

NIMBYism In New York City During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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As of late 2019, almost 80,000 New Yorkers were homeless¹. That number has likely increased since then due to the devastating economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, tens of thousands of New Yorkers living on the streets or in shelters were put at increased risk for contracting the virus. Given this reality, to decrease the spread of Covid-19 in New York City's homeless community, Mayor Bill de Blasio made the controversial decision to convert empty luxury hotels into housing for those living in shelters. This would allow for each person to properly social distance by having their own bedroom and bathroom. While this proposed solution may seem ideal, the neighborhood chosen to house the homeless shelter population became the source of a major controversy.

Many of NYC's luxury hotels are located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, an area known for its liberal residents. Mayor de Blasio faced harsh backlash from this community over his new policy. In this paper, I will explain how a seemingly liberal area such as the Upper West Side had such an adverse reaction to a social program intended to help struggling New Yorkers. I will then examine Mayor de Blasio's response to this criticism along with local activism and what this means for the future of New York City.

Homelessness and COVID-19 in NYC

When New York City was the global epicenter of Covid-19, local and state officials urged New Yorkers to wear masks, social distance, and stay in their homes. But these instructions did not apply to those without a place of their own. While shelters tried to enact precautionary

¹ Tyler Blint-Welsh. "Federal Data Show Nearly 80,000 Homeless in New York City." *Wall Street Journal*. October 24, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/federal-data-show-nearly-80-000-homeless-in-new-york-city-11571922000>

measures, such as staggering mealtimes, group living is extremely risky and by early April, dozens of homeless New Yorkers had been hospitalized with Covid-19².

In response, local advocacy groups started pressuring city and state officials to do something about this crisis within a crisis. The Coalition for the Homeless wrote a letter to Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo, asking for help protecting this vulnerable population. In this letter, the Coalition pointed out that as of April 3rd, there were 100,000 vacant hotel rooms in New York City.³ Since tourism in New York City was heavily impacted by the pandemic, hotels were struggling to stay afloat. Eventually, de Blasio decided that the city should buy out these hotels to house the homeless population.

On, paper, this seems like the ideal solution to two problems: unsafe living conditions for homeless people and hotels on the brink of closure. However, the way in which Upper West Side residents reacted to the hotel policy complicated things. Although the area has historically been considered liberal, Upper West Siders were immediately up in arms over this change to their neighborhood and the community surrounding the Lucerne Hotel pushed strongly against this remedy.

Located on 79th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, the Lucerne Hotel is known for its luxury amenities. When 283 homeless men moved into the Lucerne, neighborhood residents were quick to voice their opinions. A private Facebook group called Upper West Siders for Safer Streets was formed virtually overnight⁴. Members of this Facebook group gave anecdotal

² Nikita Stewart. "‘It’s a Time Bomb’: 23 Die as Virus Hits Packed Homeless Shelters." *New York Times*. April 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-homeless.html>

³ "Housing, Health Care, & Other Advocates Call on Mayor de Blasio & Governor Cuomo to Open Vacant Hotel Rooms for Sick and Vulnerable Homeless New Yorkers During COVID-19 Crisis" *Coalition for the Homeless*. April 3, 2020.

<https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/press/housing-health-care-other-advocates-call-on-mayor-de-blasio-governor-cuomo-to-open-vacant-hotel-rooms-for-sick-and-vulnerable-homeless-new-yorkers-during-covid-19-crisis/>

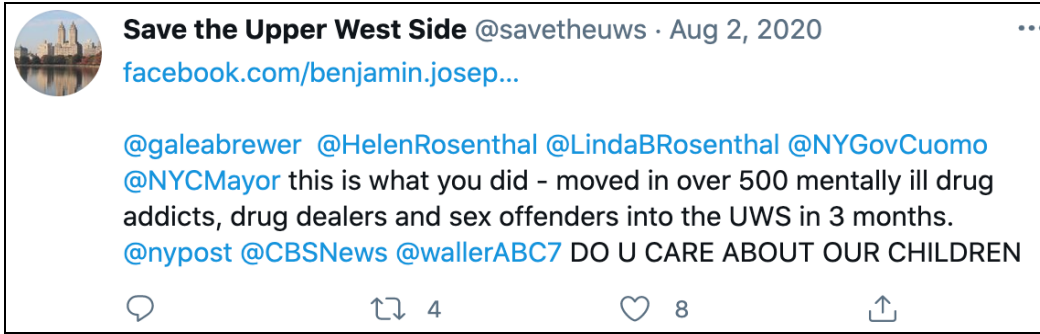
⁴ Daniel E. Slotnik. "What Happened When Homeless Men Moved Into a Liberal Neighborhood." *New York Times*. August 18, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/18/nyregion/uws-homeless-hotels-nyc.html>

