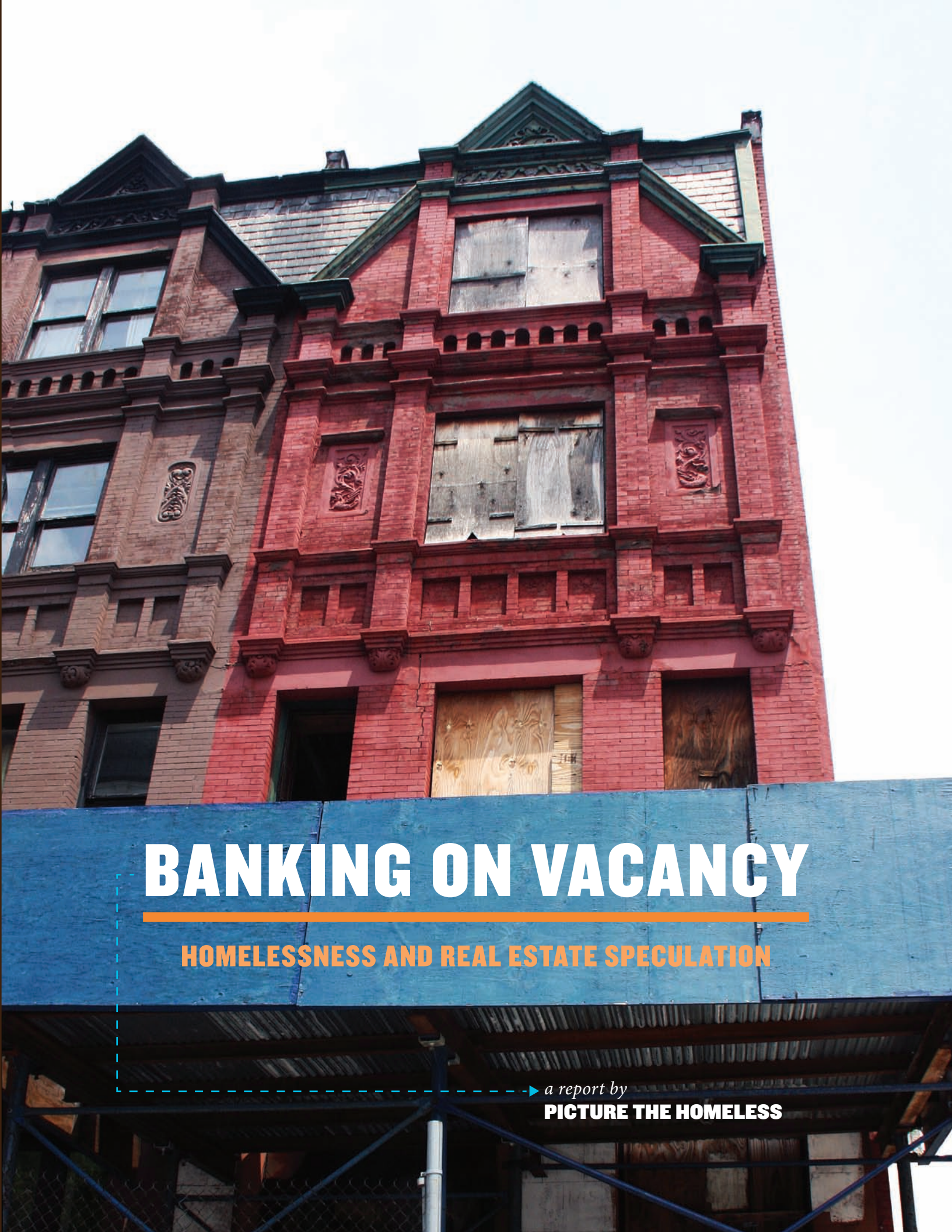

BANKING ON VACANCY

HOMELESSNESS AND REAL ESTATE SPECULATION

a report by

PICTURE THE HOMELESS

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Vacant building and newly-constructed condo in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

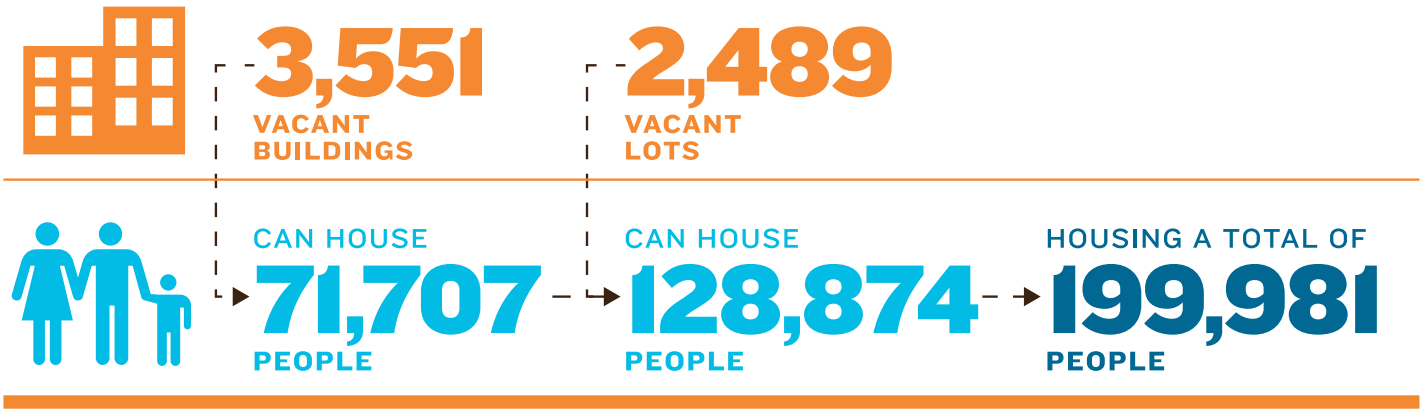
MISSION

Picture the Homeless was founded on the principle that homeless people have civil and human rights regardless of our race, creed, color or economic status. Picture the Homeless was founded and is led by homeless people. We refuse to accept being neglected and we demand that our voices and experience are heard at all levels of decision-making that impact us.

We oppose the quality of life laws that criminalize homeless people in any form by the city, state and national governments. We work to change these laws and policies as well as to challenge the root causes of homelessness. Our strategies include grassroots organizing, direct action, educating homeless people about their rights, public education, changing media stereotypes, and building relationships with allies. Our motto is "Don't Talk About Us, Talk With Us!"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TOTAL FINDINGS



The following report exposes the extent to which vacant buildings and lots permeate our landscape, concentrated in the very communities hardest hit by gentrification and homelessness. We believe vacant property can create housing, parks, urban farms, commercial and cultural space, and jobs—and this report will prove just what a transformative impact this property could have.

Private Property—So What! The majority of vacant buildings and lots in NYC are privately owned, and the trend toward privatization continues. While we envision different strategies for the transformation of publicly owned vacant buildings and lots vis a vis privately-owned vacant property, both types beg the same question: who benefits from vacancy, and does that benefit outweigh the social and economic costs of the housing emergency?

If Picture the Homeless Can Do It, The City Can Do It! Picture the Homeless gathered nearly 12,000 addresses of vacant buildings and lots in fall of 2010 from Freedom of Information Requests to 18 city agencies. We then partnered with Hunter College to create a sound methodology combining scientific and community organizing practice. If the City of New York can conduct a scientifically questionable count of homeless people one night a year (The Hope Count, costing tens of thousands of dollars), then surely they can count vacant properties: by upgrading and consolidating data they already have, and mobilizing a field count annually. Picture the Homeless did it for a fraction of what some elected officials claim would cost millions of dollars.

Catalyze Community-Based Urban Planning Community boards with some of the lowest incomes in the City have thousands of vacant apartments, tens of thousands of square feet of vacant commercial space, and hundreds of vacant lots. We look forward to the day when marginalized communities throughout NYC develop alternate plans for the use of vacant spaces across NYC, and organize for their implementation, for the benefit of all community members including homeless folks.

SOLUTIONS

Housing Creation is Jobs Creation A jobs creation program that partners with construction trade unions to provide apprenticeships to unemployed people would help convert vacant properties in the communities hit hardest by the recession and housing emergency. Every dollar of investment in housing development generates an additional two dollars in economic activity.[1] In the 1970s the CETA program funded job training for public assistance recipients through employment in the rehabilitation of vacant buildings.[2] These "sweat equity" models allowed people to receive training to renovate and purchase properties through their labor during the 1980s, but were phased out in the 1990s. We need to bring back past models with proven track records.

End Vacancy Decontrol and Liberate Thousands of Vacant Rent Stabilized Units Ending vacancy decontrol for rent stabilized apartments, renovating them and renting them at the previous rents will create thousands of low rent apartments without rental subsidies. The City can launch a program to cover the cost of renovation in order to avoid Major Capital Improvement (MCI) increases passed onto tenants. The City would be better served funding housing development and job training for homeless folks than spending thousands per month on shelter costs, per family.

Mandate a City Wide Vacant Property Count Exposing the extent of vacancy in NYC includes demystifying the ownership of properties and tracking the length of time they have been vacant. The city can take immediate steps to centralize, improve, and de-mystify its property records, including the passage of vacant property count legislation by the New York City Council. If Con Edison were required to report electric and gas usage per unit, we would know exactly how many apartments are vacant in NYC and for how long. NYC has been in a housing emergency since 1947. It is time to evaluate and place limits on the housing market and to demand that government stop incentivizing real estate speculation at the expense of the public good.

Surveyor in action.

KEY FINDINGS

A vacant property count can be done at minimal cost to the city.

City agencies already collect a lot of data about vacancy, but make no effort to centralize and analyze that information to give a holistic picture of vacant property.

