ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

History 610

Senior Project

The Deadliest Decade: A South Bronx Story

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Department of History

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Abstract

During the 1970s, New York was in an economic downturn. They had to cut services that benefitted working class, poor, and minority communities. Landlords felt that with rent control, they could no longer make a profit, so they burned down their properties for profit. With the city being preoccupied with debt of their own, most landlords were able to get away with it. By the city being neglectful it led to the spread of arson throughout the city. The place that was most effected was the South Bronx, which faced issues of violence, crime, and drugs. This gave the South Bronx the title of the "worst slum" in America. The South Bronx began to look like a wasteland and it wasn't anything anyone could do to stop it.

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Introduction

Imre Oberlander and Yishai Webber were walking in black faces and wigs with two firebombs in their car when they got arrested for arson. Oberlander was planning to burn six of his buildings in South Bronx, which isn't uncommon in that area. Between 1970 and 1975, Mr. Oberlander collected $125,000 in 21 fire insurance claims in both Brooklyn and the South Bronx[1]. In the 1970s, landlords started to burn down their properties in order to collect insurance money. This became a trend with landlords in order to make a profit off of their buildings. Arson cases increased rapidly throughout city, but especially in the South Bronx. The South Bronx were deteriorating before the city's very eyes and the city stood back and did nothing.

During the 1970s, the city was close to financial ruin. The city government struggled to keep up a large deficit. As pervious mayors increased spending, the city was forced to begin cutbacks on public services and education. The public healthcare system suffered huge budget cuts which affected poor, working, and minority communities. A great number of fire houses were shut down in high risk neighborhoods, which increased the number of arson and accidental fires in the city. By 1974, Charlotte Street and other areas around the South Bronx were burned; an estimated 33,465 fires occurred in the South Bronx. [2] Despite the increase fires, fire and city officials refused to recognized arson as a real issue in the South Bronx.

During the late 1960s, there was a rise of black and Puerto Rican population in the Bronx, this created tension among white residents. According to white residents, they saw an increase in crime which put them in fear. Back in the 1930s, they were able to leave their doors unlocked

[1] Joseph B. Treaster, "8 Landlords and Associates Are Indicted in Bronx Fires,'' *New York Times*, June 12, 1975.
[2] Megan Roby, '' The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight: A Study of the Bronx between 1950 and 1980,''*Bronx County Historical Society Journal 45,* no. 1/2, (Spring/Fall 2008):40.

and play without the fear of getting hurt or robbed. By the 1960s they saw a rise in crime and robberies in the Bronx with the change in population. Many residents were afraid to walk outside at night or leave their house at all. Many said that the South Bronx was filled with drugs, crime, violence, and fire. In the 1970s, many people were fed up and decided to leave the Bronx for good. The South Bronx continued to burn and fire and city officials didn't seem to care.

Landlords believed that rent control and stricter building codes left them with little resources. One code stated that if their tenants ever found a violation they were entitled to pay landlords only a dollar month. This was to stop slumlords from taking advantage of tenants. It was one of the series of laws that made it hard for landlord to make a profit and afford the upkeep of the building. With rent control, landlords had to find ways to make a profit. They ultimately decided the quickest way to make money was to burn the buildings and collect the insurance money. By the mid-70s, the South Bronx was deteriorating and was seen as a neighborhood that can't be saved.

Redevelopment projects and budget cuts to public service also greatly impacted the Bronx. In 1955, many hospitals and clinics were destroyed in the creation of Bronx expressway. When the city decided to close down the fire houses in the South Bronx, they had little to no access to public services within the borough. When the fiscal crisis and arson began to happen throughout the Bronx, there were little help to contain the fires. The city shut down hundreds of fire houses, which gave arsonists the perfect opportunity to burn their properties and get away with it. By the city cutting public health it made the Bronx vulnerable to resident who lived in fear as arson became a part of everyday life.

The impact of arson in the South Bronx haven't been studied in academia. Historians either write a brief summary or chapter of arson in the South Bronx. Many historians take sides

of landlords or tenants. Historians fail to examine how the South Bronx deteriorate so rapidly even though it was a trend throughout the city. They also didn't look at how landlords motives of burning besides collecting insurance money. Some blame the new black and Hispanic residents in the South Bronx at the time. Saying they caused the South Bronx conditions to worsen despite most of the fires being by paid arsonist who was hired landlords.

In the *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, fall, and Resurrection of an American City*, Jonnes talked about the conditions of the South Bronx in the 1970s. She gives a lot of background knowledge about the landlords and how city regulations effected their ability to maintain the buildings. Jonnes also talks about how a landlord named Weinreb failed to up-keep the apartments. In one incident "the basement flooded during Christmas and when the phone company came to repair the line, they refused to enter the basement because there was rats and water bugs"[3]. Jonnes talked about how new building codes effected landlords. She talked about how officials viewed slumlords and how it affected the way landlords were treated in the Bronx. Jonnes goes deep into the motives of landlords and it helps to give a better understanding of what brought landlords to that point.

In the Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity, Phillips- Fein argued that fiscal crisis divided the city and changed New York forever. She write about how different sectors private and public were affected by the crisis. Phillips talks about how the Bronx was change drastically. She says that "a city- run program at the neighborhood child health center, which brought the new Salk vaccine to more than 170,000 children. Indeed the local public hospital were so heavily used in 1940s-1950s … expanded its program to provide

[3] Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, fall, and Resurrection of an American City*, New York: Fordham University Press, (2002) 296.

medical care to people at their homes."[4] By destroying clinics it made it harder for people in the community to get access to free healthcare. People were either too far from the next free clinic or other hospital would charge more, making it inaccessible.

In "Contagion and Incubation in New York City Structural Fires 1964-1976", Rodrick argued that fire-service cutbacks led to more fires throughout New York City[5]. He talked about how the cutbacks on fire services effected neighborhoods and how it lead to an increased number of fires throughout New York. One of the strengths of the article is Rodrick's use of statistics. Rodrick uses statistics to find a correlation between the fire department's response time and the number of fires. He uses graphs and equations to estimate the average response time and the number of companies unavailable for dispatch. Rodrick also talks about the Rand model and some of its assumptions. One assumption was "availability will not deteriorate over several years; very low probability of all units busy in a region"[6] , but he says in reality "unit availability highly unstable during demand peaks… entire boroughs began to routinely suffer periods in which all fire companies were simultaneously busy". Rodrick used the Rand model and talked about the things he expected, but he used his own evidence to prove how the Rand model failed.

I think what happened in the South Bronx was a rare occurrence. Jonnes, Wallace, and Fein- Phillips only talk about pieces of what happened in the South Bronx. Some talk about the economic and social factors, but doesn't connect the two together. I argue that landlords motives and cuts to public service led to the spread arson in the South Bronx. Despite what other historians think, I believed that these two are correlated to one another. Individually these

[4] Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 18.
[5] Rodrick Wallace, "Contagion and Incubation in New York City Structural Fires 1964- 1976," *Human Ecology* 6, no.4, (1978).
[6] Wallace," "Contagion and Incubation in New York City Structural Fires 1964- 1976,'' 426.

sources do a good job of telling their individual perspective. I think to truly understand why arson was particularly bad in the South Bronx. You need to look at both economic and social factors that contributed to the South Bronx deteriorating rapidly.

Chapter 1: Money Hungry

In this chapter, I will examine how housing policies affected landlords. In particular, I am focusing on rent control and code enforcement. I will also be analyzing how rent control and housing policies affected landlord's decisions that led to housing abandonment. I will be writing about how landlords and critics felt about rent control and how it has affected landlords. I also review how housing policies and building codes changed overtime and how it has affected the way landlords manage buildings and how this changed the South Bronx. Examining the motivations and obstacles that landlords faced gives a better understanding of why they turned to arson. Overall, I will be analyzing how the predicament of landlords contributed to the deterioration of the South Bronx.

"How much am I worth?"[7] said Tom Cuevas, a landlord that owned more than 50 buildings around South Bronx in 1970s. Cuevas, like many other landlords, had asked that same question as the pressure from increasing energy prices and stricter building codes came to a head. Laws like rent control made it more difficult for some landlords to pay for fuel and maintenance on their buildings, causing their apartments to fall apart. Many landlords felt that they had no choice but to abandon their buildings. Due to increasing costs, regulations, and rent control, landlords were now faced with a decision to either make little profit or totally abandon their investment.

Rent control was first introduced around World War I due to public pressure and anti-racketeering committees. The second wave of policies came in the wake of World War II

[7] Allan M. Siegal, "A Bronx Owner Finds Fuel Costs Dashing His Hopes," May 12, 1974, *New York Times,https*://search.proquest.com/docview/120127742?accountid=8268.

because of the housing shortages and were intended to persevere housing affordability. New York City was one of the few cities that kept their rent control policies in place. . Rent control became such a divided issue that in 1962, Governor Rockefeller forced New York City to undertake rent control[8]. With rent control and individual income on the rise it caused a boom in the housing market. Overcrowding and inadequate housing decreased while vacancy rates rose well in the 1960s because people started to move the suburbs. Then, in 1965, the City's housing market began to collapse. In 1968, nearly 70 percent of privately owned rental housing was eligible for rent control based on the rents registered in 1943.[9]

The housing market started to collapse due to the white middle class fleeing to the suburbs and industry moving out of the city. The issue of rent control created tension between landlords and tenants. Many landlords argued that rent control heavily favored tenants. The goal of rent control, according to the first city administrator Hortense Gabel, was to "try to see that rents don't get too high for the class of tenants they are supposed to be slotted for."[10]. The new administration made more of an effort to restrict rent increases to tenants. The three major changes made to the building codes were, "First, no rent increases were to be given unless a building was certified free of maintenance code violations. Second, assessed valuation, rather than equalized assessed evaluation, was to be used as a basis for calculating a fair return. This provision reduced the net return available to landlords by 15-25%, depending on the county.

