

## **ACTIVIST EAST HARLEM**



# ACTIVIST EAST HARLEM

JUSTPUBLICS@365

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## Our mission



The goal of the JustPublics@365 project is to create new forms of knowledge using digital media to connect academics, journalists and activists across traditional silos, and foster transformation on issues of social justice.

The rise of digital media has fostered dialogues about “public scholarship,” but JustPublics@365 extends and enriches those discussions by emphasizing public scholarship that specifically addresses social inequality. This project breaks new ground in making explicit the connection between public scholarship and creating a more just world for everyone, with a particular focus on the impact that academic research can and should have on public policy.

The project leverages the identity of the CUNY Graduate Center as an advanced public research institution and its location in NYC, at the heart of global networks of media and activists, to push forward a public conversation around social justice and inequality and to encourage greater collaboration between academics, journalists, and activists.

JustPublics@365 creates new synergies around issues of inequality and social justice enriched by research, buttressed by data (including new types of data and ways of recording the effects of research), and informed by visualizations that will make complex issues

understandable to broader publics and make action to address inequalities easier.

This is a bold attempt to: support and encourage distinguished but hidebound scholars to become more comfortable with digital media; to prompt media broadcasters to engage with scholars and sustain that conversation; to place social activists in conversation with researchers in ways that promote social transformation; and to broaden the impact of academic scholarship on public policy and practice.



# Who We Are

## Project Leadership & Team

The project is led by Jessie Daniels, Professor of Public Health, Sociology and Environmental Psychology at the Graduate Center and the CUNY School of Public Health and Polly Thistlethwaite, Chief Librarian at the Mina Rees Library, of the Graduate Center. This series and e-book has benefitted from the contributions of dozens of individuals and we are grateful to them for lending their words to this project.

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This e-book is a compilation of our topic series entitled ‘Activist East Harlem,’ that appeared on the JustPublics@365 blog from April 22 – June 2, 2014. It is the fourth in our social justice topic series. In each series, we select a topic. We then invite academics, activists, librarians, journalists and documentary filmmakers to share their perspectives on that topic. We curate contributors’ viewpoints through a variety of media: podcasts, video, maps, data visualizations, and infographics. Each contribution appears on the JustPublics@365 blog and social media channels. At the conclusion of each topic series, we make the e-book available to everyone and encourage community members, activists, academics and journalists, to use these resources for activism, reporting, teaching, and learning.

Our previous social justice topic series are: 1) Imagining New York City After Stop and Frisk; 2) Transforming Policy from Punishment to Public Health; and 3) Scholarly Communication in the Digital Era for the Public Good.

**The East Harlem Explosion and Building Collapse:**  
A Community Conversation on  
**What Happened? and  
What Can We Do to Prepare for the Future?**

Come participate in a conversation about what happened during the response effort after the building collapse and to discuss what we can do for work other in the future to be better prepared and ready for an emergency disaster in East Harlem!

Invited Guests include representatives from NRO 25th, FDNY, American Red Cross, NYC Department of Health Office of Emergency Preparedness and Response, and the NYC Office of Emergency Management.

Support for this event was provided by the Ford Foundation.

**Saturday,  
April 26, 2014  
10:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.  
Lunch Provided!**

**CUNY School of Public Health • Silberman Campus, Hunter College  
2180 Third Avenue (at East 119th Street) • Room 115 A/B**

Sponsored by:

ESPP 402 event info:  
<http://justpublics365.com/east-harlem-explosion>

Our goal with this topic series was to deepen and expand the work of a community meeting at the CUNY School of Public Health on April 26, 2014. This meeting brought together volunteers, city officials, and faculty and staff from CUNY to discuss emergency response following a tragic gas explosion nearby that had killed 8 people the previous month. Participants met in groups to discuss the event, make recommendations for better emergency response

in the future, and strengthen community partnerships. Afterwards, several people sat down with us to talk about their experience, which we produced as a series of podcasts.

The active participation in the meeting was characteristic of the strong, invested community of East Harlem, also known as El Barrio. We drew inspiration from this event and highlighted other important activist work and pressing issues impacting the community, especially affordable housing and gentrification, and drug policy reform. In addition to the conversations with local volunteers, our series included interviews with a local journalist and two scholar-activists; featured the work of local filmmakers; highlighted a two-day forum on drug policy reform held at the New York Academy of Medicine; and discussed current events and policies impacting the neighborhood.

This series portrays only a small portion of the dynamic activist work being done by local residents. To do justice to this rich community would take far longer. Luckily, this work is represented by the many community groups that are active in East Harlem and in everyday life in the neighborhood. We encourage you to start here and do more exploring on your own, both virtually and in person. Take a walk around the neighborhood and meet some of the amazing people who call it El Barrio.

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## **PART I**

# **Part I: Community Conversations in East Harlem**

In this section, we broaden the community conversation begun by local residents, volunteers, city officials, and scholars at the CUNY School of Public Health, and consider some of the larger issues impacting emergency response in East Harlem.





A gas explosion that caused two East Harlem buildings to collapse on March 12, killing 8 people, tested the community's capacity for emergency preparedness and response. This tragedy prompted a renewed focus on East Harlem in local media, and here at JustPublics@365 given our [ties to this community](#).

In addition, given the CUNY campus in East Harlem, and that one of those killed was a member of the CUNY community - [Sgt. Griselde Camacho](#) - there are some ongoing efforts at CUNY to work with community-based groups in response to this disaster. Although East Harlem has a rich, extensive network of community-based groups and organizations, a month after the disaster it is still unclear how well these services were utilized.



