achim Anshei Libowitz, founded in 1906, had 250 members in 1939, but it too was condemned by the city in 1958 and was demolished for the Tilden project. Like the other congregations, its few surviving members chose not to purchase another building.⁴²

Most Brownsville congregations operated in small, rented facilities. When they closed, they sold their torahs and other religious materials, and their history died with their last members. Only a few of Brownsville’s congregations owned their buildings, and several of those that were not bought by the city were purchased by the newly established Baptist and Pentecostal churches serving the area’s new residents. Between 1959 and 1965, at least nine synagogues were sold to Christian churches. Ohel Abraham of Zitomir had ninety-five members in 1939, but by 1959 fewer than a dozen remained. In that year the congregation sold its two-story frame building to the Pentecostal Church of the Assembly of God for \$14,000. “They were happy to get something for the building,” remembered Ruth Lurie, daughter of a former member. “For years we continued to meet at my parents’ house in Oceanside, but we never reestablished a synagogue. The members had moved to different places.”⁴³

Two of Brownsville's most distinguished synagogues, and two of the few with architectural importance, Chevra Torah Anshei Radishkowitz and Beth Israel of Brownsville, sold their buildings in 1965 and 1966 respectively. Beth Israel's four-story synagogue went to Noah's Ark Baptist Church for \$65,000. The trustees said that they did not have the financial ability to maintain the structure, which was constantly subject to vandalism because it was vacant at "increasingly frequent intervals." The members of Anshei Radishkowitz sold their facility to the Archdiocese of New York for \$45,000. The building was one of the most beautiful synagogues in the area, according to former residents. Its sanctuary, large enough to hold several hundred congregants, had the most stained glass windows of any Brownsville synagogue. Like Beth Israel, the membership dwindled to only a few by the early 1960s. By that time, none of Anshei Radishkowitz's seven trustees lived in the area (they had all moved to other parts of Brooklyn), and their synagogue became St. Timothy Holy Church (see fig. 16).⁴⁴

Other Brownsville congregations struggled with the same concerns over maintenance of buildings that could no longer be supported by their memberships. Ahavath Achim Anshe sold its building on Riverdale Avenue to the Seventh Day Adventist Church. By that time, the congregation's membership had declined to seventy. Of that number, only about twenty attended Sabbath services and only twelve attended the synagogue during the week. The congregation's trustees argued that the surrounding neighborhood had "deteriorated and changed in the past five years, and a further change is anticipated in the future." Only two of the eight trustees lived in Brownsville and all believed that it would be impossible to maintain the building with the declining membership. Like the others, Chevra Poale Zedek Anshe Lomze, founded in 1911, gave up on the area and sold its building to a Pentecostal congregation for \$14,000 in 1963.⁴⁵

The sale of synagogues to Christian churches violated Jewish doctrines and was criticized by many religious Jews. Brownsville was not the only area witnessing racial transition in the early 1960s, and the Union of Orthodox Rabbis made a formal statement condemning the transfer of Jewish religious institutions. But these critics offered no alternatives. Unlike Catholic parishes, where the citywide Archdiocese owned and supported the parish facilities, each congregation had complete authority to dispose of its own synagogue. Some synagogues that found selling their buildings to churches distasteful instead transferred them to real estate agents—who then sold them to churches. Shomrei Emanuei and Anshe Dokshitz each sold their buildings to local agents for \$10,000 in the early 1960s. Anshe Dokshitz held services only sporadically during the past four years, and the member-



Figure 18. Bethany Gospel Chapel. Originally Hebrew Ladies Day Nursery. Courtesy Jeffrey D. Hoeh.

ship of the congregation had declined to seventeen, only six of whom lived in Brooklyn. In light of the frequent vandalism committed on the building, the congregation felt it had no choice but to sell the building for the best offer. But Brownsville Jews realized that what one rabbi called the "transparent subterfuge" of selling to an agent did not resolve the moral issue.⁴⁶

Most Brownsville Jews attended synagogue infrequently at best. The majority of Brownsville's congregants were senior citizens whose children had little desire to preserve their congregations. According to one Brooklyn rabbi, only two Brownsville congregations established new synagogues after they sold their buildings. The others "lacked a minimal quorum of active members to warrant relocation." After dissolution, the congregation frequently distributed the remaining burial plots held by the mutual benefit society to the remaining congregants and disbursed other funds in accordance with the congregation's bylaws. Several continued to exist as mutual benefit associations for the remaining members and their children.⁴⁷

Like individual congregations, the Hebrew Educational Society (HES) struggled with neighborhood change. By the late 1950s, the HES facility, now approaching fifty years old, was in desperate need of repair. In 1958, the HES told representatives of the United Jewish Appeal that the men's bathroom needed to be completely renovated, the handball courts were crumbling, and "the kitchen had deteriorated almost to the zero point." De-

spite the problem it faced, the HES continued to insist upon its relevance to the community. If anything, argued HES leaders, the transformation of the neighborhood heightened the importance of the HES to those who remained. Finding that at least twenty-one thousand Jews continued to live close to the HES headquarters in 1959, Director Landesman argued: "As we consider our present role in our community we find that we are very much needed. In a changing metropolitan neighborhood like ours, with many of our people in better economic condition moving to the suburbia or to adjacent areas, our institution assumes an important role. We must 'stay put and serve' the on-going needs of the large Jewish population in Brownsville. The larger numbers of remaining residents most of whom are in the low economic income group require intensive service by such agencies as the H.E.S." The HES dedicated itself to programs to deal with juvenile delinquency, intergroup relations, improvement and integration of public schools, the difficulties faced by the elderly, the rising crime rate, increases in the numbers of people suffering from emotional problems, and the teaching of the Jewish faith. The society also pledged to work with other community organizations to address these problems. Indeed, it was hoped that the opening of the Jimmerson Houses, with their large Jewish population, would revitalize the HES.⁴⁸

HES staff continued to hold onto a slim optimism about the Jewish community in Brownsville, noting that many Jews from Europe, Israel, and Latin America moved into the neighborhood along with the new black and Puerto Rican residents. They found that several yeshivas in the neighborhood were overcrowded, serving more than fifteen hundred children. In addition, the student body of the HES Hebrew School was larger than it had ever been in the past. "Since the H.E.S. remains the only Jewish agency with a full leisure and educational program in this area in which still resides a vast Jewish population," its staff argued, "we find ourselves serving a need as great as ever." As other Brownsville Jewish organizations followed their members to new communities, the HES expanded its program to meet new needs. Despite changes in the neighborhood, or perhaps because of them, HES membership grew during the late 1950s and early 1960s. As neighborhood institutions closed, the remaining Jewish residents depended increasingly on the organization. But external pressures from financial supporters along with internal pressures from staff and members eventually pushed the HES out of Brownsville.⁴⁹

