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High rents have Bronx locals packing up Gentrification starts to hit Highbridge, Grand Concourse.

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Lucia Davis grew up in the Grand Concourse section of the Bronx and has lived there happily for nearly 35 years. But as she walked through Franz Sigel Park with her 4-year-old daughter on a recent afternoon, she confessed that her own children may have to grow up elsewhere. Because of rising rents, she and her husband are considering exiting the city.

"You'd think you could afford to live in the Bronx," she said. "But the prices are going up, and a lot of people are moving out."

Welcome to the Highbridge and Grand Concourse neighborhoods in the South Bronx, where income growth in recent years has been among the highest in the city, but in the process has begun to push up some of the city's lowest average rents. As a result, something else has risen as well: homelessness.

In those two neighborhoods, average income climbed nearly 15% between 2005 and 2010, buoyed by a tide of people fleeing across the Harlem River from gentrifying areas in upper Manhattan in search of more affordable apartments in the South Bronx, according to a recent report from the Manhattan-based Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. That wave was enough to drive rents upward by 10% in the same period, to a blended average of \$954 for all sizes of apartments.

Shelter stays

Both those figures might look modest to many New Yorkers. But for residents in one of the poorest areas in the city, where people can least afford any hike in their living costs, they can be intolerable.

In that same five-year period, the number of families from Highbridge and Grand Concourse entering shelters jumped by a third, to 633 in 2010--the second-highest number in any community-board jurisdiction in the city, according to the U.S. Census.

Many observers say these neighborhoods have entered a period of gentrification, yet most agree it is one that differs markedly from what has been seen in recent years in such fast-rising Brooklyn neighborhoods as Bushwick and Crown Heights. Up in the Bronx, the new wave of so-called gentrifiers are actually not that much better off than the people they are replacing. That is why median incomes rose to \$26,731 in 2010—about half the income level considered very low by federal housing standards for a family of four in New York City—up from \$23,179 in 2005.

"We're not seeing stockbrokers moving here," said José Rodriguez, district manager of Bronx Community Board 4, which includes the Highbridge and Grand Concourse areas, although the percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree did shoot up by nearly 40%, indicating a greater presence of young professionals and/or those with higher earning potential.

Unlike the gentrification experienced in parts of Brooklyn and upper Manhattan, the South Bronx variation of the theme has brought less of an ethnic shift. In Highbridge and the Grand Concourse, the ethnic mix remains much as it was, with Hispanics representing about 60% of the population and African Americans at about 33% during the same five-year period, the census showed.

"This is gentrification on a lower level," said Ralph da Costa Nunez, president of the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness.

Although a stretch of Bruckner Boulevard centered around the Clocktower Building in neighboring Port Morris seems to defy that conclusion with its artist lofts and trendy restaurants, that enclave is very small and highly atypical of the South Bronx.

Despite how little the needle has moved by some measures in Highbridge and Grand Concourse, the impact on low-income families has still been wrenching, forcing many into the city's shelter and supportive-housing system.

'Nowhere to go'

"After [the low rents in the Bronx], there is nowhere to go," Mr. da Costa Nunez said. But the greater mix of incomes does have its upside. Cedric Loftin, district manager of nearby Bronx Community Board 1, which includes Port Morris' Bruckner Boulevard, said the new, higher-income residents have integrated themselves into the community and made it a more diverse and dynamic place.

The good news there is that in contrast to many gentrifying neighborhoods in other boroughs, there are a number of affordable projects in the works. Among those is a 106-unit development at 12 East Clarke Place that is nearing completion. Meanwhile, the city is negotiating the financing on a 134-unit affordable building at 810 River Ave.

Ironically, however, some Highbridge residents being pushed out make too little to pay rent in these affordable projects, and many programs that are designed to help this population are already overburdened. For example, the New York City Housing Authority has a waiting list of 160,000 people.

"There is something wrong with a scenario where you earn too little to qualify for affordable housing," said Nancy Biberman, founder and president of housing nonprofit WHEDco.

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