### image source

According to the [East Harlem Emergency Preparedness Collaborative](#) (EHEPC), despite major investments by the federal government to increase the ability of U.S. cities, communities, and neighborhoods to prepare for and respond to public health emergencies and disasters, research has shown there has been limited participation by those in vulnerable and minority communities.

On Saturday, April 26, 2014 JustPublics@365 co-sponsored a forum at the [Silberman Campus of CUNY in East Harlem](#) (2180 Third Avenue) about these issues. Community members and all those affected by the blast were invited to attend and share their concerns, listen to others and learn.



**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/04/22/east-harlem-explosion/>



## **Preparing for Better Emergency Response in East Harlem**

Emergency responders are dedicated to doing work they don't want people to know about, as one participant remarked during the recent East Harlem community conversation, held last Saturday at the CUNY School of Public Health.

This community conversation about the recent East Harlem explosion and building collapse brought together residents, community groups and scholars to discuss the emergency response to the event, and how the community could be better prepared to respond to future disasters.



Participants met in lively groups to discuss the response following the explosion as well as brainstorm strategies for developing and supporting community preparedness. They identified the need to develop quick and reliable communication channels, including social media (we especially like that one), and to be able to coordinate a local response rather than relying solely on the city's emergency response system.

As Héctor Cordero-Guzmán, an East Harlem resident and professor at Baruch College School of Public Affairs, said during the wrap-up, "East Harlem prides itself on being a community that knocks on each others' door and checks in." It is clear from the passion participants showed for their community and supporting their neighbors that there is strong potential for carrying this work forward.

JustPublics@365 was there to collect stories of the people who were affected by the explosion. East Harlem resident Louise Burwell sat down with us to talk about her reactions to the disaster, public perception of East Harlem, and the community's commitment to their neighborhood. You can listen to a podcast of the interview [here](#).

The event was co-sponsored by the CUNY School of Public Health, the Silberman School of Social Work, the East Harlem Emergency Preparedness Collective, New York City OEM Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), Community Board Eleven of Manhattan, the School of Public Affairs at Baruch College, and JustPublics@365.

Blog post: <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/04/29/community-conversations-east-harlem/>





## Jeff Mays on East Harlem Recovering from the Explosion



Jeff Mays is a reporter/producer for [DNAInfo](#) covering Harlem. He has written about East Harlem after the March 12th gas explosion and sat down with me to talk about how the community is recovering six weeks after the

tragic incident.

You can listen to a podcast of the interview [here](#).

**Collette Sosnowy:** You've been covering East Harlem since the tragic explosion that killed eight people and injured many more. What has the impact of this disaster been on the neighborhood as a whole?

**Jeff Mays:** I think the neighborhood as a whole is still reeling from the loss of those eight lives. A lot of those people were known in the neighborhood, people recognized them, so I think the loss of life is probably one of the biggest issues they're still dealing with. There's still a boy in the hospital, Oscar Hernandez

who's recovering from his injuries. The prognosis is good and doctors are hopeful but he still has a long road ahead of him.

Also, one of the biggest impacts you can see in the neighborhood are that businesses are still struggling. There are some that have been able to re-open but not return back to normal. Other businesses have not opened and are waiting for insurance payments and payouts from Con Ed. Just walking around the neighborhood, it seems like everything is normal but when you take a look around it may not be. There are buildings still boarded up, you still see people stop to gawk at the site, you still see city officials around the site. The neighborhood has been greatly affected.

**Collette Sosnowy:** Obviously, the families that lived in those buildings or nearby are the ones most directly affected. Do you know are they doing at this point?

**Jeff Mays:** I've been told that several of the families have been put up by the city in temporary apartments that I believe are three to six month placements, somewhere around there. Another five or six of them have found their own accommodations. What's most interesting is that I've been told that all of those people from the building want to return to East Harlem and city officials have promised them that they will try to make that happen, which is a big deal. I heard a story about one survivor who's doing well now who has found another place who is getting donations of clothing and furniture and just trying to put her life back together, but those families obviously have a long way to go.

**Collette Sosnowy:** What's your sense about how the community is faring overall?

**Jeff Mays:** I think that East Harlem is such a resilient community, it's a diverse community with some very strong people. You have a lot of immigrants who have come to this country looking for a better life who are incredibly hard workers. What I've seen is that people in the community came together, not just in East Harlem but lots of people in Harlem. Once they heard about the accident, they got together and tried to organize different efforts, tried to collect clothing, collect food, collect money.

There are people who are specifically patronizing the businesses in the area. People are still devastated over the fact that eight people died and over the possibility that many more could have died, but overall people are really trying to get back to normal.

**Collette Sosnowy:** What are the most pressing issues that remain?

**Jeff Mays:** Right now housing is the biggest issue. As I said, we still have those people who lost everything when the two buildings collapsed. I believe all of the vacate orders in the surrounding buildings have been lifted, but I spoke to one woman who lives in a nearby apartment. She doesn't have windows yet. She still has piles of debris in her apartment, and it's been difficult for the landlord to fix that up. She's still struggling with that because her shelter housing ran out so she's

forced to be back in the apartment while they do these repairs, and she suffers from asthma.

It's still tough for a lot of the businesses in the area. I talked to a meat market on 116th street. They've been able to re-open but part of the problem is that the phone lines in that neighborhood are down, so they can't accept credit card payments, EBT payments, which make up a huge chunk of their business. They're open, but they're barely open, and they're struggling.