In 1961, as the community's transformation continued, the concerns of Brownsville's white residents about crime and violence were increasingly important to HES operations. "Due to the population changes in the com-

munity and the early sunset during the winter months," staff reported, "parents have become very fearful of having their children walk the streets at night and, therefore, it has become necessary to provide transportation." In order to keep their program going, HES began busing children and chaperoning students to and from the headquarters. In addition, the staff shifted programs that had operated during the evenings to the weekends or afternoons because members were afraid to walk Brownsville's streets at night. Activities for specific groups, teen programs in particular, ceased to function. Even the Fellowship program, which had been relocated to a "more stable area," was at risk. Several confrontations, muggings, and fights between Fellowship members and neighborhood youths concerned HES officials: "The problem now faced by the agency is that the streets immediately surrounding it are changing ethnically to such a degree that the agency now appears to be an island." Though the staff believed that between twenty and thirty thousand Jews still lived in Brownsville, most of them resided in the western half of the neighborhood. The only way to persuade people to come to its headquarters, located in the center of Brownsville, was by offering them transportation there on HES buses.⁵⁰

As the Jews remaining in the neighborhood became the minority, many Jewish youths became increasingly angry about changes in the neighborhood, and delinquency rates among that group rose. Their parents, whom HES staff felt were paralyzed by Brownsville's transformation, did not know how to deal with their children. As a result of their inability to motivate themselves to change their family situation, an unusually large number of children attending the Center displayed problems that seemed directly related to their family situations. According to HES staff, the Jews remaining in Brownsville were "almost entirely from the lowest socio-economic strata of the Jewish community," and "their needs are great." To help these residents, HES began a cooperative effort with the Jewish Family Service (JFS) in 1961. The project sought to aid families "who realistically feel left behind in a community that has already changed. These are people who are not as yet acting out their anxieties to the point where the Youth Board may be involved but at the same time are fraught by a great deal of insecurity." The goal of the program was to provide Jewish residents with the support they needed to enable them to leave Brownsville.⁵¹

By this time, it had become clear to most involved with the HES that it too should depart. Having witnessed for over a decade the dissipation of the Jewish population, and having struggled to create programs that would bring former members back to their building, the board decided "to continue a rich and creative program at the Main Building, explore the possi-

bility of extension programming in rented facilities in the Brownsville area, [but plan] for possible relocation within a five year period." No specific event brought about the decision to move. The board's decision was based on "criminal activities and the present population, vandalism and assaults committed upon those using H.E.S. facilities in our main building and our Fellowship building," as well as the departure of most of Brownsville's Jews and the fact that the "Jewish families who had girls in the family would especially not live in the area for fear of assault upon them." While HES was successful in keeping membership numbers constant through transportation programs and shifting schedules, the organization was tiring from this effort.⁵²

To most board members, Canarsie seemed the most appropriate place for the relocation of the HES. An analysis of membership, undertaken by the staff in 1961, found that while fewer than 30 members lived in the twelve-block area surrounding the facility, and fewer than 80 people in the 4,754 units of Brownsville public housing were members, more than 150 residents of Canarsie participated in HES programs. By 1963, Canarsie had a population of 104,000, and at least 75,000 of them were Jews. Because the neighborhood had grown so quickly, like Brownsville had several decades before, it suffered from a deficit of recreational, social, and educational opportunities. Canarsie residents aggressively lobbied HES officials to expand their programs in the area, emphasizing that 80 percent of the neighborhood's Jewish families had at one time or another come from Brownsville.⁵³

The HES's proposal to move to Canarsie was overwhelmingly approved by the UJA trustees, who also agreed to fund a large percentage of the construction costs of a new facility. In 1965, the HES opened up a storefront office in Canarsie, in anticipation of the opening of its new building then under construction. Writing in the magazine of the Jewish Welfare Board, HES Executive Director David Kleinstein explained that the organization's decision was best for both the Jewish community and for Canarsie: "What does a Jewish Community Center do when the neighborhood in which it has been located for 66 years has changed so radically that the entire Jewish population of the area has moved elsewhere? The answer is that it moves as soon as it can to the area where its services and programs are needed by its former members." Kleinstein explained that the HES board had chosen Canarsie because it was a Jewish neighborhood with similar economic, cultural, social, and recreation needs to Brownsville, and that Canarsie was "the area of greatest need . . . a lower, middle-class and middle-middle class Jewish community which had become the lowest rung on the ladder of the

upsurging economic and social life and whose needs were as fundamental as their earlier Brownsville predecessors."⁵⁴

The HES sold its buildings to the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn. Despite some misgivings among board members about transferring the HES facilities to a Christian organization, former director Alter Landesman argued that the move was appropriate, and that the former HES building would continue to serve the community. "The new non-Jewish groups that have moved into the section need social services as much as the older Jewish elements who are now leaving it. The Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn has taken over by purchase both Hebrew Educational Society buildings . . . and are using them as religious, recreational, and educational centers for the population presently residing in the neighborhood," stated Landesman. These buildings continued to serve the community, but the departure of the HES was an important event in the history of Brownsville, signifying the end of the Jewish era. By 1965, when the organization moved to Canarsie, almost no whites remained in Brownsville. From then on Brownsville would be populated only by blacks and Puerto Ricans, who would have to create their own institutions.⁵⁵

The Hebrew Educational Society was the last vestige of a neighborhood founded in the late 1800s. When it departed in 1965, there were no other significant institutions left from the community created by Charles and Elias Kaplan. By the mid-1960s, Brownsville was known citywide as an African-American and Puerto Rican ghetto, a place to be avoided. Many poor blacks and Latinos, however, had no place else to live, and they did not give up hope for Brownsville's revitalization. During the 1960s, many new residents joined with veteran activists and attempted to forge a new Brownsville. Like their predecessors, they battled government inertia, and they faced the entrenched racism of New York's political system. In the context of the expanding civil rights movement and the recognition of urban poverty by the federal government, this new class of Brownsville activists achieved some significant victories. One success was the 1962 battle of Beth-El Hospital workers.



Figure 23. Supporters of community control block entrance to Junior High School 271. JHS 271 was the center of conflict in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville school district. Photograph by Sam Reiss. Courtesy Sam Reiss Collection, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

8

The Ocean Hill–Brownsville Community and the 1968 Teachers' Strike

After graduating from the Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Seminary on Long Island in 1959, Father John Powis became pastor in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. Four years later, he transferred to Our Lady of Presentation Church on Eastern Parkway, the border between Ocean Hill and Brownsville. Upon his arrival in 1963, Powis immediately saw that the local schools were in trouble. "There was this tremendous burst of population," Powis said. "I remember walking the streets and seeing a tremendous number of people, especially children. I realized that the schools would be in crisis at that moment because there were not enough school buildings." Delores Torres's four children were in these crowded classrooms, and she was upset at the way they were neglected by the New York City Board of Education. "People were getting anxious because their children were going to school at split times, no children were going full time." Torres said. More than six thousand area children were on what the board of education called "short time" during the 1960s. Two of Torres's children attended school in the morning, while the others went to class in the afternoon. The prob-

lems of local schools, created by decades of neglect and bureaucracy, brought Powis, Torres, and other activists together, and the battle they waged affected schools across the city.¹

In the fall of 1968, Brownsville and its neighbor, Ocean Hill, became the focal point for a citywide conflict over public education. The battle, which drew national attention, centered on the issue of "community control" of local schools; a proposal to allow parents to shape the curriculum and staffing of schools in their neighborhoods. Frustrated after years of attempts to integrate New York's public schools, many activists shifted their focus from racial equality to local parental control over their children's education. This idea emerged out of the "Black Power" movement and was supported by much of New York's elite, but it conflicted with the goals of the recently formed United Federation of Teachers (UFT). The UFT represented the largest teaching force in the nation, and the union feared that community control would threaten recently won job protections. In response to the attempts of Ocean Hill-Brownsville parents to consolidate control over local schools, UFT members struck the city system three times in the fall of 1968, and ultimately succeeded in ending the experiment in community empowerment.