[8] John M. Clapp, "The Formation of Housing Policy in New York City, 1960 -1970," Policy Sciences 7, no. 1 (1976): 84, doi: 10.1007/bf00146022.
[9] Ira S. Lowry, "Reforming Rent Control in New York City: The Role of Research in Policymaking," Policy Sciences 3, no. 1 (1972): 3, doi: 10.1007/bf01405216.
[10] Clapp, '' The Formation of Housing Policy in New York City, 1960-1970'', 85.

Third, 2 years had to elapse from the time a building was sold on the open market to the time that the sale could be used as the basis for calculating a fair return.[11]

While rent control did lower rental prices for many tenants, it came with a cost. Many thought rent control wouldn't interfere with landlords' profits as long as the cost of maintenance and operating costs remained stable. Instead, operating costs and maintenance grew while profits became stagnant. This affected the way landlords maintained their buildings, causing them to deteriorate.

Rent control continued to be part of the political debate in 1968 between the government and landlords who owned uncontrolled buildings were charged with seeking excessive rent increases. Landlord organizations, particularly Metropolitan Fair Rent Committee and the Real Estate Board of New York, would not respond to the public about rent increases, but raised public awareness about the crumbling housing market. They wanted to show that "rent control had led to deteriorated and abandoned housing; about $500 million of tax money had been lost through weakening of the market caused by public intervention; and (3) that new construction would be snuffed out by an extension of rent controls.[12] To combat this, landlords proposed to replace rent control with rent stabilization. Many argued that rent stabilization was more desirable than rent control because it allowed for larger rent increases, an increase on rent every time a lease was renewed, and it was to be run by landlord administrations.[13] This program failed due to the extension of rent control that governed a majority of landlord's buildings.

[11] Ibid, 85
[12] Ibid,86
[13] Ibid,87

When landlords could no longer pay for maintenance and fuel for heating, they felt like they had no choice but to abandon their buildings. Manuel Rivas, an 82 year old who had failing eyesight, relied on his rent revenue and disability pension to make a living.[14] Rivas was one of the many landlords in the South Bronx who was faced with having to abandon their properties. Five out of ten of his apartments were vacant, causing him to fall three years behind on his taxes.[15] To keep his buildings and home, Rivas had to make partial payments in order for the city not to seize his buildings. The government then changed legislation in 1972 that required landlords to pay their delinquent taxes in three years instead of four. This made it harder for landlords to maintain ownership of their properties.[16] The city then came up with four bills in order to collect delinquent taxes more efficiently. In one of the bills, the city was allowed to take over buildings quickly after one year of tax delinquency, sooner than anyone in the state.

With new bills being introduced, Rivis felt like he had no choice but to abandon his buildings. Many landlords got frustrated with these new laws because most of them relied on their properties as their main source of income. Another landlord stated "once they foreclosed a property, it disappears from the market. The building is ruined. I can't understand why they would do this."[17] Many landlords had tax arrears because of rising operation costs and the housing markets inability to demand suitable rent prices.[18] The South Bronx had one of the highest vacancy rates in the city. The objective of the bill was to address tax-delinquent properties. They claimed that the new law in "any event tested the proposition that delinquency

[14] Alan S. Oser "About Real Estate: Legislation Is Expected to Speed Property Abandonment'', New *York Times*, Oct 01, 1976, https://search.proquest.com/docview/122857998?accountid=8268.
[15] Ibid
[16] Ibid
[17] Ibid
[18]Ibid

is usually caused by building milkers."[19] The result of these bills getting passed made it harder for landlords to pay for operation costs and give them little to no alternatives. Instead of continuing to rent their properties at a loss, most decided to abandon their buildings.

The South Bronx was once seen as a safe and stable community, but by the late 60's it was described as "the bad end of an LSD hallucination."[20] In the 1940s, the South Bronx had mostly Italian and Irish residents, but they were replaced with welfare recipients and new Puerto Rican, black, Caribbean, and Latin American migrants. By the 1970s, more than 50,000 buildings that was mostly rent controlled were burned or abandoned. South Bronx landlords lessened maintenance and services due to rent control. More than 1,000 acres of the South Bronx was seen as useless to city officials, filled with criminals and poverty[21]. D.K Patton, president of the Real Estate Board of New York told *Nation's Business* that "current rents, under rent control, are contemporary with 1965 prices. This, of course, exactly exacerbates tensions between tenants and landlords. That kind of welfare is hardly constructive, with rent on one side, heat cutoffs on the other, all manner of retaliations and counterretaliations."[22] She argued that if New York City didn't eliminate rent control, what happened to the South Bronx could happen to cities nationwide.

Mainstream media argued that rent control worsened housing conditions and ruined tenant- landlord relationships. Neal R. Peirce, an urban affairs columnist, stated that "rent control, however well intentioned, distorts the operation of the free markets and pits landlord

[19] Ibid
[20] George, Fowler ''The Bitter Fruit of Rent Control'', *Nation's Business*, Vol. 66, Issue 8, https://search.proquest.com/docview/199840899?accountid=8268.
[21] Ibid
[22] Ibid

against tenants while the supply of rental housing dwindles and deteriorates."[23]They also argued that rent control regulation was one of the worst cases of government regulation. Many argued that rent control only helped higher income tenants. Higher income tenants knew about rent control and knew how to manipulate the system. Dr George Sternlieb, director of Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy Research, stated that "There is no doubt that rent control has been most beneficial to upper income tenants, and of course they invoke the rhetoric of the poor whenever they feel their privileged positions threatened."[24] The critics of rent control were mainly the new wave of conservatives, who believed that government intervention was destroying the housing market and campaigned for more private enterprise. While landlords and columnist argued that rent control failed to help low income families find affordable housing, it still gave them lower rates compared to apartments not on rent control.

In some cases landlords would increase rents, but still let their buildings deteriorate, such as in the case of Roosevelt Gardens. Built in 1922, Roosevelt Gardens was seen as a luxury complex apartment with a doorman guarding wealthy businessmen, lawyers, and doctors[25]. Gelvin Steven an economics writer from *Business Week* argued that Roosevelt Gardens started to decline when the Weinreb family bought the apartment house in the late 1950s[26]. Most tenants complained about the lack of heat and out-of-service elevators. The Weinrebs applied for an approval to increase their rent and was granted by 4 percent[27]. Many argued that "cost cutting at Roosevelt Gardens became more evident. The office worker was laid off. One laundry room was closed and the other moved to a cubbyhole so that the owners could rent out all the basement

[23] Ibid
[24] Raymond A. Schroth, "Fordham," Fordham University, (2008), doi:10.2307/j.ctt13x00ds.
[25] Jill Jonnes*, South Bronx Rising the Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2002), 288.
[26] Ibid, 288
[27] Ibid, 289.

space to a candy store…Dumbwaiters were sealed, and tenants had to take their garbage downstairs, where it was stored in the buildings, creating a deplorable odor."[28] During the late 1960s and 1970s things continued to worsen.

In the late 1960s to early 1970s, the Weinrebs started to sell Roosevelt Gardens to various corporations they owned. Stevenson thought of a few possibilities as to why they would do this; "One possibility: landlords frequently use buildings as tax shelters. Selling them back and forth lowers taxes by increasing depreciation and thereby decreasing taxable income. These transactions aren't illegal unless they're done to avoid taxes."[29] In July of 1971, the Weinrebs claimed that they borrowed money for a new boiler and improved heating system, but tenants said that the heating did not improve.[30] Some landlords would increase rent by bringing welfare families because the government paid any amount that landlords asked without any question. The Weinrebs started to rent vacant apartments out to large welfare families in order to increase rents to market value rather than rent controlled prices. Conditions continued to decline so much that when "the phone company came to repair the line, they refused to enter the basement because there were so many rats and water bugs."[31]

Poor conditions often created tension between landlords and tenants. While the Weinrebs prepared to abandon the building, they would still collect rent from tenants willing to pay, but wouldn't repair anything. On October 4, 1974 "Eight-year-old Missy Holden entered the elevator on the main floor… Missy pressed six, and the elevator didn't move. She started to crawl through a broken window; the elevator started up, crushing her head."[32] Landlords would

[28] Ibid, 289
[29] Ibid 295
[30] Ibid 295
[31] Ibid 296
[32] Ibid, 296

threaten tenants by collecting rent with a man carrying a gun. In the end, the government took the building away from David Teichner after he bought the building from the Weinrebs. This was a devastating end to a promising building, becoming another tragic story for the South Bronx. With rent control decreasing the income for landlords, many had to go into debt and find new ways of making money. Some landlords would increase rent by bringing welfare families because the government paid any amount that landlords asked without any question. Most landlords would ask for rent twice the amount of the actual price. Even though rent control was made to give people housing who otherwise couldn't afford it, some argue that it worsened housing conditions.

Landlords claimed that, under rent control, they lacked the income needed to maintain their buildings. Others argued that buildings still would have continued to worsen despite the use of rent control. Rather than admit to the terrible conditions, some landlords lied in order to avoid government interference. In 1974, two landlord groups had to give up deeds to five South Bronx apartments and landlords said that they "were in very good conditions and virtually violation-free… but had to be abandoned by their owners because harsh rent control and inflation made them financial losses."[33]After reporters went to the five buildings, they found them severely neglected by their owners and filled with litter. Two of the buildings were in such bad shape, the city had to vacate the apartments. The buildings had at least 30 violations according to city records.[34] While landlords argued that rent control stopped them from maintaining their buildings, some still failed to perform proper maintenance even when the housing market was stable.