I've also heard about some immigrants who lost everything when the building collapsed and who are now having trouble getting documentation, which is difficult when they have nothing to prove who they are. Going to the DMV when you have nothing is incredibly difficult. I know some elected officials have stepped in and are trying to help those people.

Finally, I've heard some frustrations from people about getting money to replace furniture and clothing and other things that were lost in the explosion. There's been a lot of money raised from the Mayor's fund, over \$330,000, but I've heard some complaints from people in the neighborhood that that money has been slow to trickle down to them to help with very real, pressing needs.

**Collette Sosnowy:** Is there anything else you'd like to add?

**Jeff Mays:** It's been amazing to see how people in this community have responded to this crisis. People have come together and helped one another and are looking forward to moving past this.

I talked to the Urban Garden Center, which is a business right next to where the buildings collapsed and they were finally able to re-open. They were basically destroyed. They were one of four businesses that were heavily damaged or completely destroyed, so they are re-building and they're very optimistic about their future and that they're going to come out of this situation stronger than before.

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/04/28/jeff-mays-east-harlem-recovering-explosion/>



## How Should a Community Use Digital Media to Plan for Emergency Response?

With the widespread use of social media, people often learn about emergencies via Twitter faster than they do on breaking television news or from official government news sources. In fact, these traditional news sources often get their information from social media and follow up to verify and report information.



image-source

Obviously, the advantage of sharing information via social media is that the faster people have information, the faster they can respond. However, a disparate media landscape means that misinformation can also spread quickly, or that different sources may report different information, contributing to confusion.

This was the experience for some in the wake of the gas explosion in East Harlem. While emergency responders and established organizations like the Red Cross [adhered to their procedures](#), other groups like the Certified Emergency Response Team weren't [clear about their roles](#) or where the most reliable information should come from. Participants in the April 26th [community conversation](#) held at the CUNY School of Public Health, these volunteers among them, emphasized the need for reliable, central communication channels during an emergency.

One interesting approach recently put into place in New Orleans makes use of personal health data to identify people with special needs and tailor responses to them. The New York Times recently [reported](#) on a pilot program that used Medicare data to target vulnerable individuals who may need extra help, such as people using breathing equipment. Officials from the program visited people in their homes to gauge the accuracy of the information they were able to gather from records and to get people's reactions.

As journalist Sheri Fink wrote in the article,

**“the program is just one of a growing number of public and corporate efforts to take health information far beyond the**



While this program focused on visiting people in person, elsewhere, other digital and social media are being used to augment health care, such as text messages that alert parents that their children need to get vaccinations.



But making use of personal health records raises privacy about using “big data” to reveal information people many not want shared. The pilot program conducted in New Orleans adhered to privacy guidelines and, as the article described, most people who were approached welcomed the help. However, the widespread use of digital media and the kind and amount of data we share, inadvertently or otherwise, has shaken up our ideas and expectations about privacy. The Health Information Portability and Accountability Act, more commonly referred to as [HIPPA](#), and procedures of informed consent (i.e. all of those long forms you fill out at the doctor’s office) were designed to protect people’s personal health information from anyone other than themselves, their medical providers, and others with special permission, such as a family member. But those laws

were drafted before digital media became so integrated in our everyday lives and before we thought about the potentials and pitfalls of vast stores of data.

Could (or should) a program like the one in New Orleans work in East Harlem? How could it reach the whole community, especially those with special needs? Are there other models to follow? How could people's privacy be protected? How could clear communication channels be designed given the many outlets for information?

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/20/community-use-big-data-plan-emergency-response/>

## The Red Cross was an Integral Part of the East Harlem Emergency Response

In the wake of any disaster, emergency response typically includes the [American Red Cross](#), whose recognizable logo signifies a first stop for help. Volunteers respond quickly to set up communication centers, coordinate medical attention, arrange shelter for displaced people, provide food, and offer general support. This wide range of services requires tremendous coordination, which is particularly remarkable for an organization that is primarily staffed by volunteers. The explosion in East Harlem was no different. Red Cross volunteers went to work immediately and their work continued for a month afterward.



[image source](#)

According to a [follow up report](#) on their blog:

- The Red Cross Emergency Operations Center was in operation and fully staffed 24/7 from the time of the collapse on March 12 through Sunday, March 23.
- More than 338 adults and children were comforted and assisted by Red Cross caseworkers at NYC resident service centers.
- More than 200 volunteers from across the Greater NY Region responded to the call to help those affected.
- Over 20,000 meals, snacks and beverages were served to residents and first responders.
- Between March 12 and March 14, more than 70 residents overnighted at the Red Cross operated shelter at the Salvation Army facility (for a total of 121 shelter stays; i.e., some of those 70 residents stayed more than one night).
- Dozens of children received solace and safe haven at the Red Cross shelter, with a little extra help from the Good Dog Foundation therapy dogs in conjunction with the ASPCA.
- Nearly 500 blankets and personal hygiene comfort kits containing soap, toothbrushes, face clothes, toothpaste, deodorant and additional items were distributed.
- Red Cross Client Assistance staff connected with over 20 families in need of mental health and/or physical health support.

One experienced volunteer, Mary O'Shaunessy, spoke to us at a community conversation held at the CUNY School of Public Health on April 26, which brought together residents and community groups to discuss what happened following the explosion and how to better prepare for future emergencies. She shared her experience following the disaster.

You can listen to the podcast of this interview [here](#).

My name is Mary O'Shaunassey, I am a Response Manager for the American Red Cross of Greater New York. On the day of the explosion on Park Avenue, I was actually at work at my day job as a technology manager for a legal services organization that helps low income women.