evidence of violence and depravity from men living in the Lucerne. Though local business owners reported that they had never seen this sort of behavior and reported that rhetoric about the homeless men living in hotels spread by Upper West Siders damaged their sales more than anything else locals persisted in posting concerns⁵.

This area votes blue, but it also contains an overwhelming amount of privilege. Almost 70% of Upper West Side residents are white and the median income in this area is over 90% more than the citywide median household income⁶. Race and class are key factors to consider when examining the pervasiveness of this harmful ideology held by many Upper West Siders. Just because an area votes for Democratic candidates does not mean that each resident is free of prejudice or bias. Identity also plays a significant role in the personal views of wealthy New Yorkers. While New York City is extremely diverse, areas such as the Upper West Side are pockets of privilege that are generally distanced from surrounding poverty. When residents of these white, wealthy communities are forced to face this poverty, they react in unsavory ways. I was unable to gain access to the Upper West Siders for Safer Streets Facebook page, but I was able to find @savetheuws on Twitter, created by the same residents who formed Upper West Siders for Safer Streets. Unsurprisingly, the true political views of these residents were made clear through the hundreds of posts filled with racist dog whistles, pro-police sentiment, and fear-mongering. I have included screenshots of some notable postings below.

⁵ Daniel E. Slotnik. "What Happened When Homeless Men Moved Into a Liberal Neighborhood." *New York Times*. August 18, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/18/nyregion/uws-homeless-hotels-nyc.html>

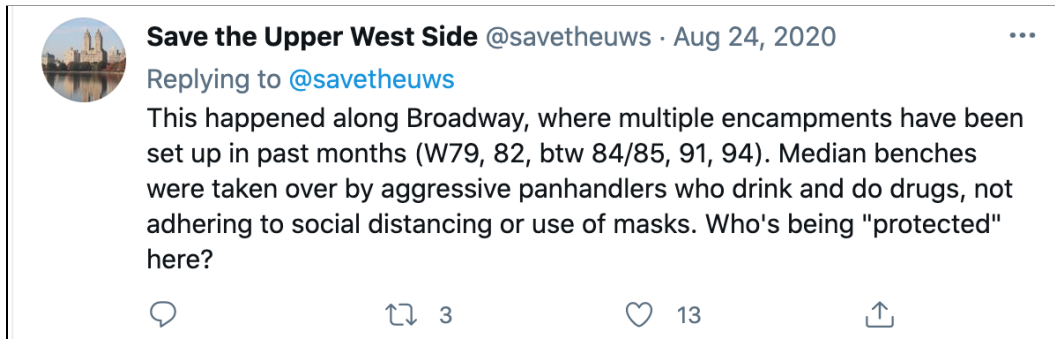
⁶ "Neighborhood Profiles: Upper West Side MN07." *NYU Furman Center*. [https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/upper-west-side#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20there%20were%20about,median%20household%20income%20\(%2464%2C850\).](https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/upper-west-side#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20there%20were%20about,median%20household%20income%20(%2464%2C850).)