The battle over community control received a great deal of attention from journalists and social scientists at the time. Indeed, the controversy remains a focus of writings on modern race relations and urban problems. None, however, discuss the vital role of the Brownsville Community Council (BCC) in the struggle. While the community control board was a separate entity, the BCC provided organizational support for community control advocates, and many BCC leaders, particularly Thelma Hamilton, Bill Marley, and Delores Torres, were also leaders of the community control movement. BCC-supported groups, including Christians and Jews United for Social Action (CUSA), also played an important role in the struggle as advocates for the community board. BCC staffers were also energetic participants in local schools during the strikes, and they provided organizational support to the activities of the governing board.²

However, the BCC programs were small in comparison to the gigantic operation that was the New York City Board of Education. In providing social services, local groups competed with private volunteer organizations like the Health and Welfare Council of New York and the Jewish Board of Guardians. While these organizations protested the usurpation of their power, they were already in decline by the 1960s. Many private social service agencies had retrenched during the 1950s, unable to cope with the needs of New York's new minority poor. Within Brownsville, groups like the Jewish Welfare Services and the Jewish Board of Guardians had pulled

out along with the Jewish population, and other organizations failed to evolve. The BCC filled a vacuum in the area of social services; it did not displace existing groups.

Local schools, by contrast, had very strong institutional structures in the board of education and the UFT. Organized in the early 1960s, the UFT replaced the much smaller, left-leaning Teachers' Union (TU) as the main protector of public school teachers. During the 1940s and 1950s, the TU supported the integration of New York's school system and other efforts to improve educational opportunities for blacks and Latinos. The UFT was also liberal in orientation, but it was more focused on the bread-and-butter needs of its members. Led by Albert Shanker, New York teachers gained significant increases in pay and won other protections regarding promotion and management of the system during the early 1960s. The objectives of the union were consonant with the goals of its upwardly mobile, mostly second- and third-generation immigrant teaching force. Community control was in direct conflict with the union's aspirations. The UFT was still a fledgling organization in the 1960s, and it would have been disastrous for the union as an organization if it failed to respond to attempts to weaken the recently created administrative structure. In this context, the UFT and Ocean Hill-Brownsville residents soon found themselves in conflict.³

The demand for community control emerged from a two-decade effort to achieve racial equality in New York schools. Across the city, schools with black and Latino majorities received fewer resources, were overcrowded, and were often saddled with teachers who had failed to perform adequately in other schools. The school situation for blacks and Latinos deteriorated throughout the 1960s, as more whites left the school system. Activists believed that integrated schools would ensure more money, improved facilities, and better teachers for minority children, and they demanded that bureaucrats work toward this goal. Despite years of effort by civil rights leaders to improve educational opportunities for blacks through integration, by the mid-1960s almost all New York City schools were segregated. Brownsville's were no exception. The battle over school integration became so heated in the early 1960s that it strained relations among New York's civil rights organizations. Frustrated after a decade of attempts to secure support from the board of education for integrated schools, in 1964 the New York NAACP, CORE, and the Parents Workshop organized the City-Wide Committee for Integrated Schools, with former Brooklyn NAACP head Milton Galamison as the leader.⁴

The committee proposed a boycott of New York City schools to protest the continuing segregation and the intransigence of school officials. On

February 3, 1964, 464,000 students, 45 percent of the student body, were absent. The majority of the participants were black and Latino, and 90 percent of Brownsville's students joined in the boycott. Many attended "Freedom Schools" organized by the demonstration leaders. Taught by a racially diverse collection of college professors, clergy, and social workers, these schools focused on African-American and Latino history and culture, and they served as models for similar efforts during the 1968 strike. When board of education officials failed to respond to the demands of the demonstrators, Galamison called a second boycott. As the rhetoric of protest leaders escalated, liberal groups such as the Catholic Interracial Council and the American Jewish Committee condemned Galamison's activities, and the New York NAACP and CORE withdrew, calling the boycott counterproductive. The action had little impact on the plans of the school board.⁵

Civil rights groups and integration activists also failed to attain a much more ambitious goal that they believed would solve the problem of segregation. Throughout the early 1960s, these groups called for the creation of an "Educational Park" in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn near Brownsville, East Flatbush, and Canarsie. The proposed park for junior high and high school students replicated a college campus and included several educational facilities from which Brooklyn youths could choose. Advocates argued that construction of a complex serving ten thousand or more students was more efficient than building several small schools, because the campus could provide state-of-the-art facilities (science labs, libraries, theaters) that were not feasible at individual schools. The proposed campus also eliminated neighborhood districts, thereby removing the biggest obstacle to school segregation—residential segregation. From 1964 to 1966, Educational Park advocates pushed their program at city hall and at the board of education. They secured three thousand signatures from area parents and the support of many liberal organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Catholic Interracial Council.⁶

After much agitation, activists convinced the board of education to study the idea, but a plan was never implemented. Many white parents' groups opposed the Educational Park. Among the most vocal critics was the local school board in eastern Brooklyn, which was controlled by white parents from Canarsie and East Flatbush (including former Brownsville Neighborhood Council Chair Irving Tabb). Parent leaders on the local school board called the plan ill-conceived and opposed the busing of their children out of the neighborhood. They argued that the Educational Park would "cause a further mass exodus of white children from our schools." Several local school board members were active in the Democratic Party,

and they used their power to scuttle the project. Councilman Sam Curtis, who represented Canarsie and part of Brownsville, opposed the idea and accompanied Canarsie homeowners groups to school board meetings. State Assemblyman Alfred Lama, who represented Canarsie and Brownsville, also pressured board of education officials to reject the idea.⁷