As part of response management at the Red Cross, I receive four-hour reports on general activities. Regular fires, evacuations of unsafe apartments, and other small disasters. I received special messages from the Office of Emergency Management and the Red Cross management regarding this explosion. As soon as I could leave work at 5:30 or so, I headed to the Red Cross where we have an emergency operations center. This is an office that is staffed only during major disasters. There are 24 seats and each seat is occupied by a person with a very specific responsibility: for obtaining large quantities of food, for arranging the setup of a shelter, for arranging for licensed mental health professionals and physical health professionals to arrive at a scene, and so on.

My job as operations management was to make sure that each of those seats were filled or that each phone at each seat was

being answered. So it boils down to there are 24 phones, if it rings, answer it, respond appropriately, make the right decision. A lot of people don't understand that the Red Cross is not a government agency. We are 90% of us volunteers. The volunteers that were available were people who are retired, self-employed, or unemployed. That can really limit our ability to respond to people who are linguistically isolated. Our volunteers speak what they speak, they're available when they're available. We happen to be lucky that a couple of our people were native Spanish speakers. It is possible that at a fire you can have people that are so linguistically isolated that no one can help them. We have facilities for that, but it takes some time to set up. When I arrived at the emergency response center, I found it in full swing. People were already at the blast site. They were already working on a reception center. Until we have the capability, that is, a released building from the Board of Education, a custodian, and shelter staff, we have reception centers. And that's where clients — and I have to define the word client here — we never call people victims because part of the Red Cross role is to encourage people in recovery and calling people victims does not encourage that. We have clients, and we have survivors. Clients, survivors, and family members were already at the site looking for information.

The definition of a disaster is that it is unplanned, therefore information is always partial, immediate, and changeable. It's very difficult to set and manage expectations. We are also committed, individually, corporately, and internationally to client

confidentiality. It is very common for family members to call, and we were getting these calls, and people saying “my sister-in-law was there, my nephew was there, my cousin was there.” We cannot release that information. We did not have the information about the deceased but even if we had it, we cannot. We cannot give information about who is registered at a reception center, or a shelter. What would happen if a man were to come and say my “wife is there, I need to get to my wife” and we released that information and that woman had an order of protection against an abusive spouse. That’s something that we always have to protect people against. We cannot make assumptions about what people are telling us.

Most people are honest. Most people want to help. We have to be realistic, as well as optimistic in our view of human nature. So we were getting calls from volunteers, we were getting calls from partner agencies, we were getting requests for food. We try to purchase food from local vendors. We try to purchase all our supplies from local vendors. Surviving vendors may have decreased foot traffic. They may have decreased customer assistance because their customers have been displaced. By the Red Cross spending money in these local businesses, we’re keeping these small businesses in business. We’re keeping their employees able to contribute to the community and therefore the function of the society is continuing to go.

Very often we get complaints from people who say “I didn’t want my money to do go overhead.” Overhead is very interesting. If you think about wanting a report about where money goes, you

would say “yes I want a report.” A report needs a database, a list of expenses, and a list of donations. That computer needs electricity. The person who is putting that information in needs an office with electricity, running water, and maybe heat or air conditioning. The software needs to be purchased. That’s overhead. So it’s very interesting to try to explain what overhead means in terms of how people get their wishes in terms of donations.

We have overhead and we are not ashamed of that. We are very careful about donor dollars. In order for a Red Cross responder to go out by themselves, that is, to respond to a fire or a vacate, they have extensive training and extensive practice, and they undergo a background check. When I walk out to a fire, I can have as many as 30 debit cards, with a maximum value in the field of \$1,000. If I’m handing someone, as a manager, \$30,000 nominally in debit cards, I want to know who they are. That is why what we call spontaneous volunteers get asked to do really basic things: hand out water, hand out food. Trained responders go into people’s homes. We go into homes to evaluate damage, to determine how much cash assistance to give, whether to give hotel rooms. I would not want someone in my home that had not undergone a background check.

So these are the things that go into being a Red Cross responder. And it all gets really ramped up in the event of a large disaster. As you gain experience, it’s also important to know how to step back. I’ve been a volunteer for 7 years, I’m very experienced, and now I’m in management. I have to step



back and allow other people to learn how to do this. That can be hard because they're training and by definition, trainees make mistakes. Sometimes, in an event like this, a simple mistake can get very high profile very quickly, and it's very difficult to manage. We never send trainees out alone, but in a fast-moving, crowded event, they make decisions. Sometimes they're very good decisions and sometimes they could have been better. And we work on that in what we call hotflashes. After an event, and in some cases after every 24 to 48 hour period, we sit down together and figure out what went wrong, what went right, and how to keep doing what was right, and how to correct what was wrong. It's a continuous process.

I love volunteering for the Red Cross. I like going out, I like adulation, I like people saying "oh you do wonderful things." It's an ego charge, and I'll take that. Fires, disasters are an adrenaline charge, but you also have to balance that against the needs of the organization and the needs of the community. Those needs will go on long after I am able to respond to disasters.

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/16/red-cross-integral-part-east-harlem-emergency-response/>



## Faith Leaders Play an Important Role in East Harlem Following Explosion

With churches large and small throughout the neighborhood, religious faith is a hallmark of the East Harlem community. It was only natural that ministers, pastors, and chaplains were prevalent in the aftermath of the March 12 gas explosion, and that pews were [full](#) the following Sunday.