[33] Joseph P. Fried ''Landlords Deed City 5 Buildings Having About 30 Code Violations: Owners Forced Out Milking' of Buildings Charged'', *New York Times*, September 25, 1974, 43.
[34] Ibid

Tom Cuevas was a 34-year-old landlord who co-owned 50 buildings around the South Bronx, but was faced with the difficult decision of having to abandon his buildings. Many of these buildings were given away by white landlords who couldn't afford repair costs. Cuevas was described as "a new breed of landlord in the city."[35] Cuevas was born in Puerto Rico wand grew up in the welfare system, which made him relate to his tenants. Cuevas used to blame his problems on rent strikes with militant tenants. By the 1970s, he was faced with new challenges and blamed the prices of oil. ""Look at this," Mr. Cuevas went on, thrusting a fistful of bills across his cluttered desk…No.6 heating oil: 12.88 cents a gallon in December, 1972; 34.87 cents a gallon in March, 1974. Fuel cost: $10,294 for 1972; $ 27,870 estimated for this year… Rent collection: $50,917 in 1972; $60,627 this year."[36]

On his buildings, Cuevas claimed he lost $958.60 last year and was expected to lose $106,000 that next year due to the cost of fuel to heat his buildings.[37]. He said that he would rather not raise rents because the tenants would have nowhere else to go. He argued that "Oil is like gold…The companies won't give credit any more. If I fall 30 days behind on my account, they won't deliver unless I have a man waiting for them with a check."[38] He believed that something had to be done in order to save these buildings. With fuel costs increasing and rent remaining consistently low, landlords felt helpless.

Fuel costs increased due to the Arab Oil Embargo in 1973. When members of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) enforced an embargo against the United States due to the U.S decision to re-supply the Israeli military and to gain power in post-war

[35] Siegal "A Bronx Owner Finds Fuel Costs Dashing His Hopes "
[36] Ibid
[37] Ibid
[38] Ibid

peace negotiations[39]. This resulted in price of oil quadrupling causing costs to increase rapidly for consumers and instability to the national economy. The price of oil hugely impacted landlords' ability to afford fuel to heat their buildings. They ended up cutting corners and it resulted in giving up their buildings. The story of Tom Cuevas was not a broad representation of how all landlords felt about tenants, but being born and raised from the South Bronx, he connected with tenants more than other landlords. Other landlords failed to have empathy for their tenants, because they either didn't grow up in the South Bronx or they were of a different race.

Aside from rent control, landlords had to deal with increased pressure from the government as well. Since the late 1960s, the New York City government had created stricter building codes in order to prevent the creation of "slum lords". Even though some of these codes have prevented landlords from this negative connotation, it affected other landlords as well. It affected neighborhoods around the city, especially the South Bronx. Building Commissioner Charles G. Moerdler, went around inspecting buildings and new programs around the city. He proposed that they increase building inspections and force landlords to clean up their properties. He brought three times the normal number of inspectors to the Bronx, each with instructions to write up every violation in the building.[40] Bronx had the most slumlords than any other borough in the city. The city hoped to give landlords an incentive to clean up their buildings and also to give tenants more of a voice. Bronx landlords were angry about the attention they were getting.

Building codes were originally created in the late 1800s when major cities experienced large fires in over populated urban areas. At the time, building codes were focused on decreasing

[39] '' *Oil Embargo, 1973 – 1974''*, accessed March 18, 2019, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/oil-embargo.
[40] Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising the Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City,* 201.

fire risks. But these codes expanded to cover other safety areas as well. Such as structural integrity, fire resistance, safety exits, lighting, ventilation, and construction materials of a building[41]. In 1939, the American Public Health Association was concerned with the housing standards of the time and was responsible for the modern housing codes, as well as health and sanitation requirements.[42] In the 1960s, New York City went through a liberal wave of leadership where the government became stricter on building codes. The government wanted to eliminate slumlords by creating more tenant friendly policies. Policy makers hoped that this would also slumlords and create better housing standards. Some argue that in many ways it did the exact opposite.

In 1966, Moerdler got a bill passed that allowed tenants in buildings with a single violation to pay only one dollar a month in rent until the landlord fixed the violations.[43] The building could have a "scuffed wall to a broken boiler: if wanted, violations can always be found."[44] Tenants found a way not to pay rent without the fear of consequences. Most community activist were full of zeal. When tenants found out about the bill, the collection of rents dropped dramatically. Many argued that it made landlord's lives even harder. Landlords weren't able to raise rents, but had to go to court to get the rent already owed.[45] A Bronx community activist stated "The cost of everything was going up, and the landlords couldn't survive. The City's housing policy was a process in futility."[46] Stricter building codes was supposed to protect the right of tenants and ended up harming them in the long-run.

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[41] '' Building Codes Fact Sheet'', accessed March 9, 2019, https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1903-25045-1885/building_codes_toolkit_fact_sheet.pdf.
[42] Ibid
[43] Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising the Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City*, 201.
[44] Ibid, 201.
[45] Ibid 201
[46] Ibid , 201

From the beginning of the 1930s, the South Bronx was redlined by the private sector and Federal Housing Administration because racial mixing was too risky at the time[47]. The state offered loans and tax incentives to landlords in order to rehabilitate apartment buildings. However, South Bronx landlords did not see any advantage in improving their properties in low income, rent controlled neighborhoods. Landlords looked forward to the federal government and urban renewal projects in order to sell their aging buildings for a profit.

After World War II, a boom in the housing market gave white people incentive to leave the city. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and Veteran's Administration's purpose was to help lower mortgages for people who wanted new housing and to help returning veterans get a one-family detached home.[48] The white people who once lived in the apartments were replaced by black and Hispanic tenants. Landlords rented to blacks and Puerto Ricans "often charging all the traffic [would] bear" and making "high returns because repairs [were] never made."[49] Even when landlords were rent collecting, they still chose to cut services and maintenance for their buildings. Some may argue that landlords were trying to cut corners in order to gain more profit from their buildings and to make up for what they lost in the past.

Landlords who owned public housing were affected as well. Public housing was created during the Great Depression because the private sector didn't supply housing for low-income families. In the late 1950s, New York City completed 20 housing projects that replaced slums within the city. Nine out of the sixteen public housing project were built around the Bronx and four of the five projects housed predominately black and Puerto Rican in the South Bronx.[50]

[47] Evelyn Diaz. Gonzalez, *The Bronx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 111.
[48] Ibid, 111.
[49] Ibid, 112
[50] Ibid, 111.

Private enterprises could not build affordable housing, and the clean up the slums without raising the rent. The change to the Housing Act in 1949 and 1954 affected the way the federal government viewed and managed public housing.

The Housing Act of 1949 changed the way the federal government viewed public housing. Liberals argued that public housing would eliminate housing shortages and slums, and it would also make housing more affordable.[51] Shortly after, there was an increase in the number of housing projects throughout the country. The act was seen as a crucial part in the political debate about the government's role in city issues. In the early 1950s, there was an average of 49,881 units being built per year. Then the construction was lowered to about 20,448 units from 1955 to 1964.[52] The Housing Act of 1954 shifted the focus on urban renewal, thereby weakening the public housing initiative.

Urban renewal was an important mission within the Housing Act of 1950. The federal and local government turned their attention to turning big cities into urban centers. In the early 1900s, private investors did the most subdividing, building, and leasing of apartments in the South Bronx. In the 1940s, construction became more difficult since better housing codes created by City Hall made building unprofitable in most of New York City.[53] The federal government would pay for most of the costs of urban land development so commercial and institutional companies could buy land below cost. The government hoped that corporations would buy more land so they can rebuild slum areas and renew the city. Mayoral advisor J. Anthony Paunch

[51] Richard M. Flanagan, "The Housing Act of 1954," *Urban Affairs Review* 33, no. 2 (1997): 282, doi: 10.1177/107808749703300207.
[52] Ibid, 281.
[53] Gonzalez, *The Bronx*, 112.

stated that urban renewal "unhoused thousands" who would "swell the overcrowding of the most dilapidated portion of the City's housing inventory."[54]

With the changing of population, South Bronx became more and more disordered. Crime increased and safety was compromised landlords became afraid for trying to find tenants for their buildings. By the 1960s, landlords and tenants in the South Bronx are increasing abandoning their buildings.[55] Landlords stopped paying taxes, providing services and collection rents They were constantly moving in and out parts of neighborhood that are getting demolished, cleared, and rebuilt. Even though there was housing abandonment throughout the city, it was more disproportionality happening more in the Bronx. Many argued that it's because the Bronx has more crime, and rapid change ethnic and racial population, but in fact number of neighborhoods around saw a rise in crime during the 1960s not only the Bronx.

House abandonment was also caused by the decline of the housing market and the socioeconomic condition of the apartment buildings.[56] In the 1940s, the Bronx was seen as safe, multi ethnic borough. Now, the Bronx is seen as crime ridden community. Even though, the city was facing a housing shortage, Bronx landlords were stuck with building that no one wanted. Some said that landlord's problem wasn't rent control, but finding any tenant to rent to. Some landlords would use their buildings as tax shelters or transferred their properties back and forth to increase valuation to sell to the city or take out a second mortgage loans.[57] Others stopped maintenance, paying taxes, and renting to low income and "troubled families." collecting rent from tenant "ran for the hills"[58] Edward Martin of the Bronx Office of Rent Control stated

[54] Ibid, 113.
[55] Ibid, 124.
[56] Ibid, 125.
[57] Ibid, 126.
[58] Ibid, 126.

"South Bronx landlords [were] like California prospectors a hundred years ago, they rushed in, took out the gold, and left a ghost town."[59] Even though landlords said rent control stopped from maintaining their buildings, they still failed to use the money that tenants to give them to get better building conditions.

Landlords continued to accept welfare families and cut services continuing the "South Bronx syndrome" around of the rest of the Bronx. Many argued that the South Bronx deterioration continued to spread through the city line. The Neighborhood Preservation Program in the West Bronx Concourse area gave information in different ways to rehabilitating buildings, but didn't stop the spread of housing abandonment around the Bronx.[60] The Municipal Loan Program gave landlords another way to leave their buildings in the South Bronx.[61] The Model Cities legislation eventually built more affordable housing and thus further entrenched the poor in the South Bronx.[62] Many argued that landlord's rent control gave them no choice, but to abandon their buildings. One can say that landlords had different programs and options open to them, but yet decided to burn or abandon their apartment buildings.