Brownsville activists were the strongest supporters of the Educational Park idea, and Willa Webster, BCC member Helen Efthim, and others spoke at school board meetings in favor of the proposal. They also complained about their neighborhood's lack of representation on the local board. The board of education, with the advice of local groups, appointed local school board members, and BCC leaders tried, without success, to secure Bill Marley's selection. While giving tepid support to the idea of school desegregation, the white parents on the local board opposed every practical measure put forth by integration activists. Schools, in their view, were not the place to achieve integration. "Integration is a housing program, not a school program," one board member stated. In rejecting the Educational Park they argued that white parents "did not want to send their children into dangerous areas," which they equated with any school with minority kids. While publicly praising the idea, board of education officials never seriously considered the Educational Park. The board hired a consultant to develop a plan, but he soon resigned when he realized that the administration would never implement it. According to the consultant, most board of education staff viewed the idea as a "mild form of insanity." Political scientist Harold Savitch, who studied the battle for the Educational Park, concluded that public hearings by the school board "were nothing but pro forma ratification ceremonies to justify the rejection." Later in 1965, through the intervention of East Brooklyn politicians, the New York City Commerce Department chose the proposed site to develop an industrial park.⁸

In February 1966, Brownsville activists filed suit against the board of education, seeking to stop its plan to build several new elementary and junior high schools in eastern Brooklyn. The suit alleged that the board's plan discriminated against Brownsville youths by constructing schools that increased segregation within the area. The lawsuit further claimed that the board refused to follow its own integration plan and demanded that the plans for an Educational Park be followed. Despite neighborhood protests, the board of education defended its school construction program on the grounds that the Educational Park proposal was unfeasible, Brownsville schools were overcrowded and decrepit, and the immediate needs of local children had to take priority over the long-term goals of integration advocates. Brownsville activists continued to press for the Educational Park, and in July 1966, BCC President Thelma Hamilton, Vice President Alex Staber,

and Angel Rivera, head of Puerto Rican Organizations of Brownsville and East New York, led more than a thousand residents in a protest of the groundbreaking for the Flatlands Industrial Park. Staber and several others were arrested when they interrupted the ceremonies by shouting "Jim Crow Must Go" and "Industrial Park No, Educational Park Yes." While public officials and businessmen stood by waiting for photographers who were to memorialize the groundbreaking, Mayor John Lindsay calmed the crowd, but the industrial development continued.⁹

One of the few efforts at integration to which the board of education agreed in the early 1960s was a voluntary program to bus children from overcrowded schools to schools in other parts of the borough with unfilled seats. Many Brownsville residents, led by Father John Powis and other local activists, helped facilitate the busing program. In the fall of 1965, several hundred Brownsville youths traveled to Canarsie, Bay Ridge, and Bensonhurst to begin the school year. But whites in these areas responded violently to the program. Powis described the events at several of the schools as a "scene out of hell." In Bay Ridge, parents and children pelted the children and Powis (in his vestments) with eggs and called them niggers. When the children entered the schools, they were put into separate classes, persecuted by the white students, and ignored by the staff. After several weeks of abuse, most of the students transferred back to Brownsville schools.¹⁰

Brownsville activists increasingly viewed integration efforts as frustrating and fruitless. Instead, they decided that if the board of education could not provide a decent education to their children, they would do it themselves. Though the concept of community control seems at odds with the goal of integration, Brownsville activists moved easily from one to the other. Several Brownsville activists cite frustration as the major reason for their changing orientation. "It was a natural evolution," reflected Maurice Reid. "The outside folks were not going to protect us, so you turn inward." Many Brownsville activists had volunteered their own children for the busing program. Their kids were traumatized, and the parents were disheartened by the response. "When you have that experience, it leads you to conclude, hey, we could do better ourselves," Reid argued. The parents also demanded control because they had been consistently thwarted by local school boards controlled by whites. In their view, white parents enjoyed influence over the operations of schools, but minorities did not. Even after redistricting in 1965, Ocean Hill and Brownsville parents lacked representation on local boards. As one community control advocate asserted, "if the decision makers are not responsive to the needs of the children they are charged with educating, why not change the decision makers? Why not put decisions in the hands of those with the greatest stake in the achievement of

the children, their parent and local community leadership?" Proponents of community control hoped that parental involvement would make teachers and administrators more accountable. They argued that parents would force New York's educational bureaucracy to devote more money to struggling schools and that the funds would be used more efficiently by locally controlled boards. Advocates also believed that parents could help solve problems like overcrowding and lack of resources by volunteering in their children's classrooms.¹¹

The move toward community control also benefited from the changing ideological climate of the late 1960s and its impact on civil rights organizations. Brooklyn CORE, for example, was a staunch advocate of integration and fought for the Educational Park. However, by the late 1960s, as the organization became increasingly separatist in orientation, Brooklyn CORE leaders, liberated by their expulsion from the national organization, dropped their advocacy of integration and aggressively supported the creation of local school districts. Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton argued in their 1968 book *Black Power* that black communities "must devise new structures, new institutions to replace those forms or to make them responsive. There is nothing sacred or inevitable about old institutions; the focus must be on people, not forms." Many activists believed that neighborhood control of all institutions was vital to African-American development. For almost two years, the BCC had put this philosophy into action, replacing private and public agencies and assuming the role of a comprehensive neighborhood social service institution. Responsibility for youth programs, recreation, job training, housing and economic development, and other government functions had already devolved to local institutions by this time. It was only logical to Brownsville activists that the educational system do the same.¹²

Some civil rights leaders, however, questioned community control. Bayard Rustin, an organizer of the 1964 school boycott, vocally criticized the idea, calling it an example of the "politics of frustration." Rustin argued that community control offered "the illusion of 'political self-determination in education,' to those 'so alienated that they substitute self-expression for politics.'" He believed that the path to black liberation was through alliances with labor organizations and other groups, not through separatism. However, in the heated atmosphere of the late 1960s, few activists heeded Rustin's advice.¹³

The coordinated effort for community control coalesced after a 1966 meeting of the board of education. Activists from around the city, including Thelma Hamilton, Father John Powis, Delores Torres, Maurice Reid, and Paul Chandler, attended the meeting to protest the board's continued ne-

glect of their schools. When one of the activists attempted to take the floor, she was told that her comments were out of order. A protest ensued, and the board members canceled the meeting and left the room. In response, activists took the board member's seats, beginning what would become a three-day sit-in at the board of education. Naming themselves the "Ad Hoc People's Board of Education," activists argued that the only way for real educational improvement was for neighborhood leaders to personally take control of the schools.¹⁴

During the 1960s, many education reformers called for the decentralization of control over public schools, which they defined as moving authority from the central bureaucracy to smaller, hopefully more efficient management at the district level. The education system stifled experimentation and handcuffed teachers in dealing with the changing needs of students. Devolution of authority to smaller units, advocates asserted, revitalized schools by giving teachers and administrators greater flexibility in developing educational programs. Neighborhood activists in Brownsville reformulated this idea and demanded local, parental control over individual schools. The BCC argued that community-based educational programs created an experience relevant to previously disregarded students, guaranteeing that all children were treated as "educable beings, endowed with creative capabilities and potential." "Decentralization provides the framework for change," the BCC's 1967-68 Total Action Plan argued. Community control freed teachers and principals "from bureaucratic red tape" and would "enable school districts to innovate." In addition, Brownsville activists reasoned, the transfer of authority gave "parents a viable role in the educational process." By decentralizing the operations of New York's schools and giving responsibility to parents, children whom the system failed would now be rescued.¹⁵