[image source](#)

Faith leaders were also present at a [community conversation](#) held at the CUNY School of Public Health on April

26, which brought together residents and community groups to discuss what happened following the explosion and how to better prepare for future emergencies.

Chaplain Alicia Goudif from the [United Chaplains State of New York](#), and who is active in NYPD Precinct 25's community board, shared with us her experience following the explosion.

You can listen to a podcast of the interview [here](#).

"I got a you call saying to look at channel one, and after that they told me you need to get out there because a lot of chaplains was out there at that time. We were just standing around seeing where we needed to help the most. I call myself the CEO. That means Chaplain Encouraging Others, so I was there to encourage others where their lives are concerned. If they need prayer, I give them prayer. If they need encouragement, I give them encouragement. I was there just helping out the police department, which I'm part of the Two Five Precinct Community Board Sergeant of Arms. So I was out there making sure everybody was safe. Everybody who needed help who were down and out to let them know it's going to be ok. It's not over until God says so. If they need help I give them my card to let them know I'm there whenever they need help. I was there following the explosion every day for those who needed my services."

Blog post: <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/13/faith-leaders-play-important-role-east-harlem-following-explosion/>

## Clear Communication is Vital in Emergency Response

Numerous volunteer groups joined in the recovery efforts following the deadly gas explosion in East Harlem, and while the community's most important needs were met, there was some confusion and disruptions in communication in the aftermath. This was part of what inspired the CUNY School of Public Health and several co-sponsors to organize a [community conversation](#) on April 26 to reassess community response efforts and discuss ways to improve emergency preparedness.



[image source](#)

Several local members of the Office of Emergency Management's volunteer [Certified Emergency Response](#)

[Team](#) (CERT) were there. CERT members are trained to assist with fire safety, medical aid, and search and rescue, among other support tasks. Most of the time, they serve as community educators about emergency preparedness. The explosion in East Harlem was the first time some of them had dealt with a major emergency. They encountered challenges with knowing their role and communicating with other organizations, and a consensus from the community conversation was the need for clear, reliable communication channels so that all responders know where to go for information.

East Harlem resident and CERT member Sam Goudif shared his experience following the explosion, and highlighted how a lack of clear communication made things more difficult, but also demonstrated the desire to help that is the motivation for these volunteers.

You can listen to the podcast of this interview [here](#).

My name is Sam Goudif, I'm a CERT member for the last two years. And during the disaster with the gas explosion, I was in Harlem. I was at home watching the news. Naturally, that was the main focus of the news and I knew right away that I would be mobilized. I got the call from the chief and was mobilized to go to 118th Street. Trafficking and crowd control were the main components of what we did. It was about 3 or 4 blocks away from the incident. We wore our masks, which were inadequate, but we had something. We had to double up on them, as a matter of fact. It was interesting that people responded quite well with us. We didn't have the issues of struggling or fighting with

anyone. As a matter of fact, people were helping out in a number of ways. It wasn't an issue with the crowd. The issue came about as the chain of command. What we were supposed to do in terms of where we were located. Who comes and goes, who was allowed and wasn't allowed. I was in the first responders. They were very visible, very active. We all tried to coordinate the best we could, the best we had. It was a very challenging moment for us, and a learning process for us. This is the biggest incident I've ever gotten involved in.

We had a discussion, we went over a lot of things [referring to the community conversation]. The main thing we discussed was equipment and being safe. That's the number one issue.

***If you aren't safe, you can't make anybody else safe. If you don't have communication you're really left out there in the field.***

So you need better communication than we did. Where were able to communicate, we were able to go over things, was at Hunter College, Zero One ground for us...to have community come together and actually support whatever needs were needed at the time, in terms of people coming in asking questions: where to go, where to get help. Facilitate them in the best way we knew how. And we did that. And that's something else we learned about. Red Cross, we coordinated with them. With the other organizations we had to find a place where we can do the best job we can do.

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/15/clear-communication-vital-emergency-response/>





## PART II

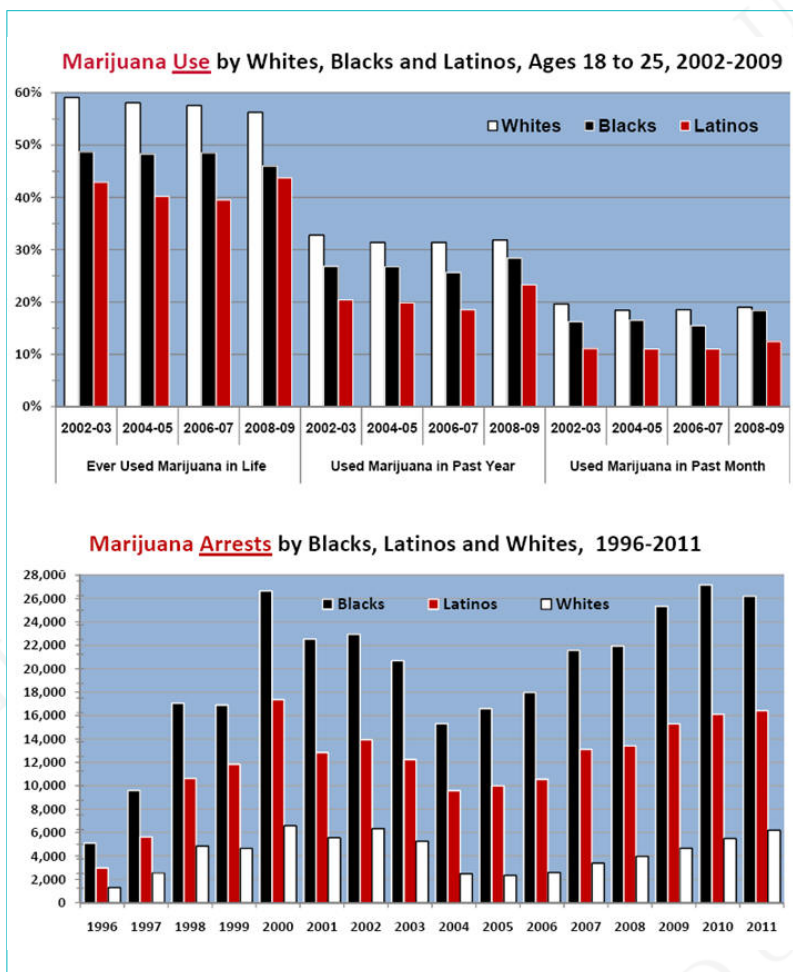
# Part II: Drug Policy Reform & Its Impact

