In the last several years, much of New York City has seen unprecedented development activity and rapidly rising real estate prices. But while some people and neighborhoods have prospered, the effects on communities in the Bronx are particularly troubling. Since 1989, income levels in real dollars have dropped by twenty percent in the Bronx, and the gap between the number of available and affordable homes and the people who need them has grown even wider. If housing costs continue to rise and incomes remain stagnant, the number of displaced families—those priced out of their own neighborhoods—will only continue to grow.

This NYC map was included in the Regional Plan Association report, Pushed Out. In contrast to the other boroughs that saw a loss of low income residents and a growth in residents earning more than $100,000, the Bronx saw growth almost exclusively from people making less than $50,000. The Bronx has, by far, the highest proportion of vulnerable tracts (low-income renters) of any county in the region, with 71% of the borough being composed of tracts at risk for displacement and 44% of these tracts currently shifting toward a higher housing market. The darker yellow on the map are in census tracks where the addition of high-end housing (rents $2000+ or homes $500K+) is at the expense of affordable housing.

Part of the solution to the displacement problem can be found in legislative efforts. Regulations at the state and local levels can preserve or increase the number of apartments offered to low- and moderate-income households, limit annual rent increases for regulated apartments, ensure quality construction and renovation work, and protect and enforce tenant rights. But blanket citywide or statewide policies that don’t take into account the differences among New York City’s neighborhoods can also have unintended consequences. Each neighborhood has unique needs and challenges. Policymakers must understand these nuances to bring positive change to every community.

Community Based Organizations (CBOs) are uniquely positioned to understand and advocate for the needs and priorities of a community and to help give residents a voice. They can conduct research and disseminate the results, serve as a convener, and organize advocacy efforts.

UNHP’s neighborhood-level information has influenced policymakers—and supported community members—for many years. When UNHP began to notice rising water and sewer rates that increased operating costs for building owners, it realized that if left unchecked, the situation could disproportionately impact low-income affordable housing communities in the Bronx and elsewhere in the city. Keeping operating costs low is critical in affordable housing because an owner cannot offset increases in costs by raising rents. In response, UNHP produced its Affordable Water for Affordable Housing report and advocated for realistic policy changes informed by data and on-the-ground knowledge. This neighborhood-based effort provided valuable information to policymakers and encouraged them to protect affordable housing owners and operators, and in turn, the people who called their buildings home.
This graphic is from UNHP’s Affordable Water for Affordable Housing Report. As a community-based organization, UNHP researched the impact of rising water and sewer rates on Bronx affordable housing properties. The Bronx building (on left) pays 10% of the average annual per apartment rent towards water, while the Manhattan building pays 2% of the average annual per-apartment rent towards water. Both buildings need the same infrastructure to have water and sewer service. The contrast is clear and illustrates the inequity of current water rate charges. UNHP was able to use their experience and research to advocate for changes to water and sewer rates for affordable housing projects.

Right now, the Bronx is grappling with growing concentrations of poverty in certain neighborhoods. Because real estate costs are the lowest in the city, the Bronx has seen an influx of people who have been displaced from other boroughs, and it is home to a disproportionate number of the city’s homeless shelters and cluster sites. CBOs are in a unique position to advocate for policy changes that limit concentrated poverty, such as more equitable distribution of shelter sites around the city and stronger measures to keep people in their homes and out of the shelter system altogether.

Using information from the American Community Survey 5-year estimates, these maps demonstrate that the Bronx is home to the highest percentage of people living below the poverty level.

City and state leaders must seek to understand the impacts any proposed policy will have on each affected neighborhood and its residents. Involving CBOs in the process is an essential way to bring on-the-ground experience and perspective to decisions that can have major effects on people’s lives. The Bronx is rapidly changing; local needs and priorities must be understood in order to continue the critical work of lifting up residents, keeping longtime community members in their homes, and ensuring the stability of NYC’s diverse neighborhoods.