NYC's laissez-faire free-market strategy for dealing with empty buildings and lots harms communities and helps big real estate.

Property owners hide behind a maze of shell corporations and LLCs, making it nearly impossible for local communities to hold entities warehousing property accountable.

The same neighborhoods that send high numbers of families into the homeless shelter system have the highest density of vacant property—in most of them, there is enough vacant space to house ten times as many people as are currently housed in shelters in that district. Citywide, vacant property could house the entire shelter population five times over.

These findings are the tip of the iceberg. We counted 1/3 of the city, leaving 39 community districts untouched.

"THIS COUNT WILL HELP US FIGHT TO TURN THESE BUILDINGS INTO PROPER HOUSING."

Arvernetta Henry,
Picture the Homeless Member

PTH member and intern prepare to scout for vacant property.

BACKGROUND

VACANT PROPERTY AND THE HOUSING CRISIS

How vacant property is developed, and for whose benefit, is one of the critical issues facing us as we seek to identify solutions to the housing crisis in New York City. Currently, housing is like any other commodity. Investors (real estate speculators), buy and sell property the same as they would shares in a corporation. Speculating on neighborhoods gentrifying is how many folks get rich in this city. It is all perfectly legal, and even incentivized by government policies.

Picture the Homeless believes that housing is a human right. From this perspective, the question of vacant properties vis a vis homelessness is simple. At what point does the promotion of the public interest in addressing basic human needs take precedence over the gross accumulation of private wealth? What happens when human rights are in conflict with property rights? This same question was at the heart of the nineteenth-century fight over slavery.

New York City government actively supports the warehousing of vacant buildings and land. In 2005, in the early days of our Housing Not Warehousing campaign, we asked (then) NYC Housing Preservation & Development Commissioner Sean Donovan to address the problem of vacancy. He responded that "development in our city requires that some property be temporarily held off the market to assemble development opportunities"... even though "temporarily" can be thirty years or more. Although New York City has been in a "housing emergency" since 1947, the City places no restrictions on how long residential buildings or land can be kept vacant!

One example: in Harlem, the buildings on the west side of Malcolm X Blvd. between 125th and 124th streets stayed empty for decades while the landlord purchased each one as it came on the market. Jeff Sutton, head of Wharton Realty, kept the apartments in these buildings vacant while making profit on the ground-floor commercial space. There was no shortage of people in Harlem looking for apartments: Harlem has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the City. Nor is it that Sutton couldn't afford to rehab the building. It just wasn't ripe for making a killing, as they say. Picture the Homeless held two "sleep outs" on the street in front of the buildings to educate the public about the connections between vacancy, gentrification and homelessness. We wrote to Jeff Sutton and asked for a meeting. In response, he demolished the buildings to construct a luxury hotel. The lot remains vacant as of this writing. (See photo on page 7) Under current law, he can do whatever he wants with his property, regardless of community needs or impact on the city as a whole.

Through Housing Boom and Housing Bust Regardless of market conditions, two constants remain: a steady increase in homelessness and the privatization of vacant property, because housing is a commodity. During an economic upswing, gentrification produces higher rents. When the economy declines, rents in low income neighborhoods don't go down. Unemployment goes up, and the city says there is no money to create housing. Through it all, New York City has set record levels of homelessness during the past 10 years. The number of homeless families entering shelter each year has doubled since Michael Bloomberg took office in 2002, and has reached 40,000 people as of today's writing.[3] This doesn't count street homeless, or folks doubled up in overcrowded housing, families in the domestic violence shelter system, or the hundreds of shelter beds provided by faith communities throughout the city.

ROOTS OF THE HOUSING (NOT HOMELESS) CRISIS

Policies at all levels of government have created the housing crisis. Since the Reagan Administration, dis-investment in housing development for the very poor, withdrawal of funds for rental subsidies such as the Section 8 voucher program, stagnating and declining wages for low wage workers, and public assistance budgets that relegate folks to extreme poverty, have contributed to more households experiencing homelessness in New York City and throughout the United States. How much rent can you afford if you make $10.00 per hour at a full time job, for a pre-tax income of $1,733 a month? According to federal guidelines, families paying more than 30% of their income on rent are considered cost-burdened... so the most you could spend on rent is $519 a month. Imagine if you have children. What happens when you lose that job? Over 50% of households in the city pay more than 30% of their income for housing!

Warehousing isn't just a New York City problem. With unemployment and foreclosures on the rise and banks sitting on countless properties acquired fraudulently or immorally, the 2010 census estimated that there are 18.6 million vacant homes[4],and an estimated 3.5 million homeless people nationwide[5]... which equals five vacant homes in this country for every homeless person! Picture the Homeless learned that other cities, like Boston, survey vacant properties, and we learned from those models. We are also anchor members of the Campaign to Restore National Housing Rights, leading a workgroup on addressing warehousing nationwide, learning from and providing support to allies nationally.

Shelter Money is Poorly Spent, Give Us Money to Pay Our Rent! Picture the Homeless members decry the amount of money spent on shelter, especially as compared to the absence of money spent on housing development or rental assistance for the very poor. We know that the claim by City officials that "there's no money" to turn vacant properties into housing is a lie, because shelter residents get a monthly update of the exorbitant amounts the City spends on shelter. In 2010, the city's budget for Housing Preservation and Development ($489 million) was only 63% of what the city spent providing shelter to homeless people ($773 million Department of Homeless Services budget)[6].

Inset: portion of actual NYC human resources administration statement, showing how much the city pays for one person to be in a shelter for a month—provided by a PTH member

"BROOKLYN NEIGHBORHOODS ARE PLAGUED BY VACANT PROPERTY AND DISPLACEMENT, AND WE'RE LOSING MORE AND MORE OF OUR PEOPLE TO THE HOMELESS SHELTER SYSTEM. THE CITY NEEDS TO DO MORE. THE DATA WE GATHER WITH THIS COUNT WILL HELP US CREATE REAL SOLUTIONS THAT BENEFIT WORKING-CLASS NEW YORKERS."

Letitia James, City Council Member

Harlem tent city protest

'They say gentrify, we say occupy'

Police arrest a woman at the Picture the Homeless demonstration in Harlem. The group's board member, Rob Robinson, said he went to Miami to learn tactics from a group, Take Back the Land, that's been moving homeless into empty foreclosed homes.

8 arrested in homeless protest

AMY ZIMMER

move homeless people onto the unused space. Advocacy group Picture the Homeless rallied roughly 100 people up tents, be spread of b mus at

Chase. They used a ruse of a fashion shoot while activists cut down the fence that police restored hou

"I don't have a problem with this," Karen Nelson, 49, who lives on th homeles At the lot on Madison

With tent city in the background, police arrest the Rev. Frank

Protest at Council session

SERIAL miniprotests by housing activists briefly halted the City Council session yesterday and caused the eviction of public spectators.

The protesters called for a hearing on a stalled bill requiring a census of all vacant lots and buildings in the city for possible future uses for the homeless.

"They didn't know how many of us there were," sa William Burnett, one of the protest leaders for Picture the Homeless-NYC.

Frank Lomba

PTH members arrested at "tent city" protest on vacant lot, East Harlem, 2009.

Housing Not Warehousing Campaign History Picture the Homeless began our Housing Campaign in 2004, with a vacant property count in El Barrio/E. Harlem. The count taught us that most vacant properties were privately owned, and the property taxes paid. This was a very different scenario than the abandonment of previous decades. Picture the Homeless members were acutely aware of vacancy: the neighborhoods with the most vacant property are the same neighborhoods that send the most homeless families into the shelter system.

SHIFTING THE CONVERSATION AND TAKING ACTION

Picture the Homeless members were convinced that the development of vacant properties was key to solving the housing crisis, and the renovation of vacant properties a source of good jobs. Our vision to create housing and jobs through the rehabilitation of vacant buildings isn't a new idea. It has worked in the past. But vacant property is a hot commodity now, and much of it is in the private market. Government officials told us that vacancy is a thing of the past, that the city doesn't keep records of vacancy, and there's just no way to prove it's really a problem. Most housing advocacy organizations also told us we couldn't do anything about privately owned vacant property. We weren't convinced. We realized that we had to shift the conversation by exposing the extent to which buildings and lots were being kept vacant. We conducted extensive outreach to homeless people, building our base to mobilize for town hall meetings and direct actions highlighting vacant property and its impact on the entire city, in the process building relationships with dozens of grassroots groups and faith leaders who felt that property warehousing needed to stop.

Participatory Research: The Manhattan Vacant Property Count We knew that we had to prove that warehousing was pervasive and harmful to community and the City as a whole. We designed and conducted a block by block count of vacant properties in Manhattan in conjunction with the Manhattan Borough President in 2006. Our report, *Homeless People Count*, proved that the total volume of empty housing units in abandoned buildings in Manhattan exceeded the number of homeless people in shelter and on the street citywide. 24,000 potential apartments could have been developed out of all those properties going to waste![7] And the housing crisis and economic recession have increased both homelessness and vacancy since then. The financial collapse of 2008 has also left countless condo developments stalled for lack of financing.[8]

Sleep Outs, Public Education and Relationship Building In early 2006, in conjunction with launching the vacant property count, we began a series of "sleep-outs", where we literally slept on the sidewalk in front of vacant buildings, engaging the community in conversations around vacancy and homelessness and gentrification. We also garnered extensive press coverage. Neighbors brought us coffee and warm soup. These public sleep-outs helped build solidarity within our organization, and public support for our work. It was during the process of building support for our first sleep out that members of PTH met with folks from the office of Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer. His office partnered with us on the block-by-block count of vacant buildings and lots in Manhattan referenced above.