Punitive drug laws heavily impact low-income, racial minority neighborhoods like East Harlem. A two-day symposium held May 1-2, 2014 at the New York Academy of Medicine, located in the area, included scholars, activists, policy experts, and local politicians talking about the past, present, and future of drug policies and reform efforts.



## Drug Policy Reform Symposium May 1-2

In his research, CUNY Professor Harry Levine documents [the racial pattern in marijuana use and arrest rates](#). The [data tell a story](#) that whites use marijuana at higher rates, yet blacks and Latinos in neighborhoods like East Harlem are arrested for marijuana at much higher rates.



(Image source)

Marijuana policy is not a new issue to New York City nor to East Harlem.

In 1939—on the heels of the national 1937 [Marihuana Tax Act](#), which established federal marijuana prohibition—New York City Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia called upon [The New York Academy](#)

[of Medicine \(NYAM\)](#) in East Harlem to produce a report about marijuana.



(Image-source)

[The La Guardia Committee Report: The Marihuana Problem in the City of New York](#) was published in 1944 as one of the nation's first systematic studies addressing many of the myths about marijuana, including: the alleged connection to "madness;" addictive potential; supposed role as a 'gateway' to other drug use; usage patterns; and potential relationship to crime and violence. The LaGuardia report concluded that *"the sociological, psychological, and medical ills commonly attributed to marihuana have been found to be exaggerated."*

To mark the 70th anniversary of the LaGuardia Report, [The Drug Policy Alliance \(DPA\)](#) and [The New York Academy of](#)

[Medicine \(NYAM\)](#) are hosting a symposium to look back on the LaGuardia Report in order to inform a rich discussion of contemporary drug policy reform efforts, both nationally and in New York. The symposium brings together scholars, activists, journalists and elected officials from East Harlem to explore the historical context and the ongoing public debates and actions about marijuana and drug policy reform.

*Marijuana & Drug Policy Reform  
in New York—The LaGuardia Report at 70*

May 1, 6–8 PM

May 2, 10 AM – 5 PM

A symposium hosted by

[The New York Academy of Medicine](#) and the [Drug Policy Alliance](#)

Program highlights include

Thursday, May 1

6:00 PM — The John K. Lattimer Lecture: [Richard Bonnie](#),  
University of Virginia.

Friday, May 2

10:00 AM — Melissa Mark-Viverito, Speaker, New York City  
Council

Panel Discussion: Drug Wars Past & Present.

*Moderator:* Paul Theerman, Ph.D., The New York  
Academy of Medicine

Jeffrion Aubrey, Speaker Pro Tempore, New York State  
Assembly

Jason Glenn, Ph.D., University of Texas Medical Branch,  
Galveston

Sam Roberts, Ph.D., Columbia University

Deborah Small, J.D., Executive Director, Break the Chains  
Bobby Tolbert, Community Leader and Board Member,  
VOCAL-NY

1:00 PM — Panel Discussion: The Contemporary Research

#### Agenda for Drug Use & Abuse

*Moderator:* Julie Netherland, Ph.D., Drug Policy Alliance

Helena Hansen, Ph.D., M.D., New York University

Julie Holland, M.D., psychiatrist and author

Amanda Reiman, Ph.D., Drug Policy Alliance, San Francisco

Maia Szalavitz, journalist

3:00 PM — Panel Discussion: New York Marijuana Policy

#### Reform in 2014

*Moderator:* Kassandra Frederique, M.S.W., Drug Policy Alliance

Richard Gottfried, New York State Assembly, 75th District

Hakeem Jeffries, United States Congress, 8th District

Harry Levine, Ph.D., Queens University

Art Way, J.D., Drug Policy Alliance, Denver

4:30 PM — Closing Presentation: [Dr. David T. Courtwright](#),

University of North Florida

5:00 PM – Final Remarks: gabriel sayegh, Drug Policy Alliance

\* \* \*

This event is **FREE** but registration is required for both days. To register for this event (required), click [here](#) (Thursday evening lecture) and [here](#) (Friday). The symposium takes place at the New York Academy of Medicine, located at 1216 Fifth Avenue at 103rd Street. You can also follow along on the hashtag #LGA70.

For more background on this important topic, see our “[From Punishment to Public Health](#),” available as an [eBook](#) and a [PDF](#).

