

To start this journal, I'll describe a couple of photographs and what they represent to me. The first picture I took is of the 46th Street 7-subway station. I spent much of my childhood in the area. My mom often did her grocery shopping at either this store or the one further south. There used to be a Duane Reade nearby, where I would buy school supplies at the beginning of the school year. Whenever I needed an eye examination or a new pair of glasses I would visit a local optometrist, located around two blocks away.

One memory that stands out is the time I grabbed pizza with my dad and sister. I distinctly remember this pizzeria had an arcade machine. I would often beg my parents to spare change just to play. Another core memory was the time I poured a ridiculous amount of red pepper flakes on my pizza. My father warned it might be too hot for me. I did it anyway out of spite—and perhaps bravado—to show that I could handle the heat. Turns out I was right, even if the amount of spice made it very uncomfortable to eat. I wonder if that moment, among others, is why I have a higher spice tolerance than my mom.

Another notable location was the card shop nearby. I would often visit it after school to browse or find others to play with. Standing across from the card shop was the apartment complex where my babysitter lived. My sister, cousin, and I spent a large part of our childhood in her care. She would take us, along with other kids she watched, to a nearby park where we played after school.

In short, this picture represents a significant part of my early childhood: where I grew up, formed memories, and first began exploring the world.

The next photograph is of 52nd Street, just outside the subway station. This picture represents the second place I called home after a fire erupted in our previous apartment. A memory that stands out was the time a blizzard hit New York. One morning, I woke up to see snow blanketing the streets. I was ecstatic—snow rarely falls in large amounts—and I looked forward to playing with my sister and cousin. Luckily, school was canceled, so I didn't have to wait.

Next is a church my mom used to attend while we lived on 52nd Street. I vaguely remember attending a communion or maybe a baptism. Occasionally when I dream, I see the inside of this church again. I'm sure the version I see in my dreams looks different from the real thing, but I know it's based on this place.

I also remember visiting a friend's house nearby to work on a group project. All I remember is playing FIFA for most of the day. More recently, I visited another friend nearby to study for our discrete math final. While reviewing practice questions, we got to talking about our hobbies. That's how I found out he also played World of Warcraft, although I had stopped playing by that point.

The last photograph is of the subway station by 74th Street and Roosevelt Avenue. It's around here that I spent most of my adolescence and where I currently live. I remember walking to the swimming pool at Flushing Meadows Park during the summer. I'd follow the 7 line, swim for an hour or two, and then walk back home.

This station lies at the intersection of Roosevelt Avenue and Broadway. Whenever I walk to LaGuardia Community College, I usually pass through this intersection. I either follow the 7 line to 82nd Street or take Broadway to the Elmhurst Avenue station on the R line.

In retrospect, I understand why the first part of the journal was meant to encompass places that have meaning to people. The photographs naturally lead to the second part of the assignment—data collected from the U.S. Census about the neighborhood you currently reside in.

According to the Decennial Census and the American Community Survey, the demographics of Census Tract 271 in Queens County have remained fairly consistent over the last decade, with only modest shifts between 2010 and 2020.

To start, the total population dipped slightly. However, the demographic makeup shifted a bit. The Asian population grew, while the Hispanic population shrank slightly. Other racial groups held steady. The median household income rose from around \$50k to roughly \$59k. While this might seem like good news, when accounting for inflation it probably means most people are earning about the same as they were ten years ago. This suggests the neighborhood is largely working class.

One statistic that stood out to me was the average household size, which grew slightly to 3.9 by 2020. That suggests people often live together in order to manage high housing costs. I had always heard this sentiment, but assumed it was hearsay. The numbers show it's grounded in fact.

Educational attainment rose slightly too. More residents have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. But the income data casts some doubt on whether it's paying off. Despite the rise in degrees, earnings have not kept pace—at least not in this tract. That might say something about the kinds of jobs available locally.

The number of people in the labor force held steady, and commuting patterns didn't change much. About half the neighborhood still relies on public transportation. This makes sense—it's common knowledge that many people live in the outer boroughs and commute into Manhattan for work.

One subtle shift is the aging population. There are fewer children and more elderly residents now than there were ten years ago.

Overall, the picture painted by the census data is one of quiet stability.

The next part of the journal involved observing a location in my neighborhood. I decided to knock out both the observation and interview portions together. On this temperate Tuesday afternoon, I prepared a few interview questions from the comfort of my home. I thought about how I wanted things to go: How would I approach people? What should I ask first? What should I do if they refused? I dreaded this part—it felt a lot like cold calling. Walking up to people and asking random questions isn't something I enjoy.

On the way to the park, I noticed school children walking around. It was that time of day when school usually lets out. When I arrived, the first thing I noticed was how loosely people were grouped. Parents and their children played together, school kids lounged around talking, and adults sat at the tables playing cards. Scattered among them were solitary individuals just enjoying the weather.