State Legislative Victory, City Legislative Challenge One policy change resulting from our Manhattan count was a bill introduced by State Senator Jose Serrano and passed through both chambers of the legislature, which eradicated a tax incentive that had essentially rewarded landlords for keeping property vacant above 110th Street in communities with high rates of homelessness and rampant gentrification.

Picture the Homeless members reached out to every member of the New York City Council in 2006, seeking to craft and find a sponsor for legislation to mandate a vacant property count and create incentives to develop housing for poor people. South Brooklyn Legal Services assisted us in the research and writing of the bill, which was sponsored by Councilman Tony Avella. By late 2009, it was clear that the Council legal department would not allow a bill to be introduced with provisions that included elements such as "duty to rent". We were in fact told that bills were not introduced at all if they weren't likely to be passed! Many of our members felt that council members should have had the opportunity to gather testimony, debate and vote on this bill, and preventing its introduction was a "subversion of democracy." Indeed, we learned a lot about the legislative process along the way.

In February of 2010, a new bill was introduced by Melissa Mark-Viverito. Intro 48 would empower the city to conduct an annual count of vacant buildings and lots throughout the five boroughs. We believed that this was a strategic and pragmatic compromise. We continue to be convinced that once vacant properties are counted and the results publicized, it will ignite outrage

Demonstration at City Hall, demanding action on vacant property, 2010.

in the communities most affected by the housing crisis and create additional organizing opportunities. While Intro 48 garnered the majority of City Council members as co-sponsors in less than a month, as of the end of 2011 it still has not been calendered by the Chair of the Housing Committee of the City Council. We reached out to the Council's policy division to see what was happening—and learned that they were "getting push-back" from the Administration, who were concerned about the "cost of the bill" even after extremely-modest cost estimates were provided.

Takeovers, the Housing Not Warehousing Coalition and Upping the Ante Faced with the barriers to passing progressive legislation through the City Council, we knew we had to raise the stakes in order to get any sort of anti-warehousing or vacant property legislation passed. With support—and homelessness—increasing, we decided to create a Housing Not Warehousing! (HNW!) Coalition. Our intent was to formalize relationships with allies, build a structure to incorporate them into the work, increase our effectiveness to win a city-wide vacant property count, and build momentum to create housing for extremely low income folks. The HNW! Coalition includes members from sectors of the community and social justice movement that we believe are critical to changing housing policy in New York City, including grassroots and community based organizations, cultural workers, faith communities, labor, academics, and housing developers.

In 2009 we took over a vacant building in El Barrio, on the corner of 116th and Madison, that had been vacant for decades. With critical support provided by members of the HNW! Coalition, we turned out hundreds of supporters in the rain. That night we slept on the sidewalk in front of the building and deepened our resolved to liberate vacant property. In the summer of 2009, we held another public takeover of a vacant lot in El Barrio owned by Chase Manhattan Bank, where 10 of us were arrested, and hundreds turned out in support. These actions put even more of a public spotlight on property warehousing, and they built support internally for members to take up squatting as a form of collective resistance. It was within this context, and that of governmental inaction, that we embarked upon a mapping project to engage New Yorkers to partner with us to identify vacant properties city-wide and to show the city that the count could be done.

VACANT NYC: SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING

In the summer of 2010, we attended a workshop on open-source crowd mapping as a means to map services for homeless folks. In our experience, homeless folks know where services are, so we suggested using the technology to map vacant properties to educate the public about vacancy instead! We launched vacantnyc.crowdmap.com, which allowed folks to text the address to our Vacant NYC map, and created the See Something, Say Something initiative in the late summer of 2010. We requested lists of vacancies from a range of city agencies, and uploaded those into Vacant NYC, for a total of nearly 12,000 vacant properties by December of 2010. This resulted in several things, including the partnership with Hunter College whose findings this report addresses.

"THE POWERS THAT BE DON'T WANT TO COUNT VACANT PROPERTY BECAUSE IT WILL SHINE AN UGLY LIGHT ON THEIR REAL ESTATE FRIENDS." *Dwayne Austin, Picture the Homeless Member*

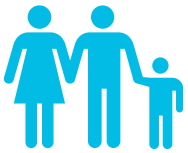
FALL 2010, TURNING UP THE HEAT

Throughout the fall of 2010, we turned up the heat on the City Council to take action on Intro 48. We engaged with allies, met with electeds, and created public education and media opportunities around the issue of vacant properties. These actions included a massive press conference in support of Intro 48. Over 100 representatives from dozens of members of the HNW! Coalition joined us.

FINDINGS

3,551 VACANT BUILDINGS

2,489 VACANT LOTS



CAN HOUSE **71,707** PEOPLE

CAN HOUSE **128,874** PEOPLE

HOUSING A TOTAL OF **199,981** PEOPLE

10% OF VACANT PROPERTY IS OWNED BY THE GOVERNMENT

11% OF THESE PROPERTIES HAD BEEN IDENTIFIED AS VACANT IN THE CITY DATA WE RECEIVED

NYC Vacant Properties Could House Every Homeless Person... and then Some! These results show the outstanding amount of under utilized housing stock that is available in just a third of New York City! Every homeless person in New York City could have a home with the amount of vacant space that currently exists. By pushing for rehabilitation of the existing vacant buildings the city could create jobs and house people immediately.

Shelters Would Become Obsolete While the city chooses to waste money on the shelter-industrial complex, we have found that the number of shelter beds in each district is significantly lower than the number of potential housing units in each community district. There is space to house five times as many people in vacant property as are currently in shelter citywide. The city spends $3,500 a month to house someone in a shelter—adding up to $856 million a year, yet there is no plan in place to create real housing for the poor.

Neighborhood Vacancy and Shelter Correlation Results from our vacant property count demonstrate a pattern of displacement. According to the Vera Institute of Justice's report "Understanding Family Homelessness In New York City" almost half of eligible homeless families came from 10 of the 59 community districts in New York City.[10] Six of these ten community districts are the same ones where we found the highest rate of vacancy. This correlation demonstrates that homelessness and warehousing go hand in hand.

City Data is a Useless Mess In advance of the count, we compiled as much city data as we could, to identify the community districts with the highest rate of vacancies using Freedom of Information Law requests to many city agencies. We were unable to obtain a clear picture of vacancy in New York City. Once we took on the challenge of walking block by block, counting the number of vacant buildings and lots, we obtained thousands of surveys reporting vacant properties. Comparing what community members identified as vacant properties to the information that we obtained from the city exposed an incomprehensible inconsistency between what the city records and what the community has to live with. Our data demonstrates that city records-keeping is useless for understanding housing conditions, and is in need of a dramatic overhaul.

Warehousing with Commercial Space Walking through blighted neighborhoods such as Harlem and Bed-Stuy one notices many storefronts that are active. What people generally do not notice is the amount of empty residential units that are available on top of these commercial spaces. Landlords warehouse their residential units because they can make enough money from extravagant commercial rents without any of the hassles of residential tenants.

Available Commercial Space can Help Subsidize Low Income Residential Units Within the thousands of vacant buildings that this report has identified, we found 4,544 units that are zoned for commercial or manufacturing use. The Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association focuses on providing affordable housing apartments on the Lower East Side through the Community Land Trust/MHA model. They are able to keep rents as low as $350 a month, in part by subsidizing their rents using some of the profits made from their rented out commercial space. According to Valerio Orselli Executive Director of the Cooper Square Committee, they are able to raise 27% of their total operating cost by using the income gained from their commercial spaces to maintain affordable units.

Affordable Housing is Not Really Affordable The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development(HUD) uses "Area Median Income" (AMI) to identify the range for "affordable housing" guidelines. AMI in New York City is distorted by affluent neighborhoods in the greater New York Metropolitan Area including northern New Jersey and Long Island, pushing the AMI to $80,200.[11] In order to provide real affordable housing, the city needs to mandate that the AMI be more locally determined. If a

building is being developed in the Bronx and is being subsidized by public funds, the AMI should be appropriate to the median income of the neighborhood! Current practices encourage gentrification and displacement while using public funds to do it.

The City Masks Vacant Lots as "Parks" In many instances our surveyors identified abandoned, garbage-filled, and weed-ridden lots that the city lists as public recreation spaces. The city needs to distinguish between lots that are publicly accessible and sealed-off lots where the community could create a plan for proper usage of the space. New Yorkers should not be living next to garbage and rat-infested lots that they claim to be recreational space! These spaces pose potential health hazards and devalue the quality of life for community members.

This Can be Replicated The city stated that a count of vacant properties in New York could not be done because it would cost too much money. We have proven that through the use of volunteers and partnering with a University a vacant property count can be done. Using our Analytical and Organizing Methodology this process could be replicated at a much lower cost than what city officials claim.

Vacancy Affects Everyone When organizing this project we reached out to as many community members as possible. We spoke at neighborhood events, rallies, protests, churches, highs schools and colleges, community organizations, shelters, city council forums, and any other place where we could find an open ear. While engaging the community about the issue of vacant properties, we received unanimous concerns about vacancy being a problem. The staggering volume of empty buildings and lots that we identified causes major harm on all aspects of city life. People who are in need of housing want these vacant buildings to be put in use. Community members who feel like there are not enough parks and recreation spaces in their neighborhoods want the vacant lots to be turned into something useful. Homeowners living next to rodent-infested lots want the city to clean up the brownfields that are ever-present across blighted neighborhoods in New York City.