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/04/30/marijuana-drug-reform/>



## **"Fighting Misinformation": Comments on Drug Policy from the "Marijuana and Drug Policy Reform in New York" Symposium**

On May 1st and 2nd, [The Drug Policy Alliance \(DPA\)](#) and [The New York Academy of Medicine \(NYAM\)](#) hosted a symposium titled "Marijuana and Drug Policy Reform in New York: 70 Years After The LaGuardia Committee Report," to look at the current state of drug policy. The goal of the conference was to foster a rich discussion of contemporary drug policy reform efforts nationally and in New York.

Over the next two days, JustPublics@365 will be posting some audio clips from the conference. Today's post includes audio from City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, Professor Richard Bonnie from the University of Virginia, Professor Samuel Roberts from Columbia University, and Deborah Small from Break the Chains.

"Elected officials need to be equipped with research and policy recommendations," declared [New York City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito](#) at the start of a day long discussion on marijuana and drug policy reform in New York.

She focused on ways to combat “misinformation campaigns based on myth not science” to make sure that drug policies are fair and just. Most arrests for marijuana are a corruption of the original intention of the law.

For her entire comments you can listen [here](#).

[Richard Bonnie](#) then opened up the conversation with comments on the Shafer Commission (aka National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse). He said that we have “over relied on prohibition and criminalization rather than using other tools to meet our objectives.” By looking at alcohol probation we can look at the regulatory practices that have already been put in place, he said. There was a “tremendous success” in discussions of decriminalization during the Shafer Commission and between 1973 and 1977 twelve states decriminalized marijuana.

You can listen to his full comments [here](#).

Following Richard Bonnie’s comments, [Paul Theerman, from The New York Academy of Medicine](#) led a panel discussion on “Drug Wars Past & Present.” Theerman opened the panel by refocusing the conversation on the “New York situation.”

The first speaker, [Samuel Roberts from Columbia University](#), said that “as a historian of drug policy this is a very interesting moment in which we find ourselves.” He told the room that it was the role of the historian to remind people of their past and that there were some things we should think about as we talk about current issues in drug policy. There are many ways of thinking about drug policy and Roberts urged the room not to focus too

heavily on medicalization because, like criminalization, there are problems with over medicalizing.

You can listen to his full comments [here](#).

Deborah Small, J.D., Executive Director, [Break the Chains](#), started by saying that it makes no sense to say we need more research to determine drug policy. The whole conversation around the need to protect children from drugs does not currently apply to other policies, like gun control and environmental hazards are much more dangerous than marijuana, she said. "The government is not protecting us from the right things," she concluded.

You can listen to her full comments [here](#).

**Blog post:** [http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/21/comments\\_on\\_drug\\_policy/](http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/21/comments_on_drug_policy/)



## PART III

# Part III: Gentrification and Affordable Housing in East Harlem

The rapid gentrification of low-income communities all across New York City has highlighted the wide income disparities among residents or, as current mayor Bill DeBlasio called it, “a tale of two cities.” Gentrification can also be described as the displacement of lower income residents and business owners as rents and property values rise. East Harlem is one of the few remaining so-called affordable neighborhoods in Manhattan, but it is quickly becoming too expensive for many people who have lived there for years. With one of the highest concentrations of public housing in the city these tensions are particularly visible. In this section, we discuss these concerns and highlight the work of two local documentary filmmakers, a community panel, and current news coverage.



## Housing in East Harlem

East Harlem is a neighborhood where the need for affordable housing is high, yet the availability of such housing is shrinking. The March 12 gas explosion destroyed homes on the site and damaged several nearby. What will replace them? The incident also highlighted the [aging infrastructure](#) of this part of the city. Will the government use public resources necessary to repair basic infrastructure, or will these be ignored until private renovations or redevelopments take them on?

In this exciting panel in about housing in East Harlem (from 2013), activists and scholars ask: what is the future of public housing? Why has “public housing” become criminalized? And, who has a right to housing?

You can view the video [here](#).



This event was featured in our Participatory Open Online Course (POOC) "Reassessing Inequality and Reimagining the 21st Century: East Harlem Focus," which took place in the Winter 2013 semester. All of the course content is archived [here](http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/04/24/housing-east-harlem/).

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/04/24/housing-east-harlem/>



## Whose Barrio? Latino Community Resists Gentrification

As gentrification rolls across New York City like a tsunami, residents of lower-income neighborhoods like East Harlem are both concerned and conflicted about the changes occurring around them. This “Latino core” has one of the [highest concentrations of public housing](#) in the country. According to educator-scholar-activist [Edwin Mayorga](#), approximately 31% of East Harlem residents in poverty, 45% are children and of those, 55% are Latino.



([image source](#))

With luxury housing replacing older tenements, residential and commercial rents on the rise, and more wealthy, primarily White, people moving in, current residents are already being priced out, and the flavor of the neighborhood is changing. As one resident interviewed in Ed Morales' documentary [Whose Barrio?](#) described, gentrification in East Harlem is the "urban removal" of Latino residents. The film, created by journalists Ed Morales and Laura Rivera's and released in 2009, examines the changes in East Harlem through the perspectives of several residents, some of whom oppose them and others who welcome it.

[You can watch the full film here.](#)

While East Harlem has already begun to experience these changes, there is a strong network of community groups, cultural institutions, tenants' rights organizations, and other activists working to advocate for the neighborhood. Furthermore, with gentrification impacting so many communities across the city, the issue is gaining the attention of the general population and policymakers. With a history of activism and an identity as a strong Latino community, many in East Harlem are actively resisting the pressures of gentrification. As the community response to recent tragic explosion and building collapse demonstrated, this neighborhood is a cohesive and engaged community that stands a chance to resist some of the destabilizing changes that accompany gentrification.