While opponents asserted that community control would exacerbate the problem of school segregation by pushing whites out of the public school system, advocates concluded that the battle for integration needed to be refocused. BCC leaders argued that residents "must look at integration in a different light than we have in the past five years. Movement of children by central direction has not worked. Decentralization attempts to build strong communities in New York City with an aim toward promoting solid community support for integration when it is tried." In demanding local control, Brownsville activists reversed their priorities: in 1960, they had argued that integration would bring about better schools; by 1965, they advocated better schools as a means to integration.¹⁶

Community control coalesced with the plans of many education policymakers in New York City who were working to secure a decentralization

program to transfer responsibility of schools to smaller units. As a result of pressure from parent activists and lobbying by officials of the Ford Foundation, the New York state legislature in the spring of 1967 directed Mayor Lindsay to develop a plan for school decentralization. To ensure that a more radical proposal was not adopted, the board of education announced a trial community control plan of its own, selecting three districts—the IS 201 educational complex in Harlem, the Twin Bridges District on the Lower East Side, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville District in Brooklyn—to participate in this program. The original plan of the People's Board of Education was to demand a citywide program for community control, but several local chapters of the organization made more progress in this area than others, and they were chosen to implement the experimental effort. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville group was the furthest advanced in developing a community-oriented school program. Before the board of education's announcement of the experiment, Father Powis was in contact with Mario Fantini, a program director at the Ford Foundation involved in antipoverty programs supportive of community control. With Fantini's assistance, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville People's Board of Education secured a grant of \$44,000 from the Ford Foundation in July 1967.¹⁷

Throughout the spring and summer of 1967, Powis's group worked with parents, teachers, local leaders, and education reformers to craft their program. They received little support from the board of education; after all, the administration did not really want the program to succeed. To operate the experiment, the group proposed a "governing board" to include one parent from each school selected by school Parent-Teacher Associations; one teacher from each school, chosen by the teachers; two administrators, one university representative, and five "community representatives" chosen by the parent representatives. The governing board, according to the plan, was responsible for hiring a unit administrator; selecting principals for local schools; setting curriculum, goals, and standards for classrooms; recruiting and selecting staff; and determining budgetary needs and allocating funds among local schools. While the New York City Board of Education envisioned a slow planning process, community control activists wanted to implement their ideas immediately. Without the board of education's agreement or support, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville People's Board of Education held elections for their governing board. Parents' representatives were chosen on August 4, and parents elected five "community representatives"—Herbert Oliver, minister of the Bedford Central Presbyterian Church, Assemblyman Sam Wright, Father John Powis, Delores Torres, and Walter Lynch—on August 10. The governing board selected Brownsville minister C. Herbert Oliver as chair. (He defeated State Assemblyman Samuel Wright

for this position.) Next, the board chose Rhody A. McCoy, a teacher and administrator in New York City schools for eighteen years, as unit administrator. Despite the fact that they had not authorized the elections, board of education officials agreed to work with the governing board.¹⁸

The 1967–68 school year was a period of positive change in Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools, according to the Ford Foundation and other evaluators. Ford reviewers felt that Rhody McCoy was “strong and capable,” and the board was “consistent in its approach.” Given its limited financial support, the governing board appeared to be functioning “as well as can be expected.” The New York City Commission on Human Rights (CCHR) also reported positive changes at Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools. The governing board appointed, over the objections of the UFT, five new principals: one white, two black, one Chinese, and the first Puerto Rican in the city. The Latino principal, Luis Fuentes, struggled to gain the support of the teachers, but, according to the CCHR, he “quickly gained the respect of the students, parents and the community.” By establishing a rapport with Spanish-speaking parents, the principal served students for whom English was a second language. Parent participation increased dramatically as a result of his efforts. The governing board also implemented several programs to support literacy in the schools, including a bilingual reading campaign; trained more than three hundred parent aides; initiated several after-school programs; and created a community newspaper staffed by students. As a result of these efforts, many more parents and children were involved in their schools.¹⁹

Despite these successes, throughout the 1967–68 school year, the governing board and McCoy battled not only board of education officials but also with many teachers and administrators at local schools. Conflict between the governing board and local teachers began early in the experiment. Teachers envisioned the governing board as an advisory group that recommended—not implemented—changes in local schools. Teachers were involved in the planning of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville experiment, but most were inactive in the summer months leading up to the August elections. When the teachers returned to work, they found that the governing board had made significant progress in implementing its plan for community involvement. Several teachers joined the governing board in the fall of 1967, but most quickly resigned and accused the governing board of ignoring their views. The remaining governing board members responded that the teachers were critical of every aspect of community involvement. The teachers, Powis argued, were also upset about the selection of Rhody McCoy as unit administrator, because McCoy was not on the board of education’s approved list for the position.²⁰

While some teachers supported the idea of community “involvement,” they opposed many aspects of the experimental district. UFT President Albert Shanker feared that community control would “Balkanize” the school system and allow a small but vocal neighborhood minority to dominate schools to the detriment of both students and teachers. Many teachers, fearful of losing their recently hard-won pay increases and job protections, opposed any change in the system. Teachers also objected to many of the decisions made by McCoy and the governing board with regard to curriculum and personnel, particularly hiring teachers and principals outside of the approved lists. Administrator McCoy made what some teachers felt were arbitrary decisions regarding assignments, and some simply refused to follow his directives. In September 1967, the UFT staged a twelve-day city-wide strike concerning operations at city schools. Though the strike did not directly raise the issue of community control, those involved in the experiment believed that the strike was directed at them. Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools remained open during the strike, staffed by volunteers.²¹

Conflict between the governing board and certain teachers increased throughout the 1967–68 school year, and on May 9, 1968, the governing board sent notices to thirteen teachers and six supervisory personnel, accusing them of subverting the community control program. The letters informed these staff that their services were no longer required, and they were directed to the board of education to find other positions. The UFT argued that the governing board’s actions were in contravention of the collective bargaining agreement, and School Superintendent Bernard Donovan agreed, immediately reinstating them. But the governing board refused to grant the teachers permission to return to work, and parents in Ocean Hill and Brownsville supported the governing board’s actions. On May 15, as a result of several demonstrations against the reinstatements at Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools, the board of education closed three of the eight schools in the district. A week later, 350 of the teachers in the district went on strike in support of the ousted employees. On June 20, Unit Administrator McCoy sent dismissal notices to all 350 striking teachers.²²

Negotiations throughout the summer failed to resolve the dispute, and 93 percent of the city’s teachers walked out on September 9, 1968. The board of education promised to immediately reinstate the teachers who wanted to return to their Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools, and the teachers agreed to return to work on September 11. But again the governing board refused to accept the directives of the board of education and rejected the reinstatement of the teachers who, in its opinion, had “voluntarily left our children for seven weeks last year.” Over the summer, with the support of the BCC, the governing board recruited dozens of teachers to replace those

who were released for striking the prior spring. They were predominantly young and inexperienced, but they believed in the idea of community control. According to the governing board, there was a waiting list of teachers who wanted to teach in Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools, and in early fall it reported that “Our 8 schools are all open and operating beautifully for the first time. We hope to now be able to work in a peaceful relationship with our teachers for a new day in educational excellence.”²³