Hiding Ownership With LLCs and MERS As we collected and analyzed the thousands of vacant properties found in our survey, we came across great difficulties in identifying their ownership. The usage of Limited Liability Corporations allow landlords to mask true ownership of warehoused and abandoned properties. In cases where the properties are bank-owned or are going through foreclosure, the usage of Mortgage Electronic Registration Systems, Inc (MERS) make it even more problematic to identify ownership and transaction history by community members. In the end, a community member would need a law degree and a substantial amount of free time to decipher the ownership of vacant buildings and lots in their neighborhood and uncover slumlords, warehousers, and property-flipping schemes. The city needs to clearly record property ownership and mortgage transactions and have that information be easily accessible. By allowing these practices to persist the city is supporting predatory tactics and displacement processes.

"People housed" is a speculative estimate, based on local zoning regulations on vacant residential buildings and lots, and contingent on development to the maximum floor/area ratio (FAR), following established city planning estimates of 350 square feet per person. Instead of mandating that all vacant lots be developed into housing, our goal is to empower neighborhoods to fight for their own needs—community gardens, parking lots, commercial use, housing development, etc. Our total figure is a potential maximum, subject in practice to detailed site analysis and community decision making.

"DEVELOPERS, BUILDERS, AND SPECULATORS SEE VACANT SPACES AS FUTURE WEALTH. THAT FUTURE WEALTH DOES US NO GOOD NOW, WHEN PEOPLE ARE HUNGRY AND STARVING AND HOMELESS."

Owen Rogers,
Picture the Homeless Member

MANHATTAN

987 VACANT BUILDINGS

257 VACANT LOTS

6,704 EXISTING SHELTER UNITS

CAN HOUSE **32,061** PEOPLE

CAN HOUSE **33,763** PEOPLE

HOUSING A TOTAL OF **65,824** PEOPLE

COMMUNITY DISTRICT FINDINGS

CD 02 | SOHO/TRIBECA

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 297

> housing a total of 11,694 people

number of existing shelter units: 100

1,585 commercial/manufacturing units found within **263** vacant buildings. **1%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **5%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 03 | EAST VILLAGE/LES

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 222

> housing a total of 8,656 people

number of existing shelter units: 260

431 commercial/manufacturing units found within **172** vacant buildings. **3%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **8%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 04 | MIDTOWN/CHELSEA

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 99

> housing a total of 15,782 people

number of existing shelter units: 1,172

370 commercial/manufacturing units found within **172** vacant buildings. **10%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **6%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 06 | MIDTOWN/GRAMERCY

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 51

> housing a total of 5,250 people

number of existing shelter units: 342

643 commercial/manufacturing units found within **41** vacant buildings. **0%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **6%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 09 | MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 105

> housing a total of 3,862 people

number of existing shelter units: 736

50 commercial/manufacturing units found within **94** vacant buildings. **5%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **7%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received..

CD 10 | HARLEM

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 327

> housing a total of 11,338 people

number of existing shelter units: 1,223

241 commercial/manufacturing units found within **255** vacant buildings. **15%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **13%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

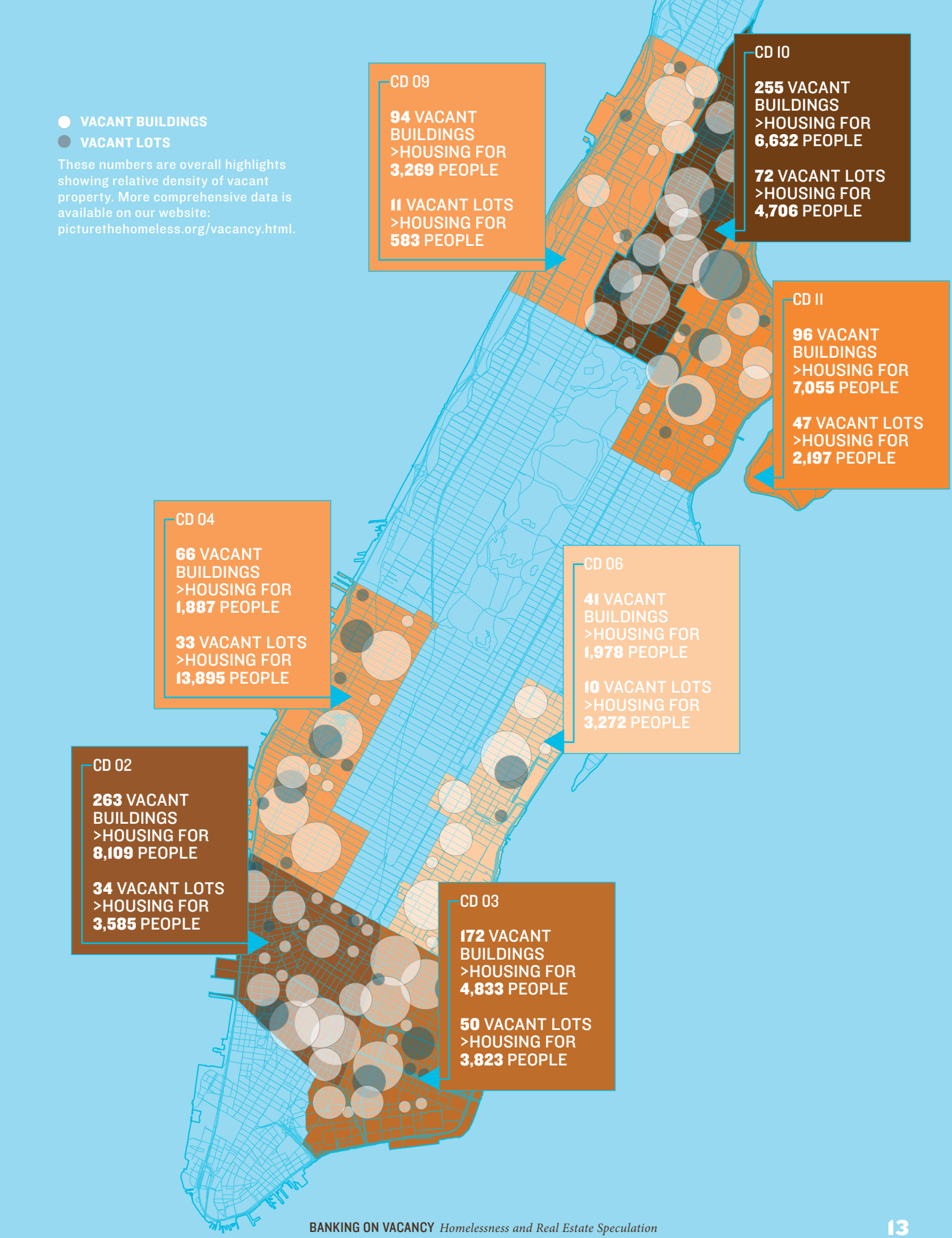
CD 11 | EAST HARLEM

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 143

> housing a total of 9,252 people

number of existing shelter units: 287

168 commercial/manufacturing units found within **96** vacant buildings. **5%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **17%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.


VACANT BUILDINGS
VACANT LOTS
These numbers are overall highlights showing relative density of vacant property. More comprehensive data is available on our website: picturethehomeless.org/vacancy.html.
CD 09
94 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 3,269 PEOPLE
11 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 583 PEOPLE
CD 10
255 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 6,632 PEOPLE
72 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 4,706 PEOPLE
CD 11
96 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 7,055 PEOPLE
47 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 2,197 PEOPLE
CD 04
66 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 1,887 PEOPLE
33 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 13,895 PEOPLE
CD 06
41 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 1,978 PEOPLE
10 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 3,272 PEOPLE
CD 02
263 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 8,109 PEOPLE
34 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 3,585 PEOPLE
CD 03
172 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 4,833 PEOPLE
50 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 3,823 PEOPLE

THE BRONX

368 VACANT BUILDINGS

186 VACANT LOTS

2,667 EXISTING SHELTER UNITS

CAN HOUSE **11,578** PEOPLE

CAN HOUSE **9,336** PEOPLE

HOUSING A TOTAL OF **20,914** PEOPLE

COMMUNITY DISTRICT FINDINGS

CD 03 | CLAREMONT VILLAGE

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 161

> housing a total of 4,963 people

number of existing shelter units: 768

1,585 commercial/manufacturing units found within **263** vacant buildings. **1%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **5%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 04 | MOUNT EDEN

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 236

> housing a total of 11,179 people

number of existing shelter units: 1,143

431 commercial/manufacturing units found within **172** vacant buildings. **3%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **8%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