As fire insurance became available in the 1970s, many landlords bought Bronx buildings for the sole purpose to burn them. Some bought the building because their buildings are "worth more dead than alive."[63] Tenants would not pay their rent and others would burn their apartments to get vacancies in public housing. Some argued that the South Bronx continued decayed because of the abandonment of buildings, the declining of the housing market, and the neighborhood. Rev Paul Moore observed that landlords and tenants had "redlined the South

[59] Ibid, 126.
[60] Ibid, 127.
[61] Ibid, 127.
[62] Ibid, 127.
[63] Ibid, 126.

Bronx as an area not worth saving."[64] By landlords burning and abandoning their buildings to get income, but in some ways it still caused a deterioration of the South Bronx. It lessened the value of their building doing more harm than good.

Stricter building codes and rent control made it harder for landlords to maintain their buildings. Landlords felt that rent control gave them less income, so they had to cut services and stop maintaining their buildings. Stricter building codes made it harder to collect rents and pay for basic necessities for their buildings; many landlords felt like they had no choice, but abandon their buildings and later on burn them. Yet, it had landlords who would purposely let their building deteriorate and abandon it in order to profit, in many cases risking the safety and lives of their tenants. They also felt stricter building codes made it harder to collect rents and pay for basic necessities for their buildings. With housing abandonment happening around the South Bronx it caused the neighborhood deteriorate. Some landlords would participate in illegal practices, while still collecting rent from their tenants in order to increase profit .The government and landlords argued that rent control was the worst government regulation by it doing more harm than good, but it still gave affordable housing to low income families. Even though landlords still faced challenges with rent control and stricter buildings, by landlords abandoning their buildings it caused the rapid deterioration of the South Bronx.

[64] Ibid, 126.

Chapter 2: The Forgotten Children of New York

In chapter 2 I will be analyzing how the cuts to public service in the South Bronx led to the rapid deterioration of the South Bronx. I study how the cuts to hospitals, and fire departments affected the community. I also will discuss how the fiscal crisis affected the city especially the South Bronx. I will look at how the creation of the Cross- Bronx Expressway in the 1950s foreshadowed downturn of the Bronx. I will examine how landlords dealt with the cuts of services, which also affected the way they maintained their buildings. I will also look at the tenant strikes against landlord's illegal practices. I look at how both the federal and city government actions to clean up the South Bronx. Also how the change of population due to white flight how it affected the South Bronx socially and economically. I will argue that the cuts to public service including fire departments gave landlords the opportunity to abandon and burn their buildings with little to no consequences.

During the 1970s, New York City was in economic turmoil. In order to get out of debt, the city decided to cut public services. They could no longer afford basic services at previous. In result, it left New Yorkers defenseless against dangers in the city, especially in low working class neighborhoods. White flight, cuts to public services, and crime were at an all-time high in the South Bronx. The streets were unrecognizable with buildings being either abandoned or burned down. The cuts to public service caused the conditions in South Bronx to worsen leaving the community defenseless against elites and landlords.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the South Bronx was home to mostly Jewish, Italian, and Irish population. Many residents would say that the Bronx was a safe and quiet neighborhood, where they could keep their doors open and children could in the streets safely. During the late

1950s the Bronx started to change. The Bronx became a segregated community, where black and Hispanic residents would live in small segregated areas, while the white community would live together in the rest of the neighborhood[65]. A South Bronx resident, Brain Werner talked about how the South Bronx changed over time. He said that "When I was in junior high school we had an incident where these kids got a hold of a rifle and there was a kid shot right in my class two seats in back of me, they actually fired a gun from the roof across the street ….we were taking an English test and she was shot; luckily she was okay."[66] He talked about the increased violence and how his own mugging forced Werner and his family to move from the South Bronx to the Kingsbridge section of the Bronx in the mid-1960s. A 1967 Fordham University study found that the "Bronx had become poorer because its businesses and middle-class families were moving to the suburbs, while "in their place [had] come thousands of Negro and Puerto Rican families . . .[who] live in abject poverty with little hope for the future."[67] Even though many can argue that it was many other factors that contributing factors such as a lost factory jobs and cuts to services. Many white residents blame black and Hispanic residents for the increase in crime, but these had no direct correlation to one another.

The construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway was one of the first signs of the South Bronx decline. The building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway was seen as devastating move for the community. The idea for the road was approved 1944 and was built in 1955. In the past, Bronx parkways increased the value of vacant land while other highways followed rail line or industrial waterfront. The Cross – Bronx Expressway, in contrast, "sliced through a dozen solid,

[65] Megan Roby. "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight: A Study of the Bronx between 1950 and 1980," *Bronx County Historical Society Journal* 45, no. 1/2 (Spring/Fall2008):39.
[66].Ibid, 39.
[67] Gonzalez, *The Bronx*, 118.

settled, densely populated neighborhoods" in the borough's western portion, destroying blocks of apartment buildings at a time when every apartment was needed."[68] This greatly impacted residents all around the Bronx. East Tremont residents were evicted, the vacated buildings around the area were seen as less desirable. Even though the goal for the expressway was to advance the community it ended up displacing thousands of residents. The creation of the expressway was one of the signs of the deterioration of the Bronx. One can argue that the Cross-Bronx Expressway foreshadowed the South Bronx decline.

Many argued that white flight was caused by the increase violence and crime by the new black and Hispanic residents in the South Bronx. By the late 1960s and 1970s crime was at all-time high. White residents like Elvira Werner was aware of the increased violence, drug use, but her job in healthcare placed her in the most dangerous sections of the South Bronx.[69] Through 1974-1975, Mrs. Werner worked as a nurse in Morrisania Hospital in the South Bronx. Werner's then- boyfriend would "would drive her to her clinical sites and would wait for her outside in his car because he was afraid of her walking alone in the community."[70] Kathleen Roby, a physical therapist who worked at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx, talked about the violence she saw firsthand. She said that the violence was obvious from the start because most injures were gunshot wounds. She tried to provide "physical therapy for these teenage boys but was unable to because they were trying to attack each other in their wheelchairs. Even with paralyzing and permanent injuries, these teenage boys remained focused on hurting members of rival gangs."[71]They claimed that they saw an increase of crime and drug use in not only the South

[68] Ibid, 116.
[69] Roby. "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight: A Study of the Bronx between 1950 and 1980'', 40.
[70] Ibid, 41.
[71] Ibid, 41.

Bronx, but around the Bronx. Roby talked about the increase of petty theft in the 1970s. Her mom was mugged twice while going to the laundromat along with children bikes, scooters, and apartment houses. This was a far cry from 1950s where residents could keep their doors unlocked without the fear getting hurt. This forced many white residents to leave the Bronx all together. Many white residents blamed new black and Hispanics for the increase crime, but blacks and Hispanics had been migrating to the Bronx since after World War II. This debunks the idea that minority are solely responsible for the crime in Bronx suggest that maybe the rise in crime was due to the economic turmoil of the Bronx not its minority residents.

In the early 1970s, New York City was on the verge of bankruptcy. The government could no longer afford to keep liberal- socialistic policies of the past. New York City was at the forefront of social reform with free education for all, inexpensive public transportation, and affordable public hospitals and clinics. To fund these social programs the city would borrow money and not worry about paying it back later. Even though this was going on for decades, Mayor Abraham Beame was known as the "villain or the scapegoat ... in the financial collapse of New York."[72] New York's investment in libraries, hospitals, subways, museum, education and art was because of the political economy in postwar years. The city economy was mostly industrial: at the end of World War II, 41 percent of the workforce worked blue collar job and 28 percent was manufacturing.[73] But this would quickly change, between 1947 and 1976, the city lost 50,000 factory and after 1960 civil service jobs were opened to people outside city limits, creating more job competition.[74] About 300 companies that employed 10,000 workers went out

[72] Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 45.
[73]Ibid, 18.
[74].Roby, "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight: A Study of the Bronx between 1950 and 1980'', 44.

of business or moved out of the Bronx between 1970 and 1977.[75] By 1976, the city government estimated that between 25-30 % of the city workforce was unemployed. By the mid-1970s, municipal debt was at all time high and the city government had no way to pay for services that supported to the city.

Job disappeared and middle-class people fled to the suburbs, poverty kept increasing, and New York City was spending more than it was earning. Beame borrowed 250 million to cover debt and expenses and it still wasn't enough. Most of the expenses for 1974- 1975 budget went towards payment of old debt making it the third-largest item in the budget.[76] The debt was so overwhelming that New York's bond and notes accounted for nearly 28 percent of bonded debt in the whole country from the historical 18 percent in previous years.[77] Beame thought that the federal government would give them more aid, which didn't pan out. The city government and banks were still in denial that one largest cities could be nearly broke. Beame and the city government viewed default and bankruptcy as the ultimate embarrassment. By 1975, the banks changed their minds. The banks started to deny more borrowing making the city pay the highest interests rate in their history with 8.69 percent[78]. It looked like the city's luck ran out. As the relationship between the banks and the city collapsed, that's when the crisis really began.

The federal government believed that New York City should clean up their own mess. During the 1970s, the federal government was facing a national economic downturn of its own. The national unemployment rate reached 8.9 percent in 1975, the highest since World War II. The automobile industry laid off more than half of its workforce and to make matters worse rapid

[75] Ibid, 44.
[76] Ibid, 57.
[77] Ibid, 57.
[78] Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*, 88.

inflation caused prices to rise, while wages and salaries stayed stagnant. President Ford figured the best thing was nothing at all and let them figure it out for themselves. He proposed cuts to services, raising transit fares or charge tuition to university students, which Beame refused to do. Beame couldn't let go of his liberal ideas in order to save the city. Around 1975, Beame realized that his socialist utopia is dead. He announced another round of layoffs, he believed that these cuts would be able to cover and make the debts payment. He proposed that closing "the smallest of the city's municipal hospitals, and shrinking the city workforce by 10 percent: 525 fewer policemen, 332 fewer firefighters, and 791 fewer sanitation workers."[79] New Yorkers weren't happy. There were protests around the city trying to keep funding for public service programs open, but the cuts kept coming. The cuts to public services left the city defenseless, making it look like a shadow of its former self.