What stood out the most to me was the large number of elderly Asian residents. I expected to see some Asian presence, given the nearby businesses, but I didn't expect the park to be a major recreational hub for older adults. Multiple groups gathered in circles playing cards, while others watched and chatted. It made me wonder—why this park? I haven't seen this kind of activity elsewhere nearby. When did this practice start?

The parents and kids made sense; playgrounds are made for them. The teens just hanging out also seemed typical. The only other nearby place I could imagine them gathering would be the mall, but that's about half a mile away.

The park was relatively busy, but I figured it would calm down as the sun set. Around 5 p.m., the food trucks usually start pulling up along the sidewalk, setting up tables and chairs for people to eat and hang out. For now, though, the park felt like a peaceful slice of life for people of all ages.

After finishing the observation, I gathered my courage and began the next part. I thought this would be simple—ask a few questions, record responses, call it a day. Turns out, I was wrong.

I approached over a dozen people, explaining that I was a college student working on a sociology project. I asked if they'd be willing to answer a few questions about their experiences living in the neighborhood. Almost everyone politely declined, and a few said they didn't speak English.

I pivoted to the nearby library, hoping maybe the librarians could suggest someone. Unfortunately, staff couldn't talk while on duty. A supervisor came by mid-conversation, and when I asked if *he* was willing to speak, he ignored me completely—even after I asked multiple times.

Next, I tried local churches. I figured maybe a pastor or someone involved in the community might talk. But most churches were closed in the afternoon.

Finally, I stumbled across a Hindu temple—Geeta Temple Ashram. A member there agreed to speak with me. He asked me to remove my shoes before entering, something I thought was only customary in mosques.

I started by asking how long he had lived in the neighborhood. He said he moved in during the 1980s. At the time, the area was mostly Hispanic and had a serious drug problem. He described today's neighborhood as peaceful, safe, and more diverse. He noted the growing presence of various Asian groups—Chinese, Indian, and Southeast Asian.

He mentioned that since COVID, foot traffic in the area has declined—not just to the temple, but across the neighborhood. He believes it'll bounce back eventually, but the area still feels quieter than it used to.

When asked if he had any advice for newcomers, he said it's a good, safe, quiet place to live. He didn't have much to say about the city's role in shaping the neighborhood.

I had gathered my personal experiences about the neighborhood, collected observable facts via the U.S. Census, observed a slice of daily life in the area, and interviewed a long-time resident. All that was left was to see how community members organize around collective concerns.

For this last part of my journal, I chose the boring but safe option of attending a community meeting. According to their website, community boards play an important role in assessing the needs of their neighborhoods and acting as a liaison between residents and city agencies. Some of the issues they handle include land use and zoning matters, making budget requests to the city, and resolving general concerns that residents may have. While community boards don't have the power to directly order city agencies to act, they do communicate community concerns—and from what I've seen, they're often successful in getting problems addressed.

I had originally planned to attend the meeting in person. Community Board 4 holds meetings once a month, usually on the second Tuesday. However, that month's meeting was canceled due to unforeseen circumstances. A Webex meeting was scheduled for the following week instead. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, since I was able to record the meeting and refer to it later for this assignment.

I arrived early and watched as attendees slowly trickled in, with the final count reaching around 40 people. The first item on the agenda was the introduction of new members. People attending for the first time were given a chance to introduce themselves and share why they were there.

After the introductions, attendees were invited to raise concerns before the board moved on to the scheduled topics. One older gentleman welcomed the newcomers and shared that he used to attend with his wife, who had sadly passed away since the last meeting. His story was met with warm condolences from others, and a sense of compassion carried through the rest of the evening. Another woman spoke about a long-standing issue: a group of retirees who were promised low or no-cost health insurance by the city. She came to the meeting seeking support, although it was unclear what kind of assistance she hoped to receive.

After the open floor, the scheduled presentations began. A representative from the FDNY reminded attendees that the city's composting mandate had officially begun, and residents would now be expected to separate food waste from regular trash or face fines.

Next, representatives from the Queens Zoo gave a presentation about a proposed renovation project for one of their educational spaces. The site, used by visiting school groups, has become overwhelmed due to limited space and resources. They were seeking support from the community to move the project forward.

The final item on the agenda was liquor license approvals. Several local restaurants had submitted applications, and the board provided a space for any objections. No one spoke against the applicants, so the licenses were approved—though I was surprised that the board had any say in the matter at all. Perhaps I misunderstood, but it seemed like they had some level of authority or influence over those approvals.

All in all, the meeting was pretty uneventful, but it gave me a glimpse into how local governance actually functions. It's not glamorous, but it's where a lot of quiet work happens to keep a community running.