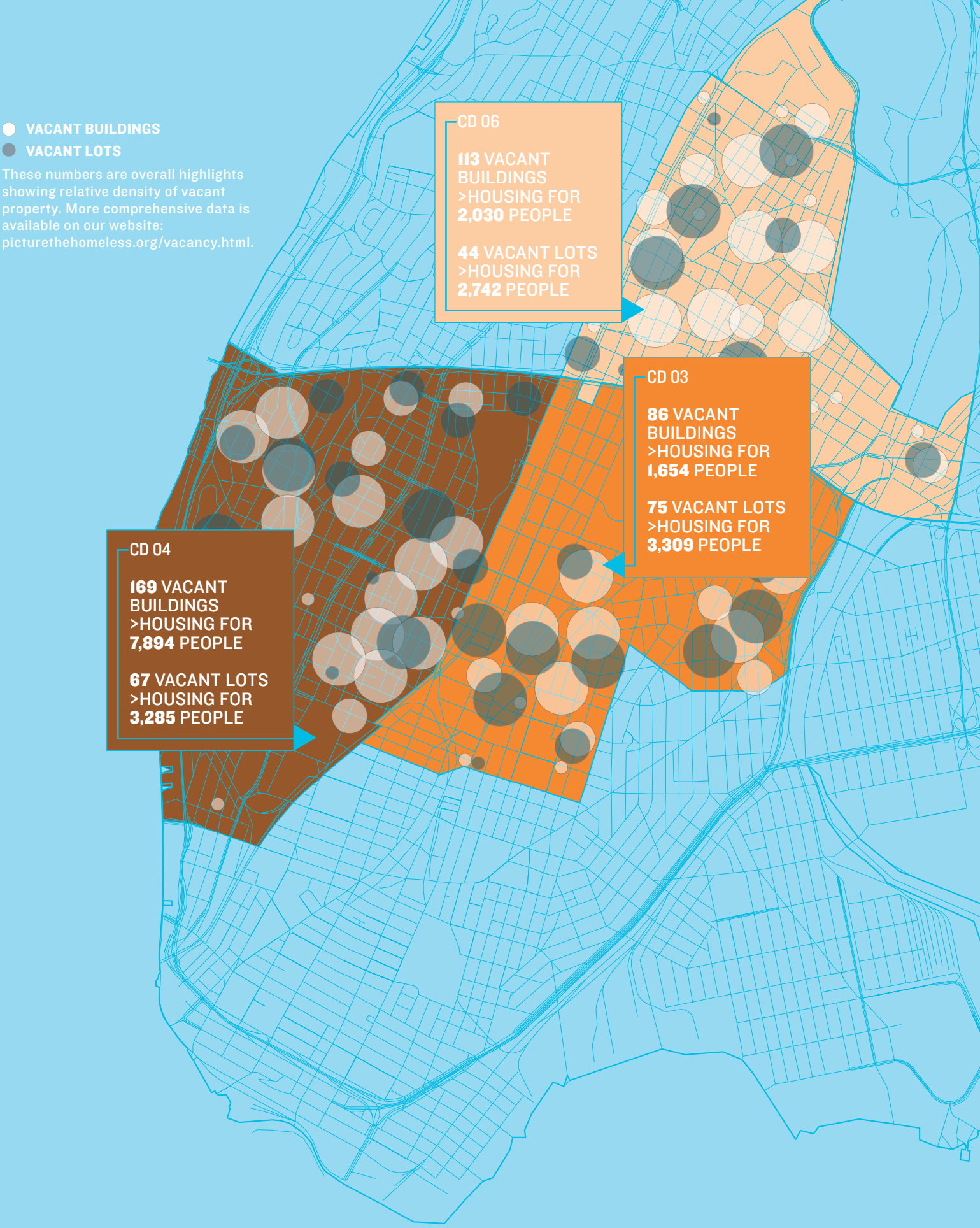
CD 06 | BELMONT

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 157

> housing a total of 4,772 people

number of existing shelter units: 776

370 commercial/manufacturing units found within **172** vacant buildings. **10%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **6%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.


VACANT BUILDINGS
VACANT LOTS
These numbers are overall highlights showing relative density of vacant property. More comprehensive data is available on our website: picturethehomeless.org/vacancy.html.
CD 06
113 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 2,030 PEOPLE
44 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 2,742 PEOPLE
CD 03
86 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 1,654 PEOPLE
75 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 3,309 PEOPLE
CD 04
169 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 7,894 PEOPLE
67 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 3,285 PEOPLE

BROOKLYN

1,623 VACANT BUILDINGS

1,412 VACANT LOTS

6,651 EXISTING SHELTER UNITS

CAN HOUSE **23,223** PEOPLE

CAN HOUSE **47,709** PEOPLE

HOUSING A TOTAL OF **70,932** PEOPLE

COMMUNITY DISTRICT FINDINGS

CD 01 | WILLIAMSBURG

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 349

> housing a total of 22,611 people

number of existing shelter units: 688

145 commercial/manufacturing units found within **188** vacant buildings. **7%** of vacant property is owned by the government, only **10%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 02 | DUMBO/CLINTON HILL

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 212

> housing a total of 6,100 people

number of existing shelter units: 1,094

204 commercial/manufacturing units found within **155** vacant buildings. **4%** of vacant property is owned by the government, only **14%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 03 | BEDFORD-STUYVESANT

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 466

> housing a total of 10,376 people

number of existing shelter units: 852

123 commercial/manufacturing units found within **419** vacant buildings. **3%** of vacant property is owned by the government, only **2%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 04 | BUSHWICK

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 384

> housing a total of 5,647 people

number of existing shelter units: 518

55 commercial/manufacturing units found within **202** vacant buildings. **8%** of vacant property is owned by the government, only **19%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 05 | EAST NEW YORK

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 531

> housing a total of 13,379 people

number of existing shelter units: 970

36 commercial/manufacturing units found within **254** vacant buildings. **5%** of vacant property is owned by the government, only **2%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 06 | RED HOOK/PARK SLOPE

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 294

> housing a total of 4,767 people

number of existing shelter units: 295

107 commercial/manufacturing units found within **134** vacant buildings. **3%** of vacant property is owned by the government, only **14%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

CD 08 | CROWN HEIGHTS

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 182

> housing a total of 5,079 people

number of existing shelter units: 832

78 commercial/manufacturing units found within **117** vacant buildings. **4%** of vacant property is owned by the government, only **15%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

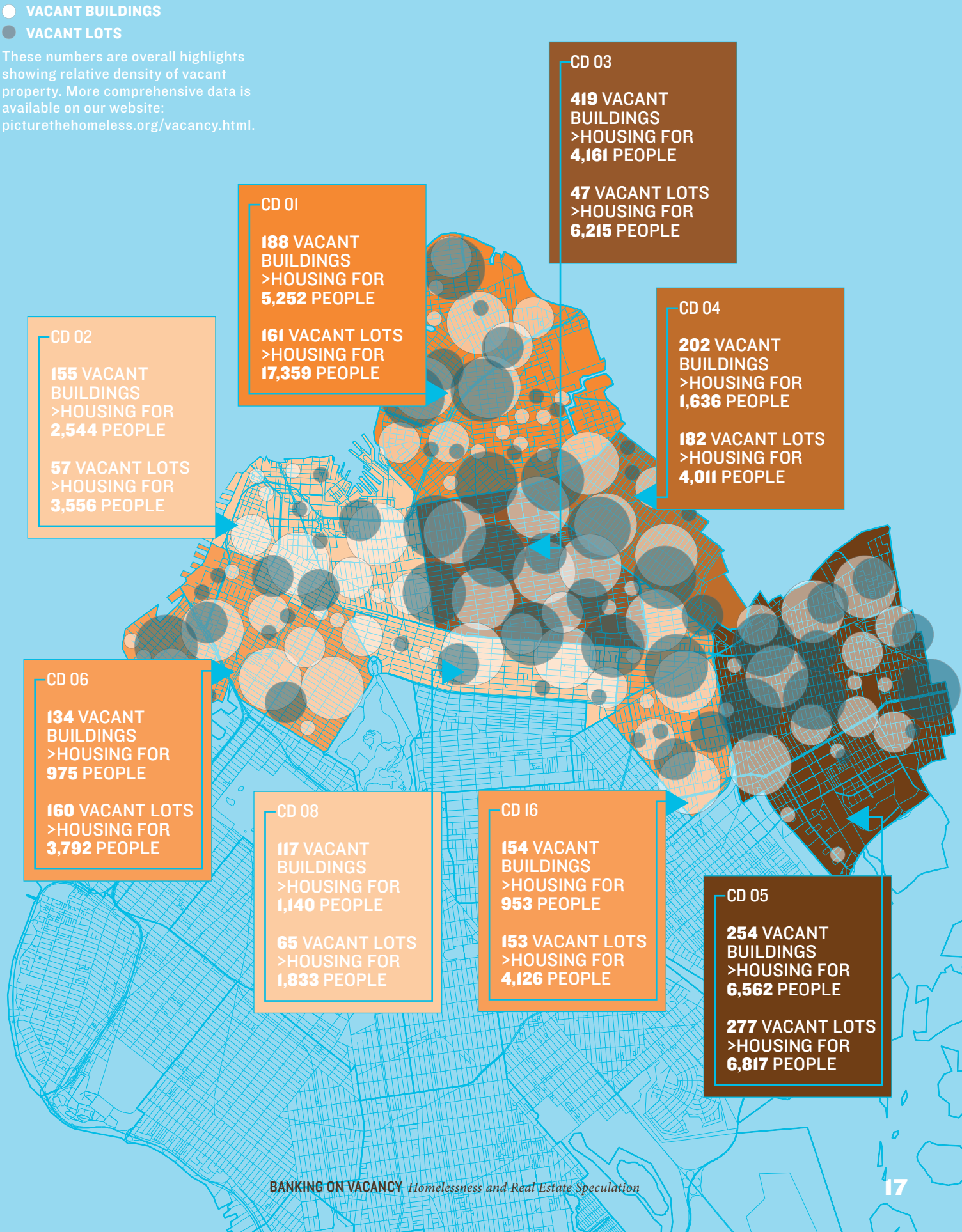
CD 16 | CYPRESS HILLS

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 307

> housing a total of 5,079 people

number of existing shelter units: 1,402

83 commercial/manufacturing units found within **154** vacant buildings. **31%** of vacant property is owned by the government, only **26%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.