The Beame administration was cutting various public services that sent the city into an uproar. In response Governor Hugh Carey created the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB) to reduce city's spending, evaluate and audit the city's records, and to override labor contracts agreed to by the city's elected officials. They were allowed to call a "state of emergency" and control the financial affairs of New York City.[80] The EFCB had no labor representative nor did it include anyone from the black and Hispanic communities. This showed that the city government did not care about representation, cutting services that affected black, Hispanic, and work class communities the most. One of the first things they agreed to cut was public hospitals.

[79] Ibid, 91.
[80] Ibid, 152.

The municipal hospital system was controversial back in the 1950s. Critics both liberal and conservative claimed that the hospitals were inefficient and underutilized and should be turned into smaller outpatient facilities if they should exist at all.[81] Many of those hospitals gave inadequate care. Even though hospitals got high city subsides, they still lacked funds. Despite their problems, the hospitals were a major source of employment in poorer neighborhoods and served millions of people who lacked health insurance or were on Medicaid. The hospital was a source treatment for many poor-working class neighborhood such as asthma, lead poisoning, cancer, heart disease, venereal disease, tuberculosis, sickle cell, violence, and mental illness. Closing these hospitals meant taking away poor people's only source of healthcare, which would deeply affect communities' economies and health[82]. Despite the benefits, the EFCB and the city government decided to shut down sixteen hospitals. One *Village Voice* reporter reported that one patient said "The doctors treat like a human being, not a poor person" and "I'm lost if they close this place down." She was an eighty-one-year- old woman, partly blind, suffering from diabetes.[83] The closing down of city hospitals deeply affected minority communities, taking away many of the residents' sources of healthcare.

The Delafield Hospital near Washington Heights was the first one to close in the summer of 1975. Even though Delafield had numerous violations of the city's health violations, it served mostly low-income, black, and Latinx communities. New York's public health was known as the most liberal in country. Its main goal was to provide affordable health care services to the poor and working class, but their budget too was reduced because of the crisis. Between 1974 and 1977, the Department of Health decreased from 4,400 full-time and 1,600 part-time employees to

[81] Ibid, 212
[82] Ibid, 212
[83] Ibid, 214.

3,300 full- time and 1,000 part-time workers.[84]The also closed Fordham Hospital and Morrisania Hospital both in the Bronx in 1976. They also closed a family clinic in the Bronx along with Part of Sea View Hospital in Staten Island. A Bronx community activist once called Fordham Hospital services "totally inadequate" and now said, "If we lose the Fordham we'll lose all chances of getting a new Fordham. Once you close an institution, it's all over."[85]

Other parts of the health care system were affected as well. Prisoners in the city's jails lost health services and the prison health care budget fell 25 percent[86]. The city closed three nursing schools, which included the School of Nursing at Kings Hospital. Twenty out of the seventy-six Child Health Stations closed. A third of Dental schools and health centers closed, while fourteen of twenty-one eye clinics closed around the city[87]. Drug treatment were also heavily impacted by the crisis, eliminating programs that helped with drug-use, instead making stricter drug laws. It sent drug addicts through the criminal justice system rather than rehabilitation. Some argue that by making these cuts, the city was getting rid of undesirables of the city. Even though the health care system badly hurt the city, arson was still the most visible sign of the deterioration of the city.

The police department budgets were also affected by the fiscal crisis budget cuts. The cuts to the police force make the city feel unsafe. The crossing guards whose budget came from the police budget were removed throughout the city. The city government purposed that instead of the city government running public services, New Yorkers should volunteer to do service jobs to save money. Beame suggested that volunteers become axillary police and citizens patrols to

[84] Ibid, 216.
[85] Ibid, 214.
[86] Ibid, 216.
[87] Ibid, 216.

make up for the police service. The auxiliary police saw an increase in phone queries, the volunteer efforts did little to counter the impact of the budget cuts. This continued to be an ongoing struggle throughout the mid- 1970s.

Another big public service that was cut drastically was the fire service. In 1972 and 1974, New York City started to reduce services in the fire services, in primarily the highest fire incidence neighborhoods. Previously, structural fires started to increase from 33,000 in 1964 to 40,000 in 1967 and to 46,000 in 1968.[88] With the increase in workload, New York City's fire-service unions in 1968 successfully agreed to open 14 new fire companies in high-fire communities. The companies were opened in 1969 and 1970 and stayed open until November 1972.[89] The service cuts were developed to look at "response time" models for the New York City Rand Institute. In the late 1960s the Lindsay administration had a contract with RAND Corporation in order to study the fire department and come up with a system to use in order to make a decision about which fire houses to close. The goal of the model was to decide what services to keep based on facts rather emotions. The Rand was funded by the New York City and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Rand Institute used an equation to determine which fire companies got shut down. Rand believed that many fire companies in high population density, high fire-incidence communities could be eliminated without a big impact. Rand came to this decision " because units had been established, due to the high fire hazard, close together in such districts, which as a consequence, had low calculated " response times."[90]

[88] Rodrick Wallace, "Contagion and Incubation in New York City Structural Fires 1964 -1976," Human Ecology 6, no. 4 (1978): 424, doi: 10.1007/bf00889418.
[89] Ibid, 424.
[90] Ibid, 425.

Which was counterproductive because the fire stations were set up there because of the high rate of unusual fire accidents that were there in the first place.

In 1972, 1974, 1975 and 1976 a total of 35 fire companies were either shut down or relocated mostly from high fire hazard places based on Rand models.[91] Between 1974 and 1977, the city lost more 1,500 firefighters.[92]In July 1975 one fireman was removed from each remaining fire company, which resulted in 25 percent decrease per engine in firefighting manpower.[93] Rand assumed that "service times independent of each other and of the state of the system, i.e., the "Markov property" of stochastic systems,"[94] but in reality New York "at peak demand, units are known to go from fire to fire without rest, so services efficiency in such circumstances decreases rapidly as firefighters tire. While statistical tests for the Markov property exist, they have never been applied to fire service during peak periods."[95] One can say that the Rand model took away fire services from people who needed it the most, which mostly low income- working class communities. By the mid- 1970s, it seemed that the city was only looking out for themselves and leaving poor and working class people behind.

After 1972, studies shows that areas burned down spread either within their own or into nearby neighborhoods. Overcrowding and under maintenance of housing has been known to increase the chance of fire hazards. Places like the South Bronx and Central Harlem had an extreme demand for fire service that caused the relocations of fire companies from near Inwood and Washington Heights. [96] There was protest around the city from communities wanted to save

[91] Ibid, 425.
[92] Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*, 228.
[93]Wallace, "Contagion and Incubation in New York City Structural Fires 1964 -1976," 425.
[94] Ibid, 426.
[95] Ibid, 426.
[96] Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*, 231.

their fire houses with most of them being from high risk neighborhood. As much as New Yorkers protested only a few firehouses were saved. This resulted in the reduced fire-service resources resulting more increase structural fires, which otherwise would be contained. By 1974, Charlotte Street in the South Bronx was burned alone. It was estimated that there had been 33,465 fire in the South Bronx[97].Large sections of the South Bronx was burned, so many residents started to move to the West Bronx, resulting in overcrowding. The city was closing fire companies in the South Bronx as late as 1976. In 1977, the city saw an increasing number of fire deaths at 330 (up from 232 the year before).[98] The death occurred mostly in poor- working class neighborhoods causing these communities to deteriorate even more. With fire companies decreasing in the South Bronx it gave landlords the perfect opportunity to burn their properties without the fear of consequences.

Landlords benefited from the lack of fire companies in the South Bronx. They began to burn their buildings in order profit from them. The Bronx Task Force in 1974 confirmed that the fires was started by paid arsonists and landlords. They would burn their buildings in order to collect insurance payments to make a profit. Most landlords would strip their buildings to resell or scrap first and then burn them. Many argued that landlords thought that arson was the last option they had to abandon their building while still getting a profit. Before, landlords started to limit services trying to save money, and this resulted in buildings falling apart. A white resident from the South Bronx, Derrick, recalled that services like the garbage pick-up came less frequently.[99] By having older buildings that had poorly maintained boilers, deteriorating electrical systems, and lacked sanitation, landlord's buildings were the perfect candidate for

[97] Wallace, "Contagion and Incubation in New York City Structural Fires 1964 -1976'', 437.
[98] Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*, 228.
[99] Roby, "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight: A Study of the Bronx between 1950 and 1980''43.

burning buildings without anyone really batting an eye. Besides landlords, tenants also found ways to preserve their buildings and tenants' rights.

With conditions of buildings worsening, tenants found ways to combat landlord's efforts to cut services and house abandonment. Tenants would organize strikes for tenants' rights and take matters into their own hands. A 30 year old housewife Dorothy Simmons took over the responsibility of managing her South Bronx apartment building[100]. Under a court order, Simmons collected rent from herself and her neighbors and "used the money to keep the old coal furnace going, fix broken pipes, repair fallen plaster and holes in ceilings, exterminate rats and paint all 16 apartments."[101] This was in response to the worsening conditions around the neighborhood and housing slums around the city. Owners and few housing experts said that rent control is to blame. Mrs. Simmons who had never managed a property argued that its common sense. She said [102]"When you have someone working for you, you have to be there and act as though you know what you're talking about, even though you may not know."