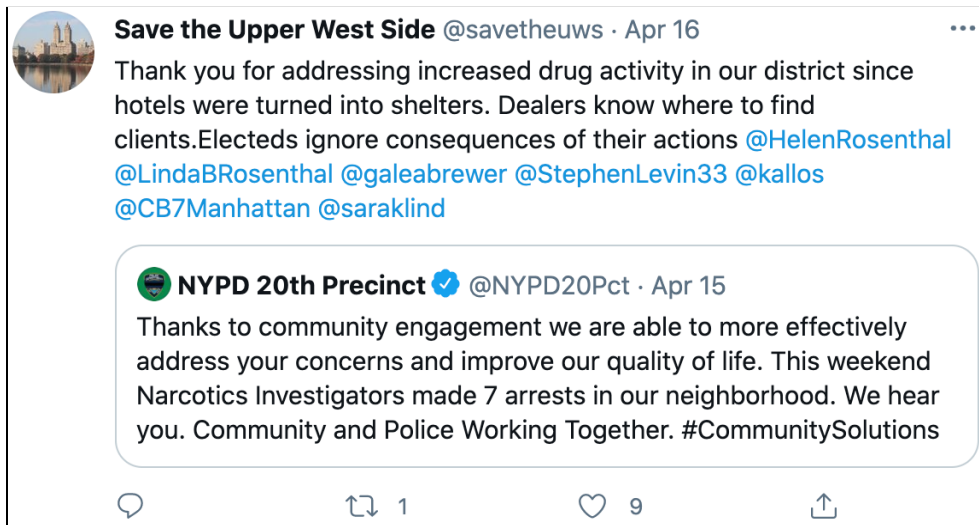
This tweet generalizes the all of the homeless New Yorkers moved into hotels as addicts and predators while implying that the reason for this outrage is to protect local children.



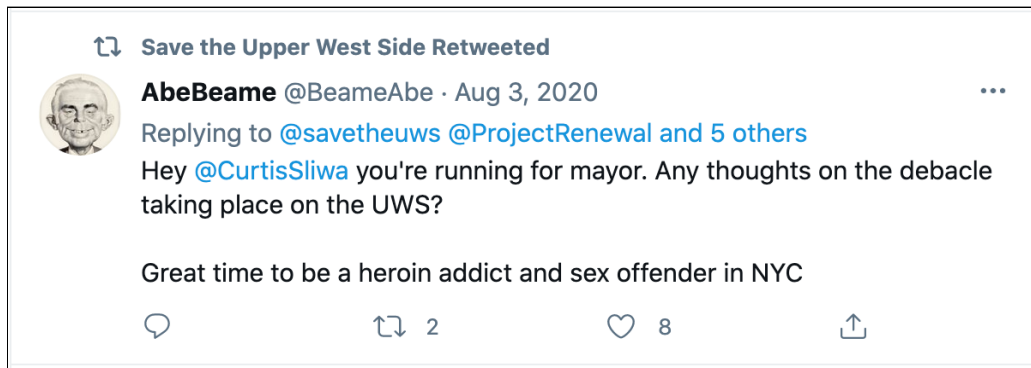
Save the Upper West Side retweeted this post that claims that downtown Manhattan is in shambles due to the neglect of local politicians. By specifically referencing crack, this post uses a racist dog whistle for communities that have historically been the most impacted by that epidemic.



The hotel policy was put in place to protect homeless shelter residents from becoming infected with Covid-19 and this post essentially claims that all of these residents are unworthy of protection because of anecdotal evidence of panhandling.



In this post, Save the Upper West Side simultaneously praises the NYPD while villainizing local homeless populations.



This post tags a Republican candidate for mayor and similar to other postings, generalizes the homeless population on the Upper West Side as drug-addicted and predatory. While this tweet was not written by Save the Upper West Side, they decided it would be appropriate to retweet.

What is NIMBYism?

To fully understand why a neighborhood known for its liberal attitude was so unwelcoming to people in need, it is necessary to define NIMBYism. NIMBY is an acronym that stands for “Not In My Backyard” and it refers to when a neighborhood or community strictly opposes policies that would cause residents to be adjacent to people or developments that they consider to be undesirable. This attitude is most often seen in regards to affordable housing. Cities like New York have a long history of NIMBYism. Federal efforts to improve the lives of low-income residents in cities after World War II were hindered by the racist practices of real estate agents and business owners. Several interest groups pushed for slum clearance to be included in urban renewal programs. While some liberal activists voiced concern over the quality of life that slum residents faced, the majority of pressure to create public housing stemmed from

a desire to improve property values. The National Association of Real Estate Boards, also known as NAREB was created to advocate for urban renewal while harshly opposing public housing⁷. Due to these efforts, public housing was moved to less desirable parts of cities. This was an early iteration of NIMBYism and it led to concentrated poverty across the United States for generations to come.