As a result of the governing board’s refusal to reinstate the teachers, the UFT called a second strike, which began on September 13 and lasted through September 30. Brownsville schools continued operating during the strike with replacement teachers. When Mayor John Lindsay agreed to station New York police at Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools to protect the returning teachers, the UFT agreed to end the second strike. But the governing board refused to allow the striking teachers to return to the classroom. McCoy told the returning teachers that they had to take a “sensitivity” course before reinstatement. Several Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools allowed the teachers into their buildings, but administrators did not give them classroom assignments. When teachers entered the schools, tensions increased. The teachers who supported the governing board ostracized the returning teachers, and protesters outside the schools attempted to intimidate them.²⁴



Figure 24. Confrontation between teachers and community control advocates. Paul Chandler is in center of picture. Courtesy United Federation of Teachers Archives, UFT Photo Collection. Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

During October, conflicts at Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools became an everyday occurrence. Several schools had large police forces and rows of barricades to separate the factions from each other and from the students. One former student remembered that “we’d look out on the rooftops, across the street from the school the cops were there with their riot helmets and their nightsticks and helicopters, and the playground was converted into a precinct, and walking up to the school you just have mass confusion.” On October 1, police arrested six people after an altercation outside of JHS 271, the center of the conflict in Ocean Hill. Prior to the arrests, several hundred residents massed outside the school to protest the returning teachers and to prevent their entrance into the building. The confrontation continued even after several teachers supporting community control asked the protesters to disband. Because of tensions outside the school, the board of education closed JHS 271 for several days during the fall.²⁵

As a result of the strikes, racial tensions escalated in Brownsville and across the city to the point that Mayor Lindsay publicly voiced his fears that a riot would occur. Even though 70 percent of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville replacement teachers were white and 50 percent were Jewish, many viewed the conflict between the UFT and the governing board as a battle between white and black (and Puerto Rican). Black and Latino parents accused the teachers of racism, both for walking out and for failing to effectively teach their children while in the schools. Racial strain increased dramatically when the UFT called attention to several anti-Semitic flyers that were distributed throughout Brownsville and in several schools. The origin of these flyers was hotly disputed, but the UFT used them to rally support behind its cause. The most widely read document demanded that all the Jewish teachers resign and threatened the teachers with violence. “Get Out, Stay Out, Staff Off, Shut Up, Get Off Our Backs, Or Your Relatives in the Middle East Will Find Themselves Giving Benefits to Raise Money To Help You Get Out From Under The Terrible Weight Of An Enraged Black Community.” The union distributed 500,000 copies of the flyer, and, as a result of its inflammatory statements, the New York Association of Rabbis and the Jewish Anti-Defamation League became actively involved in the strike. Other Jewish groups, such as the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, also followed the strike closely.²⁶

The governing board publicly stated that it never condoned anti-Semitism in any form and that the UFT was using these documents to kill the experimental district. The board cited a New York Civil Liberties Union report, which found no connection between the anti-Semitic statements and the governing board. “They looked through all their files for anything that was anti-Semitic or antiwhite from any district in the city . . . and most

never came from Ocean Hill–Brownsville,” said John Powis. “They created in this city a fear . . . that here was a bunch of crazy people that were determined to take over the schools.” The charges of anti-Semitism badly hurt the community control effort. “We were the bad guys now, and they were the good guys,” remembered Paul Chandler. According to Maurice Reid, race was not an important issue in the deliberations of the governing board but the UFT used the issue to weaken the experimental district. Union leaders were looking for a way to gain the support of New Yorkers, “so they reached out to things that were said or done by folks that really were not involved directly in the day-to-day operation of the district or the decision-making of the district to make it seem that this was a black-white issue.” The experimental district attracted activists of many differing ideologies. Jitu Weusi, a JHS 271 teacher, was prominent in the battle, and he created a major controversy when he read one of his student’s poems on WBAI radio. Most New Yorkers viewed the poem, titled “Anti-Semitism, Dedicated to Albert Shanker,” as a direct attack on Jews. Weusi argued that the poem expressed feelings that deserved recognition, but the incident galvanized support for the teachers.²⁷

Throughout the months of September and October, board of education officials waffled, sometimes stating that the governing board was never officially recognized and sometimes working with the governing board to achieve a resolution to the dispute. While classes continued in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, most of the city’s schools were paralyzed. The board of education officials pleaded with government officials to intervene, asking Mayor Lindsay as well as the New York State School Commissioner, James Allen, to resolve the conflict. The board of education suspended and reinstated the governing board several times, but the community control effort continued in Ocean Hill—Brownsville schools.²⁸

BCC staff and board members were active participants and leaders in this struggle, and several were arrested in protests at local schools. During the conflict, BCC staff members helped organize parent volunteers in the classrooms, pulled together groups of protesters to support the governing board at local schools, and published several “fact sheets” on the conflict. One such missive stated that “Albert Shanker is a power hungry dictator whose agents (19 teachers) deliberately undermined the programs in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville school district in an attempt to sabotage and destroy the demonstration district and thereby declare community control a failure.” According to striking teachers, BCC leaders were instigators in many violent altercations. They accused BCC President Thelma Hamilton of spreading a false rumor that police had shot a child during a school protest, and they also claimed that Hamilton, accompanied by Sonny Car-

son of the Brooklyn CORE, went into a school and threatened teachers with physical harm. BCC board member BCC Marley, according to striking teachers, grabbed the camera of a teacher and went after another teacher with a beer can. The strikers charged Major Owens with condoning violence against teachers by supporting the workers who attacked striking teachers. “How is it possible,” they asked, “that federal funds are given to such men,” who “incite riots, intimidate people,” and “assault teachers.” Owens, the teachers complained, backed these people. “[Y]et,” said one critic, “he is now a City Commissioner in overall charge of anti-poverty groups around the city. Is it any wonder, then, that attacks by anti-poverty workers on teachers have become even more intense this school year?”²⁹

The BCC and the governing board were so closely connected that several people protested to federal officials about the affiliation. Congressman Emmanuel Celler received several letters objecting to the federal government’s support of the BCC and, indirectly, the governing board. Celler, who actively supported the UFT, also protested the activities of the BCC to the Office of Economic Opportunity. OEO officials, however, cognizant that the BCC’s involvement was in accordance with the principle of “Maximum Feasible Participation,” responded that BCC staff and leaders had every right to join in this struggle. “We are not unmindful of the complaints of those who infer that local anti-poverty workers should be restrained from endeavoring to provision certain communities with substitute educational outlets during the ongoing teachers’ strike,” reasoned the OEO staff. “But, at the same time, as citizens and members of the community, anti-poverty workers cannot ignore the legitimate and explicit concerns and objectives of the community they serve. Such concerns have been manifested in attempts to provide children of some communities with the education they are now being denied because of the school dispute.”³⁰