In 1968 Mrs. Simmons organized the tenants to get help from the League of Autonomous Bronx Organization for Renewal. The organization put them in touch with a lawyer to ask that 1966 state law be enforced to take away management responsibilities from the landlord, Lurok Realty Corporation and it give it to a "receiver". Mrs. Simmons claims that "He [the landlord] was here every month collecting his rent ... He wasn't doing a darn thing but putting the money in his pocket."[103] On December. 10, 1968, Judge Alfred J. Callahan appointed Mrs. Simmons,

[100] David K. Shipler, ''Tenant Prevents Building Decay Woman Takes Over Job of Maintaining Tenement,'' New York Times, December 1969, https://search.proquest.com/docview/118620070?accountid=8268.
[101] Ibid
[102] Ibid
[103] Ibid

which was rare for tenants to be appointed that position. [104] When Mrs. Simmons first became the landlord she had to "borrow and steal coal." She found that an average rent of $ 15 was enough to finance repairs to the apartment building. Ironically, the Rand Corporation said "at least $ 20 to $ 25 a room was needed each month for maintenance, taxes and mortgage payments, and some landlords have put the figure higher."[105] Even though Mrs. Simmons could see why some landlords complained about the lack of money to fix their buildings, she still believed her landlord could have found money to fix the building if he really tried. The building improved so much that on Dec.5 the vice president of Washington Heights Federal Richard Grant, planned to turn over the building to a paid agent so he could complete the mortgage payments. Mrs. Simmons story rejects the argument that rent control is the reason why landlords couldn't afford to maintain their buildings, but it's because some landlords just pocket the rent for themselves either fixing the bare minimum or in many cases nothing at all.

Another group of slum dwellers devised a plan to save housing in the South Bronx. Twenty tenants bought a five- story building from an absentee landlord for 36,000 as loan from the city. The loan was interest free for 20 years. Conditions have improve since the tenants took over. With the help of anti-poverty organizations and Housing and Development Administration they "purchased a new boiler, the rats have been driven out… the hallways are clean and number of the apartments have been repainted in the upgrading of the building, which may eventually cost 100,000."[106] Bronx and United States representative Herman Badillo suggested a bill that should be passed to allow tenants to buy apartments from absentee landlords with federal money.

[104] Ibid
[105] Ibid
[106] Murray Schumach ''Tenants Buy and Rehabilitate Slum Building'', New York Times, June 1972, https://search.proquest.com/docview/119440650?accountid=8268.

He believed that it would help to clean up neighborhoods and city slums around the city. Badillo thought it would help the city and banks take on less responsibility of taking the ownership of the buildings. Instead of waiting for the city and landlord to improve conditions, tenants decided to do it themselves.

The fiscal crisis continued to be a topic for the federal government in 1970s. President Carter made a secret trip to Charlotte Street in the South Bronx in 1977. He wanted to look at the conditions of the South Bronx and New York City as a whole. America tuned in to see President Carter walked through the terrible conditions of the South Bronx. CBS's Bob Schiefer claimed that the South Bronx was "perhaps the worst slum in America."[107] The New York Times said that visit to the South Bronx "was as crucial to an understanding of American urban lie as a visit to Auschwitz is crucial to an understanding of Nazism."[108] By president of the United States going to the South Bronx, the city was excited to see that change was finally coming to the Bronx. It seemed that suddenly Americans all over the country cared about the South Bronx. The city started to set up new projects and put federal government in the Bronx, other borough started to resent them. Herman Badillo's proposed to put money into housing in Charlotte Street. The Brooklyn borough president said "If President Carter's chauffeur had taken at right turn instead of a left turn, we'd have all the money going to Bushwick now."[109] The Board member voiced their objections and voted to reject Badillos's plan. Many of Carters projects failed to pass and the South Bronx continued to be seen as a mountain of rubble.

[107] Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising the Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2002), 316
[108] Ibid, 316.
[109] Ibid, 325.

The South Bronx was also the hot topic for the 1980 presidential campaign. All the presidential candidates came to the South Bronx to talk about how they would clean up the Bronx. Teddy Kennedy made his appearance in March 1980. Badillo took him to the very spot Carter stood three year earlier. Badillo said "Take a look around you, Senator, and see for yourself what the Carter promises have done."[110] A few months later on August 6, Ronald Reagan came for his turn. He went to speak at the National Urban League conference at the New York Hilton. Artists like John Fekner wrote the decay and broken promises across the side of an empty buildings. Reagan came out his limousine and commented that he hasn't "seen anything like this since London after the Blitz."[111] He criticized Carter for not keep his promises, and promising to rebuild the South Bronx through tax incentives and private industry. People heckled him and told him to go back to California. He told them "If you'll just listen, I'm trying to tell you – I know there is no program or policies that a president make federal government can come in and wave a wand to do this."[112] When elected Reagan administration gave 1.3 million of the federal budget among four South Bronx groups for rehabilitation. The Reagan administration failed to keep their promise. By the late 1970s through the early 1980s, the federal government was trying to find ways to solve the "South Bronx problem." President Reagan and Carter both failed to keep their promises, as the South Bronx continued to struggle to survive. One can argue that maybe the reason why the federal government promises fell through is because in the back of their minds they believed that the South Bronx couldn't be saved.

The fiscal crisis significantly impacted New York City. It turned the city of liberal-socialist views into a city filled with chaos. They had to find ways to save money, so they cut

[110] Ibid, 326.
[111] Ibid, 333.
[112] Ibid, 336.

public services. Without the federal government help, New York City realized that they were all own their own. The cuts to fire departments, and hospitals greatly impact work-poor communities, leaving many to fend themselves. With cuts effecting mostly the poor and working class it looked too many that the city was trying to get rid of undesirable parts New York; poor, black, Latino, and working communities. While the city was trying to figure out a way to save themselves, landlords used this opportunity to take advantage by burning their properties for insurance money. Tenants took matters into their hands and clean up buildings, and in some cases taking ownership of them. In the late 1970s, problems in the South continued to worsen, effecting minority and working class communities the most.

Chapter 3: The South Bronx is Burning

In chapter 3, I will examine the cause of the spread of arson in the South Bronx. I will particularly look at the landlord's motives for burning their buildings. I want to study if arson in the South Bronx was a product of political circumstances of that time. I also want to explore individual arson cases and if landlords were motivated by making profit or if there was another underlining reason. I want to look at the different ways the city government tried to solve the problem in the city, especially in the South Bronx. I want to look at how the federal government responded to the South Bronx and how opinions of the South Bronx changed over time. I want to see if the cuts to public service contributed to the spread of arson around the South Bronx and why it spread so rapidly. Overall, I want to argue that landlords lacked profit from buildings and cuts to public services led to the spread of arson in the South Bronx, which resulted in the rapid deteriorate of the borough.

During the 1970s, New York City went through a transitional period. New York was no longer the liberal-socialistic utopia it once was. The city was in chaos and New Yorkers were officially on their own. Landlords were abandoning and burning their properties, in order to collect insurance to make a profit. Cuts to public services, particularly the fire department, gave landlords the opportunity to burn their buildings without the fear of consequences. Even though arson cases were happening throughout the city, it deeply affected the South Bronx. With white flight and cuts to public services, it made the South Bronx more vulnerable, thereby causing arson to spread more rapidly than in other communities. The South Bronx started to look like a waste land filled with crime, violence, and streets covered in rubble. By the late 1970s, the South Bronx became a household name with President Carter's visit to the South Bronx. Americans

finally became aware of how bad the South Bronx truly was, calling it the worst slum in America. Landlord's needs for profit caused them to commit arson, but the cuts to public services made the South Bronx extremely vulnerable as previously stated.

Due to rent control, landlords felt that they couldn't make profit, so at first they would stop services. Daily services like garage-up, painting, and rat exterminating were eliminated in order to save money. When landlords could no longer afford to keep their buildings they would abandon it. Some landlords started to burn their properties in order to receive insurance money to make a profit. Properties were being burned at an alarming rate and affected many minority and working class communities throughout the city. The destruction of the city was most prevalent in the South Bronx. By 1974, Charlotte Street in the South Bronx and many of the buildings on the surrounding streets were burned.[113] Many believed that the crumbling conditions was the beginning of the deterioration of the South Bronx.

One of the biggest cuts to public service was to the fire department. As fire houses started to close down, the city started to see an increase in fires with most of them arising from arson. Even though it was obvious that arson was the main cause of fires around the city, the fire department ignored it. One fireman stated "The arson, I would say, was officially ignored. The fire commissioner, the chiefs of department, they just wished this place would go away, that they could sell it to Westchester County and get rid of it. At Charlotte Street there were twelve hundred false alarms in one year. You know how many arrests they made? Zero. Every fire in a vacant building had to be arson. No one lives there, and yet when we pull up, the fire's out thirty

[113] Megan Roby. "The Push and Pull Dynamics of White Flight: A Study of the Bronx between 1950 and 1980," Bronx County Historical Society Journal 45, no. 1/2 (Spring/Fall2008):40.

windows."[114] By the city and the fire department neglecting to address the issue of arson, it caused it to spread rapidly causing it destroy communities.

In 1970, the fire department saw an increasing number of fires in the South Bronx. Engine Company 82 made 6,204 runs to 4,246 fires, or, eleven fires a day.[115] Despite the increase in number of fires, no one thought arson was an issue. A memo written on March 17, 1970 by Charles F. Kirby, deputy fire chief to John T. O'Hagan, the chief of the fire department, they didn't mention arson as a major cause of the rapid increase in fires. "Between 1964 and 1968 while structural fires in the city rose 42% percent, the Bronx increased 70 percent." He noted fires increased in the area assisted by Engine Company 82 spreading first south and north. He expected to see an increase because "there are no physical and sociological changes to warrant a contrary assumption at the present time… The potential of the spread for the 1970s consists of a further intensification of fires in all but the most southern portion and a spread in the central area to Fordham Road."[116] Kirby proposed that better sanitation programs and sprinklers in apartment's buildings would avert the arson problem. He vaguely mentioned arson saying that it could potentially turn into a social issue. Arson was becoming a problem and they didn't do much to solve it. This ended up costing the city and the fire department more in the long run.