NIMBYism in liberal communities like the Upper West Side is especially interesting because it means that residents want government programs like affordable housing to exist, but to be far removed from their daily lives. The online forums like Upper West Siders for Safer Streets are filled with racist sentiments about the homeless people living in hotels⁸. It is very telling that wealthy, white communities on the Upper West Side focused their time and resources toward protesting this policy as opposed to supporting their new neighbors in a time of crisis.

How Did City Actors Respond?

Mayor Bill de Blasio has a long history of allowing outside interests to impact the way he governs. He made many progressive campaign promises, including advocating for increased and improved public housing programs. However, he unfortunately decided to give in to the demands posed by NIMBYs in the Upper West Side and in August of 2020, de Blasio announced that New York City would begin moving homeless New Yorkers out of hotels and away from wealthy NIMBYs⁹. De Blasio planned on transferring residents in the Lucerne to the Harmonia Houses in

⁷ Dennis R. Judd and Annika M. Hinze. *City Politics: The Political Economy of Urban Renewal*. Routledge. 2010.

⁸ Zack Fink, Courtney Gross, and Juan Manuel Benitez. "Hotels Housing the Homeless Test the Upper West Side's Liberal Credentials." *Spectrum News NY1*. August 14, 2020.

<https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/off-topic-on-politics/2020/08/14/off-topic-on-politics-upper-west-side-homeless-nyc-homeless-hotel-divide>

⁹ Erik Durkin. "De Blasio: City to begin moving homeless people out of hotels after complaints." *Politico*. August 17, 2020.

<https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2020/08/17/de-blasio-city-to-begin-moving-homeless-people-out-of-hotels-after-complaints-1309540>

Midtown, a nearly full shelter that houses many families with disabilities¹⁰. These residents would likely be displaced onto the streets, continuing the cycle that the hotel policy was intended to resolve. Advocacy groups protested this change, with several demonstrations held outside of hotels like the Lucerne. In September, the city decided to delay hotel evictions following the backlash. There was another large spike of cases over the holiday season with hospitalizations reaching levels that had not been seen since May¹¹. If it weren't for the persistent activism of homeless rights activists, the death count in this community would have been much higher.

The Upper West Side is not the only place in New York City that has seen a rise in NIMBYism during the pandemic. Just one month ago residents of the Upper East Side protested the construction of a homeless shelter in the area. Created by the Goddard Riverdale nonprofit, this shelter is intended to be a “safe haven” that allows residents to stay during the day. Over 1500 Upper East Siders signed a petition to prevent this shelter from being built¹². However, a growing movement to combat NIMBYism has formed in cities like New York.

The appropriately named YIMBY (Yes in My Backyard) movement advocates for public housing programs to be spread around the city as opposed to clustered in low-income neighborhoods. One YIMBY group called Open New York has worked in several neighborhoods around the city such as Flatbush, Murray Hill, and Union Square to promote public housing projects and to ensure that wealthy, white residents do not take up all of the space in community discussions¹³. This type of activism is vital to solve the deep-rooted disparities that are present

¹⁰ “New York City Pauses Plan to Displace Shelter Residents for Homeless Move.” *ABC7NY*. September 11, 2020. <https://abc7ny.com/lucerne-hotel-homeless-shelter-covid/6418872/>

¹¹ Daniel E. Slotnik. “Coronavirus in New York: The Latest.” *New York Times*. December 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/01/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc.html>

¹² Melissa Klein. “Upper East Side residents protest planned NYC-funded homeless shelter.” *New York Post*. March 6, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/03/06/upper-east-side-residents-protest-planned-nyc-funded-homeless-shelter/>

¹³ Sam Raskin. “The YIMBY movement comes to New York City.” *Curbed New York*. September 17, 2020, <https://ny.curbed.com/2018/9/17/17869546/open-new-york-yimby-rezoning-brooklyn-nimby>

among New Yorkers of different classes. Unless groups like Open New York continue to do the hard work and advocate for those who are too often ignored, NIMBYism is not going anywhere.

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