VACANT BUILDINGS
VACANT LOTS
These numbers are overall highlights showing relative density of vacant property. More comprehensive data is available on our website: picturethehomeless.org/vacancy.html.
CD 03
419 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 4,161 PEOPLE
47 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 6,215 PEOPLE
CD 01
188 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 5,252 PEOPLE
161 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 17,359 PEOPLE
CD 04
202 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 1,636 PEOPLE
182 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 4,011 PEOPLE
CD 02
155 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 2,544 PEOPLE
57 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 3,556 PEOPLE
CD 06
134 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 975 PEOPLE
160 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 3,792 PEOPLE
CD 08
117 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 1,140 PEOPLE
65 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 1,833 PEOPLE
CD 16
154 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 953 PEOPLE
153 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 4,126 PEOPLE
CD 05
254 VACANT BUILDINGS >HOUSING FOR 6,562 PEOPLE
277 VACANT LOTS >HOUSING FOR 6,817 PEOPLE

STATEN ISLAND

362 VACANT BUILDINGS

250 VACANT LOTS

82 EXISTING SHELTER UNITS

CAN HOUSE **2,120** PEOPLE

CAN HOUSE **7,472** PEOPLE

HOUSING A TOTAL OF **9,592** PEOPLE

COMMUNITY DISTRICT FINDINGS

CD 01 | NORTHERN STATEN ISLAND

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 612

> housing a total of 9,592 people

number of existing shelter units: 82

199 commercial/manufacturing units found within **362** vacant buildings. **2%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **3%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

QUEENS

211 VACANT BUILDINGS

384 VACANT LOTS

0 EXISTING SHELTER UNITS

CAN HOUSE **1,023** PEOPLE

CAN HOUSE **31,696** PEOPLE

HOUSING A TOTAL OF **32,719** PEOPLE

COMMUNITY DISTRICT FINDINGS

CD 14 | FAR ROCKAWAY

total number of vacant buildings and lots: 605

> housing a total of 32,719 people

number of existing shelter units: 0

39 commercial/manufacturing units found within **211** vacant buildings. **36%** of vacant property is owned by the government; only **24%** of the vacant properties we found had been identified as vacant in the city data we received.

ANALYTIC METHODOLOGY

ASSESSING CITY DATA

We began by assessing what data the city already had. In the course of our research we had learned that different city agencies collect different information about vacant properties—the NYPD keeps track of vacant property in which illegal activity has been reported, the Fire Department monitors properties that they had sealed up after fire damage, and so on. In November of 2010 we began an exhaustive campaign of Freedom of Information Law Requests to every city agency that could conceivably have kept relevant records. In the end we sent nineteen FOIL requests to eleven different agencies. Many city agencies ignored or outright refused to comply with our requests. Some provided data that was clearly out of date, or formatted in such a way as to make it impossible to collate or compare with other city agency data. And then some responded right away, with very helpful and thorough data.

Ultimately, by obtaining information regarding vacant lots and buildings from various governmental agencies via the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) as well as information reported through other governmental and non-governmental sources, we stacked up a listing of over 40,000 properties. Our comprehensive data set came from the sources seen in "Initial Findings."

We shared this dataset with our partners at Hunter College, who carefully reviewed it. They removed duplicate and erroneous listings. All vacant buildings and lots were mapped using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software and the Department of City Planning's PLUTO database. It quickly became apparent that the vast majority of the vacancies were concentrated in a small number of communities. We concluded that it would be most efficient and effective to concentrate time and resources on these neighborhoods. A complete block-by-block survey of the entire city would certainly have been possible, but we could not justify the additional time and resources it would require to survey and map the relatively small number of vacancies in many parts of the city.

In order to narrow down the areas to be surveyed, we had to use only the data that was up-to-date and available citywide. The Right to the City Condo Count listings were taken out because they were dated and in only one borough. The 4,000 partial vacate orders were removed, because the data was useless for our purposes. The city fails to document the extent of the vacancy in a partially-vacant property, meaning that every one of these properties was somewhere between 1% and 99% vacant. It would have been impossible to count or verify partial vacancies in our field survey without having access to the buildings.

IDENTIFYING CONCENTRATIONS OF VACANT PROPERTY

We considered mapping the concentrations of vacant property by census tract, zip code, Council District or informal neighborhood boundaries. We concluded that the best choice would be the city's 59 community districts. Mapping these addresses in GIS, Hunter was able to identify the number of vacant properties per community board. We used this finalized list to identify target areas. Hunter collected information regarding the size of each community district from the Department of City Planning, and used this to control for density and determine the number of vacancies per square mile (mi^2).

Community districts were ranked from largest to smallest in three scenarios: total number of vacancies per mi^2, total number of vacant lots mi^2, and total number of vacant buildings mi^2. We then analyzed and compared the top ten community districts in each list. Because many community boards appeared in more than one "top ten," removing the repeats left us with a list of 18 community districts. This list included all of the major areas of vacancy concentrations, and fit our own collective knowledge of the city's neighborhoods. Because it was strategically important to cover all five boroughs, thus truly creating a replicable model for a citywide vacant property count, we expanded our list to 20 by adding CD 1 in Staten Island and CD 14 in Queens, the areas with the highest number of vacancies per mi^2 within their respective boroughs.

AFTER THE FIELD SURVEY

Data Entry Once the field survey was done, the surveys were collected and grouped by borough. Each physical survey was then entered into a spreadsheet with columns for all of the information on the survey. We used Internet tools such as The Open Accessible Space Information System (OASIS~oasisnyc.net) designed by the CUNY Mapping Service to identify the addresses on each survey when a surveyor could not find an address for a particular property. OASIS uses City Planning information to create an online map

WE FOUND THAT CITY RECORD-KEEPING IS USELESS FOR UNDERSTANDING VACANCY, AND NEEDS A DRAMATIC OVERHAUL.

INITIAL FINDINGS

905 vacant lots and buildings reported by volunteers

1,067 vacant buildings reported by the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)

3,121 vacant lots reported from Department of Environmental Remediation

434 vacant city-owned lots reported by the Division of Real Estate Services at the NYC Department of City-wide Administrative Services (DCAS)

5,552 vacant buildings reported by the NYC Department of Buildings (DOB)

706 reports of stalled construction sites

697 buildings with full vacate orders, from the DOB

4,151 buildings with partial vacate orders, from the DOB

451 vacant lots and buildings from Right to the City Vacant Condo Count (RTTCC)

30,080 vacant lots reported from NYC Department of City Planning (DCP) Pluto Data

→ **41,176** total vacant buildings and lots

SECONDARY FINDINGS

1,808 Vacant Buildings from the Department of Building Lists, and HPD Vacant Buildings

7,771 Vacant Lots from the Department of City Planning Pluto, Department of Environmental Remediation (Brownfields), vacant city-owned lots from Division of Real Estate Services, Department of City Planning Pluto Data

→ **9,579** total vacant buildings and lots

of New York City that provides city data on each property in all five boroughs. We then transferred the addresses of each property into its Borough, Block, and Lot location in order to extract the property information from the city data on PLUTO and map it via GIS. The bulk of the data entry and transfer was done by full-time and part-time interns at PTH and Hunter College.

Margin of Error While we provided numerous trainings for volunteers, and partnered less-experienced counters with veteran volunteers, working with non-professionals will inevitably produce a diversity of survey quality. Less than 5 percent of our surveys were invalidated as incomplete, wrong, or identifying addresses that upon follow-up research were not vacant. In some cases, we sent experienced organizers out to re-count entire transects to verify surveyor findings. This is a conservative count. Suspicious properties without clear evidence of vacancy (boarded-up windows, padlocked doors, overgrown lots) were omitted, and in the case of vacant condos we believe the quantity is significant. Any erroneous entries serve to underscore the need for the city to conduct an official citywide vacant property count as a matter of good public policy.

PTH members and allies at Manhattan training.

WE MOBILIZED 295 VOLUNTEERS, FOR A TOTAL OF 1,475 HOURS SPENT COUNTING VACANT PROPERTY.

Follow Up Research After compiling all of the surveys on a spreadsheet and obtaining the city's PLUTO data for each address, we then did follow up research to further verify the data. We used Google Maps and OASIS which provides links to the Department of Buildings and ACRIS information on each property. The majority of the vacant buildings that were identified by surveyors had a clear record of vacancy complaints or vacate orders according to the Department of Buildings website, while other buildings were visibly vacant. The final set of data and maps combines the results of our field study with the valid data we received from the city. In many cases the field survey confirmed vacancies reported in city data. However, our survey found significantly more vacant buildings. In part this is because our survey found many completed residential buildings with active ground-floor retail and residential units intentionally held off the market (and thus not listed in the city data). In part it may have to do with a continuing growth in vacancies since earlier this year. We believe it also reflects the great value of having on-the-ground community surveys conducted by volunteers from our neighborhoods.

One of the shortcomings of the field survey, however, was the ability to accurately identify vacant lots. Since vacant lots do not have observable street addresses, surveyors usually had to provide a reference from a nearby building. We had to check local and on-line sources to come up with block and lot numbers that best identified the vacant lots. Sometimes surveyors incorrectly identified a city park or side yard as a vacant lot and we were able to correct these mistakes. In the end, we found that existing city data shows many more vacant lots than found in the survey. Nevertheless, we still found a large number of vacant lots that were not previously recorded.

Cost Analysis The city-wide vacant property count was achieved through a partnership between Picture the Homeless and the Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Development. Volunteers, including the volunteer labor of homeless leaders of Picture the Homeless, helped to keep costs low. The primary costs were staff time for organizing and coordinating the count, assistance with data collection and management, analysis of findings, preparation of maps, as well as other resources like printing, food for volunteers, and transportation. While objections to a city wide count include the claims that it would cost "millions of dollars"12, we did it for approximately $150,000, less than $1 per person who could be housed in the property we counted. Considering the potential savings to the city and neighborhoods, and families impacted by homelessness and the housing crisis, this is quite a bargain.

NEIGHBORHOOD SNAPSHOT: BEDFORD-STUYVESANT By Kendall Jackman

Prior to the financial crash of 1929, Blacks could not live on the Fulton Street side of Atlantic Avenue, only whites: doctors, lawyers, teachers, businessmen. Blacks were only allowed if they worked for the white folks. When the crash occurred, life changed in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

When they tell the history of the crash, they don't talk much about how entire neighborhoods changed hands. Bedford-Stuyvesant is one such neighborhood.