Firemen often recalled the horrifying aftermath of the fires. Many of them remember seeing buildings in flames while families stood on the side with their suitcases and other valuables neatly on the sidewalk. In some cases, not everyone made it out alive. Once, three boys

[114] Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising the Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American* City (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2002), 232.
[115] Ibid, 233.
[116] Ibid, 234.

were paid to burn down a building, and ended up getting trapped in their own fire. One witness stated "One kid was caught in it and he was a crispy critter when we got to him, the other two kids were badly burnt."[117] Dennis Smith wrote a bestselling novel called *Report from Engine Company 82* in which he described his frustrations battling fires that no one seemed to care about. He claimed that city officials and South Bronx residents were watching buildings burn without batting an eye. When the alarm rang, firemen knew it was Charlotte Street and 170th. "We go to that intersection more often than any other. It is usually a false alarm, but there is no such thing as "crying wolf" in this business… Few people even turn to watch us go by. Screaming fire engines and police cars are part of life in the South Bronx, just sounds to which people have adjusted."[118] Fires, false alarms and drugs became part of everyday life for fireman in the South Bronx. From the fireman's perspective, the South Bronx was burning and no one seemed to care enough to take action.

As arson cases started to rapidly increase, the fire department finally started to take notice. Even though many thought the landlords were the cause for the increase in arson, others believed it was really welfare recipients. Some argued that welfare recipients were responsible for arson because they wanted to get into better housing (mostly public housing). This would allow them to be placed on the priority list for housing. In fact, there was large signs at the welfare-centers in both Spanish and English saying "THE ONLY WAY TO GET HOUSING PRIORITY IS IF YOU ARE BURNED OUT BY A FIRE"[119] Along with priority housing, the welfare department paid out two-three thousand dollars to burned-out families to replace their items. Many said that a lot of the fires were deliberately set by junkies and a "new breed of

[117] Ibid, 233.
[118] Ibid, 234.
[119] Ibid, 232.

professionals; the strippers of buildings". This "new breed" would clear the buildings of valuable copper, brass and steel and sell them for scrap.[120] Others would set fires just to watch the place burn, while kids would do it just for fun and, in extreme cases, revenge. Many think that landlords were solely responsible for arson, but residents also participated in the act for better housing. However, landlords were still burning their buildings at alarming rates, and benefitted more financially than tenants.

Residents started to live in fear as arson became a way of life in the South Bronx, particularly on Charlotte Street. A mother who lived near Engine Company 82 said "The firehouse was right down the block, and if my kids had any lullaby to go to sleep, it was the fire engine."[121] A fifth grade school teacher at PS61 recalled when her kids would come to class smelling like smoke. They would tell her, "We have suitcases packed. This week is the fire. (The word had been thoughtfully sent around beforehand, so people could escape with little loss of life or property.)"[122] The teachers knew that students would soon disappear from class. Residents started to become desensitized because fires became a part of life. They had no idea how to stop the fires and the city didn't provide much help, leaving them to fend for themselves.

Many wondered what brought landlords to this point. Many landlords felt that rent control was to blame. Landlords argued that rent control gave them the inability to maintain their buildings and to make a profit. Others argued that it was the tension between landlord's, particularly elderly Jewish men, and younger tenants that led to the burnings. By creating stricter building codes and taking nonpayment taxes, many argued that the city just did these things for record keeping, not for the prevention of arson. Peter Marcuse found the city's own inability "to

[120] Ibid, 232.
[121] Ibid, 233.
[122] Ibid 223,

police its own housing stock . . . this create[d] the opportunity to milk a building and often led to abandonment."[123] Many landlords would abandon their building and still lose money. Others would use illegal practices like using their buildings as tax shelters by transferring their properties back and forth to increase value or to get a second mortgage loan. That changed when low-premium fire insurance became accessible in the 1970s. This gave landlords the opportunity to get rid of their property and make a profit. Many investors started to buy apartments in the Bronx with the intention of burning them for insurance money. There was an "untold number of Bronx property owners who bought insurance policies that made their buildings worth more dead than alive."[124] Landlords were able to take advantage of the lack of fire companies and were able to get rid of their buildings and take money without being prosecuted. The New York Urban Coalition ultimately concluded the problem was a loss of hope. "The owner loses hope in the building, the banks in the neighborhood, and the tenants in the landlord . . . [thus] the building has no future."[125]

By 1975, there was a 20 percent rise in fires in the South Bronx and the borough was filled with physical destruction, drugs, violence, and economic turmoil. The city started to take notice, but did nothing to stop it. During the prior year, more than 12,300 fires occurred through five and six story apartments and small stores. There was nearly 4,100 fires in the first four months of this year and still firemen expected another record high[126]. Fire officials conservatively estimated that 30 percent of the fires were arson, which was three times the national average[127]. It was killing 30 to 40 persons a year, and wasn't reported much in the media

[123] Evelyn Diaz. Gonzalez, The Bronx (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pg. 126.
[124] Ibid, 126.
[125] Ibid, 125.
[126] Joseph S. Treaster, ''20% Rise in Fires is Adding to Decline of South Bronx'', *New York Times*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/120407825?accountid=8268.
[127] Ibid

circuits. The city lost millions of dollars in property and the street blocks were in ruins. Rev. Paul Moore stated that "If this keeps up there will be no South Bronx."[128] Many fire, police, and city officials at the time did nothing to clean up the South Bronx. In one interview, Bishop stated that "It looks like they've redlined the South Bronx as an area not worth saving."[129] In addition, Fire Commissioner John. T. O'Hagan admitted that "what we've done in the past isn't satisfactory... But, we're going to put additional effort into this problem until we get results." The city finally started to realize that the issue of arson could no longer be avoided or ignored.

South Bronx officials often claimed that they didn't have enough money in the budget to hire men to police the neighborhood in order to deter arsonists. Many community members disagreed, including. Rev Louis Gigante, a city councilman of the South Bronx, who stated "They say they don't have the manpower and I say that's baloney … I have a theory: if there's something wrong and bad and crippling you put your forces there and take care of the problem. Let the other problems go for a while."[130] During this time, New York City was in economic turmoil and its citizens felt like there was nothing that they could do. Fire Marshalls were responsible for investigating suspicious fires in the city. They covered more than 12 square miles and more than 800,000 people[131], which was the highest in the city at that the time. Many fireman felt like they were being over worked and risking their lives. Since most of the buildings were in need of repair, there were often more dangerous to enter than others. Three out of every seven firemen were killed and 1,500 were injured on duty in the South Bronx, which was more than any other of the five boroughs.[132] One fireman claimed that "Last year one of our guys went

[128] Ibid
[129] Ibid
[130] Ibid
[131] Ibid
[132] Ibid.

through the roof in one of these building and fell six floors."[133] Arson made firemen's jobs even risker than they already were while also continuing to deteriorate the South Bronx.

Despite everything, there were a few landlords who were convicted of arson. On April 26th, 1974, three South Bronx landlords were arrested in two separate cases. In one of the cases, the marshal said "the landlords of a crumbling tenement at 1062 Faile Street entered the building at 2 am with a companion. The two were carrying five-gallon gasoline cans and moments later a second-floor apartment burst into flames"[134] They were caught by young people who wrote down the license plate numbers of the men who drove away. Two Brooklyn men were also arrested in the South Bronx and were suspected of trying to burn down six tenements in which one of them owned and was charged with possession of an explosive device. Landlords viewed arson as a get rich quick scheme and as a way to get rid of their buildings fast.

The most influential motive for burning down their buildings was due to insurance payout. Robert Kirschbaum of the New York Property Insurance Underwriting Association (NYPIUA - also known as the FAIR Plan) extends coverage in high-risk areas and says it's not "uncommon for insurance on four-story and five-story walk-ups to range from $ 75,000 to $150,000 per year."[135] In order to collect the full amount of what the building is worth, the building needed to be destroyed. Some of the properties had little to no resale value, so any economic return was better than none. The NYPIUA had to pay $10 million in insurance losses in the South Bronx, according to Kirschbaum.[136] Fire marshals assumed that businessmen and landlords hired professional criminals and even children to commit the arson while the property

[133] Ibid
[134] Ibid
[135] Ibid
[136] Ibid

owners were usually out of town when their buildings caught on fire. A criminal professional, Mr. Barracato, said he would charge around $1,000 to set a fire. He also said that teenagers would charge around $50 to $100. [137] It became a business for both landlords and tenants, they had no reason to stop and they were destroying the South Bronx in the process.

Landlords put little blame on themselves. The president of the Bronx Reality Advisory Board, Ruben Klein, which was an organization with 1,500 landlords stated that "Nobody can deny that some owners burned their own property."[138] He still argues that "the greatest destruction is by the people themselves. – addicts, unsupervised children, careless or angry tenants."[139] Mr. Klein said that properties that were deteriorating and in need of great repair were sold to banks for a small fraction of their mortgages. Landlords were burning down their properties, often without remorse, and tended to blame others for their actions. The South Bronx was going down in flames and neither the city, fire department nor the residents knew how to stop it.

In 1975, eight landlords and their associates were indicted in the connection with the pattern of arson in the South Bronx. The charges included arson, possession of fire bombs and bribery. Mario Merola, the Bronx District Attorney, said that this arrest was just a "drop in the bucket". He felt that these arrests were a step in the right direction toward "declaring war on these arsonists."[140] The ultimate goal was to convict them with "involvement in the setting or the attempt to set fires to collect insurance."[141] Imre Oberlander, a 38 year old of 133 Haywood

[137] Ibid
[138] Ibid
[139] Ibid
[140] Joseph B. Treaster "8 Landlords and Associates are indicted in Bronx Fires,'' *New York Times*, June 1975, https://search.proquest.com/docview/120390985?accountid=8268.
[141] Ibid

Street, Brooklyn, owned six buildings in the South Bronx and several in Brooklyn[142]. He collected $125,000 from 21 fire insurance claims from 1970 - 1975. Four of his buildings had fires, but none of them had been destroyed[143]. Mr. Oberlander and Yishai Webber blackened their faces and Oberlander was found wearing a wig when the cops picked them up. In addition, the two were found with firebombs in their car.