On October 14, citing concern over the safety of its teachers, the UFT struck New York City schools for the third time in two months. The strike lasted until November 19, when the board of education secured the intervention of New York State Education Commissioner Allen, who suspended the governing board and put the Ocean Hill–Brownsville school district under state trusteeship. The trustee reinstated the teachers, transferred three principals, and ran the schools for four months, at the conclusion of which he reinstated the governing board. Soon after that, however, the New York state legislature adopted a school decentralization plan that created thirty districts across the city, each with approximately twenty thousand students. The bill was strongly supported by the UFT; but most community control advocates opposed the plan, because it resulted in districts too large for significant experimentation with parental control and protected the es-

established system of advancement for teachers and administrators. And the decentralization legislation eliminated the Ocean Hill–Brownsville experimental district.³¹

The crisis at Ocean Hill–Brownsville was a major event in New York City, capturing the fervent attention of the local media, civic leaders, and local politicians. The conflict caused a serious rift among the city's liberals. Many of the organizations that supported the Brownsville residents during the Beth-El strike were now divided between the teachers and the neighborhood. In 1962 the Jewish Labor Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the AFL-CIO, the NAACP, the Urban League, the Anti-Defamation League, and several other groups had formed a mighty coalition to support Brownsville workers in their battle with Beth-El hospital management. By 1968, many of these groups were on opposite sides—the AFL-CIO understandably supported the UFT, one of its strongest members, while leaders of the newly independent Brooklyn CORE were active in support of the governing board. Many other organizations, in particular the NAACP and the American Jewish Congress, found themselves paralyzed—sympathizing with competing causes. Journalists and other commentators still refer to the conflict as the breaking point of the “liberal coalition” of civil rights groups and Jewish organizations. Many argue that the wounds exposed during the battle for community control have yet to heal.³²

Like the Beth-El strike, the Ocean Hill–Brownsville crisis galvanized the community. Once apathetic residents followed the negotiations closely and participated in the demonstrations at local schools. Parents who were not active in their schools became teachers' aides and nonprofessional assistants. In the end, despite their efforts, the expectations of these residents to create a system to support the educational needs of local children were frustrated because local activists overestimated their ability to outmaneuver politically powerful organizations such as the UFT and the board of education. Once outsiders, by 1968 New York's teachers were an organized force capable of commanding support from New York's labor organizations and local politicians. No government institution in the city was more entrenched than the board of education. The community control program envisioned by Brownsville activists directly threatened the power of these institutions, and made the conflict inevitable.

Historian Jerald Podair argues that the conflict affected not only New York schools but all city residents by destroying the illusion that New York was a pluralist society whose residents shared core values. The struggle over community control became a focal point for advocates of varying ideologies. Black Power advocates saw the community control movement as the

vanguard of efforts to create an “Afrocentric” curriculum that, they believed, was better attuned to the needs of blacks. Leftist intellectuals saw it as a means to empower poor Americans through political engagement. Others saw the idea as the end of the liberal experiment, because it contradicted the ideals of opportunity and merit. They worried that community control would result in a system that awarded political connections to the detriment of quality. Critics also warned that community-based power increased the parochialism of education in the city and suppressed minority rights. While many New Yorkers had prided themselves on the “humanism” of the city's residents, by the late 1960s whites and blacks had widely divergent views on the meaning of terms like “equality,” “pluralism,” and “middle-class.” The 1968 teachers' strike, Podair concluded, exposed these conflicts, and they have yet to be resolved.³³

While the debates around community control continue to draw attention from many perspectives, to Brownsville activists the battle for public schools posed much more mundane concerns. Unlike intellectuals who joined the effort, most Brownsville parents were not focused on the larger philosophical meanings of community control. They were seeking to move a gigantic bureaucracy forward in the hopes of improving education for their children. Most Brownsville residents rejected efforts to subsume the battle for local schools under a broader agenda of race-based ideology. In March 1969, the leaders of the Detroit-based “Republic of Africa” announced that the group would hold elections in Ocean Hill and Brownsville. The goal was to consolidate black ghettos and rural areas into a self-governing federation. As a focal point of racial conflict, Brownsville was an attractive place to begin the movement, the leaders believed. But when they attempted to organize the area, they were rebuffed by the overwhelming majority of residents. “People told them ‘I'm an American, and that's where I'm staying,’” Paul Chandler recalled. The goal of residents was to secure greater accountability from local government, not to establish a competing infrastructure.³⁴

The majority of Brownsville blacks and Latinos continued to hold to the ideals of an integrated, pluralist society. Thousands left the neighborhood in the 1960s and 1970s in search of integrated neighborhoods. But the reality of segregated schools in the late 1960s made activists modify their goals to those they believed were more achievable. The failure of Brownsville residents to secure what they thought were reasonable requests to influence their children's education was a bitter pill to swallow. Yet it did not end the efforts to improve the community.

73. Ibid.
74. Connolly, *A Ghetto Grows in Brooklyn*, 22; Wilder, *Covenant with Color*, 178–183.
75. Clarence Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn*, 75.
76. U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Population, 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940); interview with Jacob Baroff, 13 December 1999.
77. Clarence Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn*, 86; Samuel Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: Harper, 1993), 159; interview with Reverend Spurgeon Crayton, 22 November 1999; “History of Universal Baptist Church,” Universal Baptist Church, no date.
78. Kazin, *Walker in the City*, 141.
79. “The History of a Gang: A Tough Kid,” *New York Post*, 8 April 1940; “Reles Made Crime Debut as Boy of 13,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 6 March 1940.
80. Albert Fried, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 202–204.
81. Ibid., 204–206; “The Story of a Gang,” *New York Post*, 9–10 April 1940.
82. Fried, *Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster*, 216–218; “Reles, Two of Gang Indicted in Killing as O’Dwyer Acts,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1940; “Reles Confesses to Six Murders,” *New York Times*, 16 May 1940.
83. “Lays Murder Ring’s Birth to Brownsville Slum,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 March 1941; “O’Dwyer Is Ready to Purge Brownsville,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 14 May 1940; Goell, *Brownsville Must Have Public Housing*.
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- Glauber, *All Neighborhoods Change*, 53, 57; “Consumer Group in Brownsville,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 13 March 1945; Joel Schwartz, “Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1945–1980,” in Ronald Lawson, ed., *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904–1984* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 142; Meg Jacobs, “How About Some Meat?: The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941–1946,” *Journal of American History* (December 1997): 910–941, 923–925.
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27. Milton Goell, *Brownsville Must Have Public Housing*, 19.
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29. *Ibid.*, 17.
30. *Ibid.*, 26–29.
31. *Ibid.*
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Chapter 3

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Chapter 4

1. "Boro NAACP Blasts Reds: Works with D.A.'s Men on Brownsville Probe," *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 June 1951; "Press Release, Brownsville Citizens Committee of 2000," 20 July 1951, Papers of the New York American Labor Party, Special Collections, Rutgers University, box 55 (hereinafter "ALP Papers"); see also Biondi, "The Struggle for Black Equality in New York City, 1945–1955."
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16. Sorin, *Nurturing Neighborhood*, 203.