Bankers stopped you when you exited the train at Nostrand Avenue and Fulton Street. They asked you if you worked. Did you make $5.00 a week? Do you want a house? We became proud owners of beautiful brownstones. The typical brownstone is three stories high. The duplex apartment on the first two floors was where the owner (white folks) had lived, and the top floor apartment had been for "the help". The owners of four story brownstones were lucky and had an extra floor.

When we purchased them during this time, we turned most of them into boarding houses. The new owner lived on the first floor and split the upper floors into rooms. It became a strong, tightly-knit, Black middle-class community.

In the 1960s, banks started not giving home owners loans to improve their property, although the property had been paid for two, three times over. When band-aids no longer work, they were forced to sell the property for a fraction of its real worth. This was the beginning of modern day redlining in Bed-Stuy.

The gentrification of Bedford-Stuyvesant can be seen as the descendants of the original owners reclaiming their neighborhood. I see it as the destruction of a proud neighborhood that lived as a community, not a group of people who just owns property for profit.

ORGANIZING METHODOLOGY

Partially-completed surveyor map.

"THIS REPORT DEMONSTRATES THAT HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE CAPABLE OF DOING WHAT SOCIETY SAYS THEY CAN'T—AND WHAT CITY GOVERNMENT WON'T."

Dwayne Austin, Picture the Homeless Member

Simply put, there are people who benefit financially from other people being priced out of housing. Homelessness is an essential part of the housing market as it currently functions, and the only way that is going to change is for people who are homeless to organize and fight back and win. As an under-resourced grassroots organization, organizing and asserting the rights of an extremely stigmatized constituency, the only way we can impact large systems such as the housing market is to creatively combine base building, leadership development, participatory research, direct action, civil disobedience, legislation, litigation, media and coalition work. We knew that our documentation had to be airtight for this count. Thanks to our partnership with Hunter College, we learned a lot towards how to accomplish that.

This report exposes that there is enough vacant housing and land to house every homeless New Yorker, and then some. In the five years since our Manhattan Count, Picture the Homeless members and staff have developed our vision for the use of vacant buildings and lots. At the same time as we've learned a significant amount about urban planning, housing finance, cooperative housing development, community land trusts and mutual housing associations, as well as other strategies such as squatting or homesteading. Our organizing methodology stands on the shoulders of past and present housing struggles. Communities have organized, conducted participatory research, demonstrated, created alternative urban renewal plans, gotten arrested, squatted, renovated buildings, made gardens out of garbage strewn lots, and pressured elected officials and policy makers to resource affordable housing development at all levels of government. These and other tactics informed our Organizing Methodology.

Mobilizing volunteers was the most crucial piece of the puzzle. 20 community boards is a third of the city—a lot of blocks to walk up and down! We reached out to volunteers through our normal outreach channels, meeting people at soup kitchens and shelters throughout the five boroughs to let them know about this project and our work and asking them to participate. We also went to colleges and high schools in search of volunteers and interns. The fact that this project revolved around housing, a central issue to all New Yorkers, allowed us to attract a lot of support. In the end, we mobilized 295 volunteers, for a total of 1475 hours spent counting vacant property!

As part of the mobilization effort, members and staff of PTH developed the curriculum for a formal 2 hour workshop, focusing on how vacant property impacts not only homelessness, but dozens of other issues as well. We offered teach-ins to any group, class, or organization that would be willing to give us a space to discuss these issues, and paid members to conduct the workshops. We were successful in scheduling frequent teach-ins helping us educate the public while recruiting volunteers. At the same time, we conducted internal workshops to build our members capacity to be effective ambassadors of the vacant property count—as well as build broader skills that would help the count in a number of ways, such as: public speaking, participatory research, internet searching, organizational messaging, and more.

To collect viable data, volunteers needed training in how to identify vacant property. In the month leading up to the count, Picture the Homeless organized trainings in every borough so that volunteers learned how to distinguish vacant buildings and lots, especially in cases that were less clear-cut than buildings with cinderblocks in all the windows. Volunteers learned how to identify vacancy, how to fill out a survey, and how to read a map for the area that they were to cover. Volunteers got an additional orientation and training on the day of the count.

In order to effectively cover all five boroughs,we broke the vacant property count down by borough from June through August. Locations were spread out through each of the community districts that we counted.

Vacant building walking tour, Chelsea, 2009.

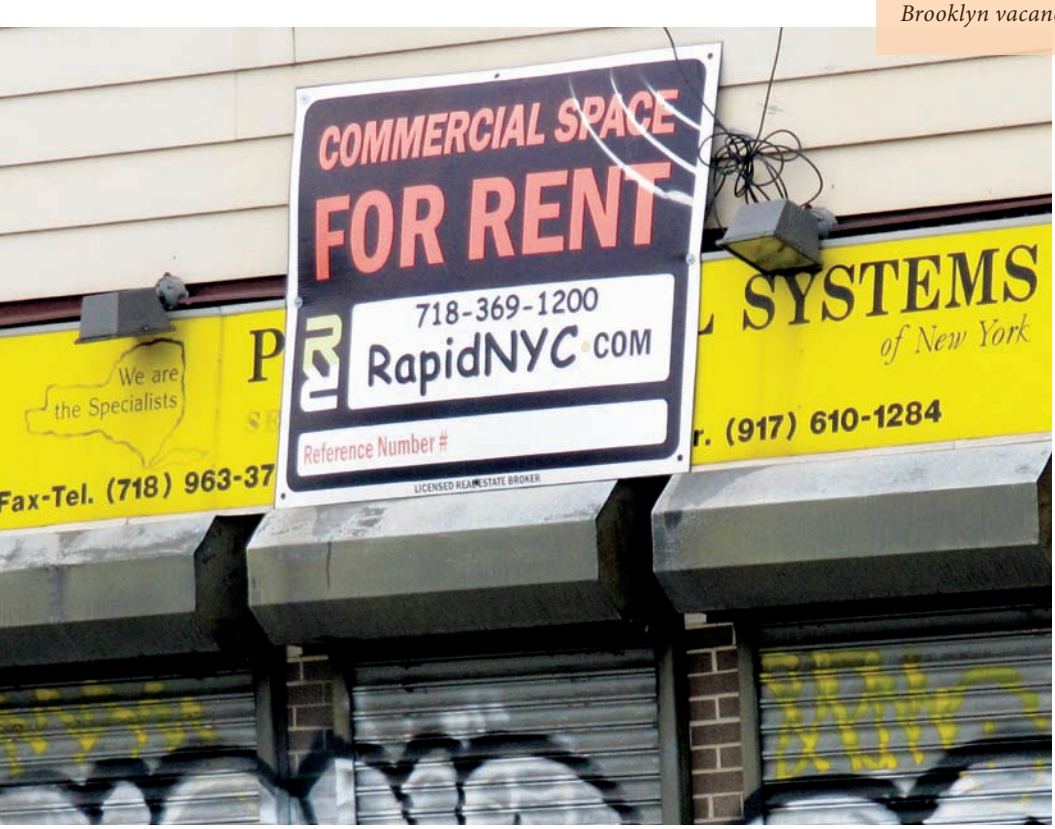
Lots of organizations are fighting for justice in New York City, and we're fortunate to have allies in lots of overlapping sectors of the struggle—from other groups that do community organizing to faith communities with a commitment to social justice, progressive labor unions, immigrant rights groups, community development corporations, nonprofit housing developers, and more. Many got their members to serve as volunteers. Some elected officials assigned staffers to work with us. Dozens of our allies in our target communities opened up their offices to serve as "Hubs," so that volunteers could meet up on the day of our mass mobilizations, receive training from PTH members and staff, get donuts and coffee and a clipboard and survey forms, and head out into the field.

We broke up each community board into "transects," smaller areas of 10 to 20 square blocks, and assigned these to our volunteers. First-time volunteers went out in teams, and more experienced vacant property counters on their own. Teams had five hours to count their transects, and they highlighted each block on their transect map as they covered it so that we'd know it had been counted. Later, interns and staff took these maps to go back and count the portions of each transect that the volunteers had not been able to get to. At the end of each count day, volunteers returned to their hubs to hand in their findings.

Because we wanted to spread the word about our count far and wide, we put a lot of energy into getting media coverage. Throughout the months of May and June we held press conferences in each Borough, announcing the kick-off of each count. With help from city officials, Hunter College, and allied organizations, we were able to have five successful press conferences that got us coverage from El Diario NY1, Bronx12, Capital New York, New York Amsterdam News, Bronx News Network, WBAI, DNAinfo, New York Daily News, and many blogs.

HOMELESS PEOPLE GET ARRESTED FOR SLEEPING ON THE STREET—EVEN THOUGH IT'S NOT AGAINST THE LAW—BUT THERE'S NO PUNISHMENT FOR LANDLORDS WHO KEEP BUILDINGS VACANT FOR DECADES.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Brooklyn vacancy.

End Warehousing The city needs to prioritize housing by investing in real long term solutions to the housing crisis. Vacant-city owned properties identified in this report should be immediately turned into housing for low income New Yorkers. While many of the thousands of vacant buildings are empty condos where people could move right in, rehabilitation of distressed vacant buildings would provide jobs for countless skilled homeless people who have been laid off due to budget cuts and the economic recession. Low-income people who are willing to put their own work into fixing a vacant property should be granted ownership through the value of their sweat equity. A massive shift in how the city deals with housing needs to take place. The current record numbers of homeless people expose the dire need for housing and this report shows that there is more than enough housing available as long as the city is made to do something about it.