Another landlord Majund Salejj, 33, was accused of setting fire to his five-story apartment. The fire was restrained to the second-floor hallway and the only resident who could not escape was an elderly women who was rescued. The two men were charged and found guilty of arson and unlawful transportation of gasoline.[144] They also were charged with corruption since they attempted to give a police officer money after their arrest. A father and son, Edward Richberg Sr. and Edward Richberg Jr, were also charged with arson. Edward Richberg said that he owned the abandoned building, which was attached to a tenement that housed 40 families. Police later found out that Mr. Richberg was lying and the property was actually owned by his brother-in-law. The family then attempted to bribe police officers and was charged with arson and possession of explosive devices.[145]

Mr. Colon and Virgina Rivera, who were both 16, were on lookout during the fire and were arrested after. Mr. Colon pleaded guilty to arson while Rivera was awaiting trial for the same crime. The two older men were indicted and charged with both arson and conspiracy. Robert Bonet asked Miguel Rodrigues to hire someone to set fire to Mr. Bonet's coin-laundry

[142] Ibid
[143] Ibid
[144] Ibid
[145] Ibid

shop. Rodrigues hired his nephew Angel Colon to burn the shop down on April 15th, 1975. He not only burned down the coin-laundry shop, but also seven other stores as well.

By the mid – 1970s, the South Bronx was in turmoil. New York City was finally starting to pay attention to arson as a real issue within the borough. President Carter's visit to the South Bronx changed the way Americans viewed urban cities. His visit to the South Bronx showed how bad things have gotten in the city. Many argued that the problem wasn't just in New York City, but in cities throughout the country as well. Journalist Joseph. P. Fried thought that the way to save cities is to create jobs and build up communities[146]. He also felt that this would be one of the ways to stop what was happening to the South Bronx and to every other city at the time.

The South Bronx reappeared in the national spotlight again during the World Series at Yankee Stadium. During the game, ABC Sports captured flames from a fire blocks from the Stadium. The camera focused on the "roaring conflagration", and announcer Howard Cosell announced in his inimitable nasal twang, "The Bronx is burning."[147] The game continued, while the Bronx continued to burn. This brought embarrassment to both former and present Bronx residents. One resident began to cry saying "It was so awful ... Seeing it there and knowing the whole world was watching."[148] The building that was burning was an elementary school and it took five hours to put out. America got to experience firsthand what it was like for residents in the South Bronx. It made America view the South Bronx as one of the biggest slums in American or even the developed world.

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[146] Joseph P. Fried ''The South Bronx, U.S.A: What Carter Saw in New York City Is Symbol of Complex Social Forces on a Nationwide Scale,'' *New York Times*, October 1977, https://search.proquest.com/docview/123227295?accountid=8268.

[147] Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising the Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2002,) 317.

[148] Ibid, 317

The church also became involved in trying to help the South Bronx. In the late 1970s, the Catholic Church made it their mission to rehabilitate and preserve the South Bronx. The church did not close any schools and provided a good and safe education throughout the Bronx. Father Smith and Gennie Brooks created the Mid-Bronx Desperados Development program in order to redevelop Charlotte Street. They worked with the poor and helped by "visiting the friendless and needy, while also clearing rubble and escorting battered girlfriends to the hospital."[149] Missionaries of Charity, a religious congregation associated with Mother Teresa, turned a burned-out apartment house into a soup kitchen and refuge for battered women. Also, the volunteers who visited the poorest parts of India, found that the South Bronx was more difficult to help. After President Carter came to visit, Mother Teresa came to the South Bronx without anyone really noticing. The church never gave up on the South Bronx and made goals of trying to rehabilitate the South Bronx. The church community had an unspoken influence in the community because it was the only official organization that reached out and tred to help the community.

In 1976, arson rates were at an all-time high with 13, 752 arsons fires. The Bronx lost 97 percent of their buildings due to housing abandonment and arson between 1970 and 1980[150]. Mayor John Lindsay created an organization called CANS, a community and news service that provided shelter, food, and money for tenants in need. Landlords would lie about the number of tenants in their buildings. By the late 1970s, arson rates were still high, but they were slowly declining. After President Carter visit to the South Bronx, Flanagan and Tom Fox met up from Washington D.C to see if they could help the South Bronx. They created a green coalition with

[149] Ibid, 318.
[150] Alessandra Malito, "The History of Burned New York Boroughs," *Chasing Fires RSS*, accessed April 01, 2019, http://burned.journalism.cuny.edu/the-history-of-burned-new-york-boroughs.

the Bronx frontier "the PDC, Green Guerillas, the New York Botanical Garden and others."[151] They also went to the Department of Interior funds and was able to get 1.1. million dollars to change fifteen garbage lots into parks. In 1978 Bronx Frontier created "a mobile kitchen in former bookmobile roved the streets teaching cooking and nutrition."[152] Another group that formed was Bronx 2000 in the summer of 1978. Bronx 2000 organized both tenants and owners to clean up lots and make them into parks trying to clean up the community. They also added a farmers market in order to give residents access to better food. Within a year, the number arson in New York City went down. One can argue that, it took grassroots organization to do what the city failed to do. It gave residents hope and better access food and a cleaner environment, which is unheard of in urban areas at that time.

Arson was an issue that was ignored for the first half of the 1970s. The fire and city officials refused to recognized arson as a real threat to resident and mostly minority communities. Even though landlords had the most to benefit from burning their properties, they blamed junkies for their own misfortunes. The city had its own economic problems, so they ignored the signs until it was too late. It wasn't until 1977 that America knew how far gone the South Bronx was. Tenants and grassroots organizations had to work together to make the South Bronx look like a community worth saving.

[151] Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising the Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City*, 321.
[152] Ibid, 321.

Conclusion

Arson was a trend throughout the city, but it became part of everyday life in the South Bronx. Tenants knew that landlords were gonna burn down their buildings for weeks and didn't tell the police. They act like it was a regular day in the South Bronx because they realized the city government didn't care about them. The cuts to public services made things inaccessible to New Yorkers, especially in working and poor communities. For nearly five years, both the fire and city officials refused to acknowledge arson as an issue, which cost thousands of residents their homes and sometimes their lives. Landlords were burning their buildings to collect insurance money, leaving the community in rubble behind them.

Landlords and city leaders blamed junkies and minorities for the worsening conditions in the South Bronx. Even though most of the destruction was caused by the city official's negligent response to the rise of arson cases at the time. White residents thought that when blacks and Hispanics moved in the Bronx in the 1960s they brought crime and violence with them. In truth, blacks and Hispanics residents were there since after World War II because of rent control, disputing the fact that they are reason for the increased violence. I argue that the reason for the increase violence was due to the economic problems that were happening in New York at that time. The fiscal crisis put pressure on tenants and landlords, which made them turn to crime in order to survive.

Cuts to fire and police services made it hard for the city to investigated arson cases effectively. Landlord would not always torch their own buildings, but also paid other people to do it. Sometimes they would pay junkies or even kids to collect their money. By the mid- 1970s, the city could no longer ignore the arson problem in the South Bronx. President Carter's visit

showed how bad things have gotten. That's when the city and federal government decided that they finally had to do something.

In the late 1970s, the city was making an effort to rebuild the South Bronx. Morrisana Air Right Houses became the only finished housing projects in the South Bronx at that the time. It was planned since the early 1970s, but was finished by 1977[153]. It was built on top of the Penn Central railroad and it expanded three city blocks. It had 843 low- income housing units. Despite the success of the Morrisana project, the South Bronx were still losing housing units in 1980s.[154] When elected, Mayor Koch announced that he will be spending $ 4.4 billion dollars to build 100,000 housing units in five years.[155] He later amended into a ten year plan that would produce 250,000 housing units. The plan took three administrations to finally implement it.

The South Bronx became the place for redevelopment during the Ten- Year Housing Plan. Community Preservation Corporation (CPC) founded by David Rockefeller the CEO of Chase Bank in 1974 convinced banks to assist owners repair their buildings in working- class neighborhoods. CPC also provided "technical support, loans, mortgages, government funds, and tax credits."[156]The LISC also contributed by picking a few CDC's and helping them get city properties for a dollar each and market financial packets for them. The city in result would cover the rest of the cost and offer low- interest mortgage to buyers.[157] Throughout government administrations ten-plan was in constant limbo. Mayor Koch ultimately didn't want to use money out of the city's budget to fund the plan. His predecessor Mayor Dinkins gave more than Koch

[153] Themis Chronopoulos, "The Rebuilding of the South Bronx after the Fiscal Crisis," *Journal of Urban History* 43, no. 6 (2017): 937.
[154] Ibid 941.
[155] Ibid 941.
[156] Ibid, 944.
[157] Ibid, 944.

and made an effort to rebuild the South Bronx. He gave them more apartment buildings and better development sites. The Giuliani administration gave less and focused privatization housing. He didn't cancel the Ten- Year Plan Housing Plan, but put little money into it. According to surveys of the between 1980 and 2000, the South Bronx gained 17,423 units.[158] 53,706 housing units was built in the South Bronx in 1987-2001. By the late 1990s, the South Bronx were filled with housing units, a far cry from the streets of rubble in the 1970s. Along with the increase of housing units, "the population of the South Bronx grew from 463,118 in 1980 by 19 percent to 550,945 in 2000."[159]

Since the 1970s, the South Bronx still mostly have black and Hispanic resident. There still aren't any white or Asians, which could be a result of continuing racial tensions and segregation of urban areas. The South Bronx is still one of the poorest communities despite the genfification that has been happening in the last couple of years. The average median household income $ 23,692 in 2015, which is the lowest in the borough.[160] It still has rent-stabilized that are cheap enough for residents rent

The South Bronx has come long way from 1970s. The buildings that were filled with rubble is now filled with housing. The question is why arson spread so quickly in the South Bronx. I think the short answer is that with the violence and crime going on in the South Bronx, the city thought it couldn't be saved. Instead of fixing the problem they decided to let the community destroy themselves. Even though, crime and arson has declined in the South Bronx they still are one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. Today, the South Bronx is still redlined and face environmental challenges like a lack of clean water, air pollution. They also

[158] Ibid, 947
[159] Ibid, 947
[160] Ibid, 952

have public health issues with high numbers of obesity and asthma. 40 years later, residents are still feeling the consequences of the city's neglected and empty promises. One can say that the South Bronx was rare and extreme case because of a neglectful city not looking out for them.

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