17. "Letter from Irving Tabb, President, BNH&WC, to Philip Cruise, Chairman, NYCHA," 7 June 1955, Papers of the Citizen's Housing and Planning Commission, New York (hereinafter "CHPC Papers"); "Duo Admits Giving Teenagers Heroin," *New York Amsterdam News*, 18 February 1950; "Pretty Cop Helps Break Heroin Ring," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 5 January 1951; "Ex Model Traps Narcotics Suspects," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 12 January 1951; "Renew Holdup Wave: Failed in 1 of 2 Jobs," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 10 February 1951; "Thug Gets \$1,400 in Auto Stick Up," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 7 April 1951; "4 Brownsville Stores Robbed in Vicinity of Police Station," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 25 May 1951; "Next Class of Rookies Coming Here," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 20 November 1951.

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Juvenile Delinquency Rates—Offenses/Rate per Thousand, by Health Area (HA)

	HA 56	HA 57	HA 58	HA 59	HA 60
1953	54/15.2	121/29.6	23/6.9	127/23.6	55/15.2
1954	53/14.9	144/34.2	34/10.4	195/34.1	130/35.9
1955	98/27.8	197/45.4	30/9.4	357/58.8	176/48.1
1956	113/32.1	304/68.2	50/16.1	477/74.4	223/60.4
1957	163/46.6	397/86.5	26/8.6	628/92.9	274/73.5
1959	180/48.9	424/87.2	35/11.6	601/88.4	226/57.3
1959	254/65.8	400/78	30/9.9	604/87.4	311/75.3
1960	272/67.3	439/81.3	44/14.6	696/97.9	432/99.8
1961	372/92	476/88.2	67/22.2	707/99.5	572/132.2
1962	375/92.8	549/101.7	87/28.8	796/112	649/150

Source: New York City Youth Board, *Youth Board Area Report*, 1964.

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23. Initial Occupancy Statistics, NYCHA Papers, box 63E3, folder 8.

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Number of Families Moving Out of Federal Projects

	Total	Voluntary	Involuntary	Total Units	Turnover Rate
1950	1,138	475	603	14,161	7.75
1951	1,214	688	526	14,161	8.49
1952	1,157	714	443	16,633	7.76

Number of Families Moving Out of Federal Projects (*continued*)

	Total	Voluntary	Involuntary	Total Units	Turnover Rate
1953	1,657	900	757	20,557	9.16
1954	1,819	1,136	683	25,775	8.00
1955	2,543	1,658	685	31,004	7.87
1956	2,401	1,890	511	31,803	7.54

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change in Boston's Jewish neighborhoods was led by homeowners, and that the fact that most Jews rented is not determinative of the pace of neighborhood change. In Brownsville 95 percent of families rented, so it is difficult to make comparisons between the actions of renters and homeowners. Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 53.

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Chapter 5

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2. Interview with Paul Chandler, 2 February 2000.
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5. *Special Census of New York City, 1957; Brooklyn Communities*, 167; U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Housing and Population, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972).
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21. "Memo from Alfred Waxman, Senior Intergroup Relations Officer, to Henry J. Mulhearn Assistant Director, Intergroup Relations Re Incident at Van Dyke Houses," 15 November 1962, NYCHA Papers box 90A4, folder 6.
22. "Memo from David W. Holland, Senior Intergroup Relations Officer, to Henry J. Mulhearn, Assistant Director Re Case Number 207," 2 September 1961,

NYCHA Papers, box 90A4, folder 6; "Memo from Blanca Cedeno, Senior Intergroup Relations Officer, Re Reassurance Visit to Two Elderly Families in Fear of Living Conditions at Van Dyke Houses," 5 September 1962, NYCHA Papers, box 90A4, folder 6.

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24. "Memo from Bernard Moses, Manager, Van Dyke Houses, to Mr. Frank, Chief Manager, Division C, Re Tenant Transfer Requests," 3 September 1964, NYCHA Papers, box 90A4, folder 4; "Memo from Barbara Carter, Housing Assistant, Intergroup Relations, to William Valentine, Director, Intergroup Relations," NYCHA Papers, box 90A4, folder 4; "Memo from David Holland, Senior Intergroup Relations Officer, to William Valentine, Director Intergroup Relations," 5 December 1963, NYCHA Papers, box 90A4, folder 4.

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37. "BNC Membership List," 23 November 1958, Papers of the Brooklyn Council for Social Planning, Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library (hereinafter "BCSP Papers"); Glauber, *All Neighborhoods Change*, 103-110; "Memo from Blanca Cedeno, Senior Intergroup Relations Officer, to Henry Mulhearn, Assistant Director, Re Neighborhood Contacts," 31 August, 1961, NYCHA Papers, box 90A4, folder 16.

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43. Interview with Ruth Lurie, 11 January 2000.
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51. "Minutes of the 1962–63 Budget Conference," 28 March 1962, UJA Papers; "Joint Report of Hebrew Educational Society and Jewish Family Service to Moses L. Parshelsky Foundation," 23 August 1962, HES Papers; "Minutes of 1964–1965 Budget Conference," March 1964, UJA Papers; "Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors," 9 May 1962, HES Papers; "Minutes of Parshelsky Fund Meeting," 1 March 1963, HES Papers.
52. "Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors"; "Minutes of Parshelsky Fund Meeting."
53. "Analysis of Geographic Distribution of Membership as a Result of Mapping Survey," undated, UJA Papers; "Memo re Meeting With Mr. Isaac Schwartz and Mr. Theodore Ratner," 9 January 1963, HES Papers; David M. Kleinstein, "3 Miles and 66 Years: Why the H.E.S. Is Leaving Brownsville," *JWB Circle*, March 1965.
54. "Minutes from Board of Director's Meeting," 13 February 1963, HES Papers; "Minutes of the 1965–66 Budget Conference," 30 March 1965, UJA Papers; Kleinstein, "3 Miles and 66 Years."
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Chapter 6

1. The story of Local 1199 and their unique efforts to bridge racial and class differences to organize service workers during the 1950s and 1960s is ably told by Leon

- Fink and Brian Greenberg in their book *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of the Hospital Workers Union, Local 1199* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). Fink and Greenberg acknowledge the importance of the Beth-El strike in the union's quest for collective bargaining rights, but they devote only a few pages to the conflict in their book, preferring to give greater attention to the strikes leading up to the Beth-El struggle. *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone* describes the strategy and tactics of 1199 president Davis and his officers during the battles of 1959 at six major New York hospitals and analyzes the role of local politicians, civil rights leaders, and the media in shaping these conflicts. The Beth-El strikers followed the methods developed in these earlier battles, and for this reason the strike is less necessary for Fink and Greenberg's purposes. A close analysis of the Beth-El strike, however, is useful, because it highlights the role of urban change and race relations in shaping the conflict.
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3. U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Population and Housing, 1960* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963).
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7. *Ibid.*, 56.
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Chapter 8

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