Pass Legislation that Would Mandate a City Wide Count The Vacant Property Count exposes the need for an annual census of vacant buildings and lots to be coordinated by the city. We have exposed potential housing for 199,981 individuals that is not being used while there are people suffering brutal winters on the street. Counting these properties is an important first step to transforming them into housing for homeless people and fighting back against displacement. An annual count would allow people to obtain a clearer picture of the available housing and lots that could be developed with community input.

Three Year Vacancy Limit on Private Property Many of the vacant buildings that surveyors identified have been vacant for numerous years by speculators waiting to turn a profit. To make sure that housing is made available, the city needs to impose a 3 year limit that a residential unit could remain without tenants. There is not a homeless problem in New York city, there is a housing problem. By mandating use of residential spaces the city would ensure a higher rate of housing on the market and decrease the amount of vacancy. Those units that become vacant for more than 3 years should be taken over by the city and turned into housing for low income New Yorkers.

Community Land Trust The use of Community Land Trusts and Mutual Housing Associations would allow for long term affordable housing that would be regulated by the tenants that live in them, and facilitate a shift from a profit-based housing system to one based on people's needs. Since Community Land Trusts are non-profits, this model would also allow city- and privately-owned buildings to be gifted to people that want to stay in their communities at an affordable rate, reducing the high rate of homelessness and displacement. For more information on Community Land Trusts, check out our website at: picturethehomeless.org/clt.html.

Freedom of Information Many governmental agencies simply refuse to comply with the Freedom of Information Law. We learned firsthand just how difficult it is to access the information that we need. This inconsistency is a major problem for New Yorkers trying to get information about their communities, or the actions of their elected and appointed officials. It also harms intergovernmental operations overall, and should be addressed through an executive order mandating uniformity, promptness and transparency in each agency's responses to FOIL requests.

Affordable Housing for Low- and Extremely-Low Income New Yorkers

Any new development that is subsidized by public funds should have real affordable housing units. Right now the city uses a percentage of Area Medium Income that is considerably higher than the median income of the neighborhood where these developments are being built. In order to keep community members in their neighborhoods, the city must mandate that any development include affordable housing units using a percentage that corresponds to the median household income of the community.

Usage of LLCs and MERS The City needs to create a better system for recording and reporting ownership. The usage of LLCs and MERS allows building owners and banks to hide how many properties they actually own and makes it difficult to find them. People should be able to know who owns what in their neighborhood in order to know who to hold accountable for causing blight in their communities.

Partial Vacancy While this report identifies fully residential vacant buildings, it does not encompass partial vacancies. Surveyors were trained to only record a property that was clearly unoccupied. Many landlords maintain tenants in a building in the process of emptying it out. Given the scope of this report we could not identify how many vacant apartments were in a building with partial vacancy. Further research needs to be done to clarify and quantify partial vacancies in order to better assess under utilized residential spaces.

WHY SHOULD PROPERTY RIGHTS TRUMP HUMAN RIGHTS?

In the middle of the count, PTH leaders traveled to Chicago to support the Anti-Eviction Campaign moving a homeless family into a vacant home.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

City Hall demonstration, 2010.

Picture the Homeless is a multiracial, city-wide, grassroots organization founded in 1999. Our membership is comprised of homeless and formerly homeless New Yorkers. Members of Picture the Homeless are living in shelters, doubled-up with friends and family, sleeping on subways, parks and transit facilities. Some have been unemployed or underemployed for the long term, some are juggling multiple low-wage or underground-economy jobs, others are union members who have recently lost work, others are disabled or senior citizens. All of them are extremely poor. Most are concerned with ending homelessness not only for themselves, but in working to make New York City a better place. Picture the Homeless works to build individual capacity and collective power for homeless New Yorkers as community stakeholders through grassroots organizing.

We are a resource for homeless folks to identify the root causes of homelessness and to develop solution-based organizing campaigns. The fundamental causes of homelessness are connected to intersecting issues rooted in our economy: particularly the commodification of housing and resultant housing exclusion, extreme poverty, racism, gender and sexual identity discrimination, immigration, and other forms of economic marginalization. Issues that frame our work include the impact of homelessness on individuals and communities, the financial and human cost of the shelter industrial complex, the intersection between government agencies such as the police department and homeless folks, and the (mis) representation of homelessness and homeless people in the media.

Picture the Homeless has worked since our founding to place ending homelessness on the agenda of the broader social justice movement, by pointing to the intersecting issues of racial, gender and economic justice. We sit on the coordinating committee of the Right to the City Alliance-NY, the steering committee of the Campaign to Restore National Housing Rights, the steering committee for the Campaign for Fair and Just Policing, Organizing for Occupation, and are involved in numerous other alliances. We are recipients of the Union Square Award, the Samuel Peabody Award of the Citizens Committee for Children, the Building the Blessed City Award from Interfaith Assembly on Housing and Homelessness, the Harry Chapin Self-Reliance Award, and the Rabbi Marshall Meyer Risk-Taker Award by Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. Ours was named one of the top 50 public policy blogs by the Policy Police.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Count coordinators Kendall Jackman (l) and Adrian Antonio Paling (r).

Staten Island and Brooklyn volunteers.

Picture the Homeless conducted this groundbreaking, city wide survey of vacant buildings and lots with the vision, participation and assistance of many friends and allies. We are grateful to each and every one of them.

This report was written by Adrian Antonio Paling, Sam J. Miller and Lynn Lewis. The Vacant Property Count that it chronicles was executed under the meticulous direction of Adrian Antonio Paling, Housing Not Warehousing organizer at Picture the Homeless. This first city-wide survey of vacant properties is the culmination of seven years of efforts by our Housing Not Warehousing campaign, originally staffed by Sam J. Miller, who has been the consistent staffer of this work, since the campaign began. This participatory action research project is one of several strategies developed by our Housing Not Warehousing campaign to increase the supply of housing for the poorest New Yorkers, by identifying and exposing the extent to which land and housing is made unavailable by speculators. It represents the culmination of years of creative organizing and relationship building with allies. Anika Paris, Chris Blow, Eric Brelsford and Mara Gittleman all helped produce the "Vacant NYC" interactive online map of vacancy that was the immediate forerunner of this project. Support from Picture the Homeless Executive Director Lynn Lewis, Office Manager Anika Paris, interns Solène Junger and Tanaka Nyemba, and board member Ryan Gibbs were critical in different ways to the success of the count.

We are extremely grateful to Dr. Tom Angotti, Director of the Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Development, for sharing our enthusiasm for this project, and the belief that Housing is a Human Right. Tom committed the resources at Hunter College to help make this a reality. Angela Tovar of Hunter College spent hundreds of hours on data entry and mapping, and participated in the field research portion. The most important aspect of their contribution however, was the ability of Tom and Angela to work with us as full partners in this project. They gave direction where we needed capacity and they took direction when we were clear about our goals for the project. Peter Marcuse was also instrumental in his enthusiastic support for this project.

The city-wide report was conceptualized during the winter of 2010 and throughout the spring of 2011. Picture the Homeless and Hunter College held several planning meetings to review project goals and methodology, with Angela Tovar, Adrian Antonio Paling, Genghis Khalid Muhammad, Kendall Jackman, Lynn Lewis, Sam J. Miller, Tom Angotti, William Burnett. At the weekly Picture the Homeless organizing team meetings, as well as the weekly Housing Not Warehousing campaign meetings, the vacant property count enjoyed the brain power of dozens of homeless leaders and the entire Picture the Homeless staff. Members

"WE WANT TO SHED LIGHT ON THE HOMES WITHOUT PEOPLE AND THE PEOPLE WITHOUT HOMES."

Frank Clark, Picture the Homeless Member

Count volunteers in Staten Island (l); PTH member demonstrating at City Hall (r).

contributed in many other ways, including phone banking, meeting with ally organizations to elicit support, and training volunteer surveyors. Jerry Singleton and Ryan Gibbs, for example, made hundreds of calls to mobilize volunteers. Marina Ortiz provided crucial support updating our website and social media work to help raise awareness and turn out volunteers for the count. Finally, the brilliant graphic design of this report is the work of Design Corps, a project of the Pratt Institute. Laurel Ames, Crissy Fetcher, and Lizzi Reid produced the winning design as decided by a vote of PTH members and staff.

Hundreds of volunteers spent thousands of hours walking up and down the streets of every borough in the city all summer long. They gathered the data that this report presents, helped with coordinating the count dates, prepared materials, facilitated trainings, and conducted volunteer outreach. We are grateful to the generous allies and community based institutions who opened their offices to us to use as "hubs," where count volunteers met for training and to pick up their survey packets, who mobilized their members and helped to spread the word. CAAAV, Coalition to Save Harlem, Community Voices Heard, Grace Church, Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing, John Wesley United Methodist Church, Neighbors Together, Not an Alternative, Pratt Area Community Council, Project Hospitality, Project Renewal, Queers for Economic Justice, Union Theological Seminary, numerous branches of the New York Public Library, and the offices of Council Members Margaret Chin, Letitia James, Jessica Lappin, Melissa Mark-Viverito, Diana Reyna and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer.

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Photography: Marina Ortiz Design: Laurel Ames '12, Crissy Fetcher '12, Lizzi Reid '13 Design Corps, Pratt Institute, designcorps.pratt.edu

PICTURE THE HOMELESS

This report exposes the extent to which vacant buildings and lots permeate our landscape, concentrated in the very communities hardest hit by gentrification and homelessness. We believe vacant property can create housing, parks, urban farms, commercial and cultural space, and jobs—and this report will prove just what a transformative impact this property could have.

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