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/01/whose-barrio-community-resists-gentrification/>

## What does de Blasio's Affordable Housing Plan mean for East Harlem

On Monday, NYC mayor Bill de Blasio released his ambitious 10-year, \$41 billion [affordable housing plan](#), which proposes creating 80,000 new units of affordable housing and preserving 120,000 more city-wide. It emphasizes greater urban density, building up, and implementing some requirements (as opposed to current incentives) for developers to include affordable housing in new construction.



([image source](#))

What does this mean for East Harlem, a neighborhood whose affordable housing stock is dwindling as gentrification, particularly in the form of newly-constructed luxury housing, raises the overall market value of apartments.

According to a 2012 [report](#) issued by Manhattan Community Board 11, which represents the neighborhood, most East Harlem residents live in some form of rent-regulated housing. East Harlem has one of the highest concentrations of public housing in the city and much of the remaining housing stock has been rent-regulated. However, as the report suggests, the expiration of government subsidies will likely price current residents out of their homes. A third of rent regulations will progressively expire by 2040.

City-wide, rents have gone up nearly 40 percent in the last 20 years, while renters' wages have risen less than 15 percent. Nearly a third of the city's households who rent pay more than 50 percent of their income in rent and utilities. According to the 2012 U.S. Census, the median income of East Harlem households is \$31,444.

Currently, despite incentives such as tax breaks for new construction and financial assistance to property owners to keep their buildings from turning market-rate, more rent-regulated apartments are lost to deregulation than new ones are built ([source](#)).

The strategies proposed in the 2012 Community Board 11 report may dovetail with the Mayor's proposed plan. The Community Board 11 report recommends coordinating efforts to maintain

the supply of rent-regulated housing, and working with building owners to promote continued participation in programs that will preserve affordable housing. If successful, de Blasio's plan will preserve the current supply of affordable housing and both regulate and incentivize the creation of new stock. However, how the plan will be funded and implemented remain to be seen and it's a question of how much affordable housing will be left to preserve in East Harlem and how many opportunities there will be to intervene in new development by that point.

The mayor's report highlights [El Barrio's Artspace P.S. 109](#), which is an affordable housing project for artists, as an example of adapting existing structures into housing. This project was developed by Minneapolis-based developer Artspace with grant funding from the Warhol Foundation for the Arts. While this unique project may not be able to be replicated at a scale that meets the community's overall needs, it is a start.



Reclaiming property for housing and building on vacant lots is what activist organization [Picture the Homeless](#) has been vying for. Working with the Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Development, the group identified enough

abandoned and unoccupied space in the city to house all of the homeless, outlined in this 2012 [report](#). In their study of city housing data, they found a total of 143 vacant buildings and lots in East Harlem that could house 9,252 people. Perhaps implicitly acknowledging the organization's exhaustive work, the mayor's report call for conducting a comprehensive survey of all the vacant sites in the city, potentially corroborating their data and analysis.

Overall, the plan has the potential to address at least some of the community's urgent housing needs and ideally help shape a healthier community development over the usual displacement-through-gentrification.

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/08/de-blasios-affordable-housing-plan-mean-east-harlem/>

**PART IV**

**Part IV: East Harlem  
Scholar-Activists**







A key focus of JustPublics@365 is on the work of scholar-activists. Someone who exemplifies this model of engaged scholarship is Lynn Roberts, an Assistant Professor at the CUNY School of Public Health. Her broad range of work and research has included reproductive justice, youth development and juvenile justice, the prevention of intimate partner violence, models of community organizing for social justice; and the intersection of race, class and gender and its influence on health disparities. In this series on East Harlem, we'll feature a number of scholar-activists.

Listen to a recording of the interview [here](#).

**Collette Sosnowy:** Thanks for talking with me today, Lynn. Can you share a little bit about your work in East Harlem and in the South Bronx?

**Lynn Roberts:** I suppose my work in East Harlem began actually many years ago when I was also teaching at Hunter College, in their public health program. I developed a course about 12 years ago focused on initially the South Bronx because I have been doing some work there and expanded it to include Harlem, not just East Harlem but Central and West as well, from

the perspective of people who lived and worked there, so that you could look at it through various disciplines and also through lived experiences rather than just an academic lens and then updated the course when we moved into the community here of East Harlem in Fall 2012.

That brought me back to East Harlem with fresh eyes and in a different period of time in its, I guess, evolution, depending on how you look at it because a lot of changes in the community in terms of real estate and gentrification and then our being here and being able to reach out again and form relationships with those who are doing interesting and exciting community work here.

**Collette Sosnowy:** What are the parallels between South Bronx and East Harlem?

**Lynn Roberts:** They're each very rich communities and one of the things that I think was highlighted in the course was just the diversity. I choose the South Bronx and Harlem because they both represented what I think are perceived by the general public as iconic communities.

People here at South Bronx, they hear Harlem they might have a preconceived notion about what each one of those communities represent if they haven't been there or lived there. I wanted to demystify and clarify the richness of each of these communities, not just as whatever someone's preconceived notion of what might be described as a low income or an urban community is like. They each have rich histories of growth and decline of

innovation in terms of the arts and just really rich histories in terms of the larger American story.

I think it's important for all of us to know about that these communities from those who know best and bringing the community into the classroom I think is really important. A large part of wanting to revisit the course was to, I guess, dispel some of the myth and even some of the apprehension and fear of that, some of my fellow colleagues and students had about being in East Harlem in particular, fear of crime, fear of some type of danger, which I didn't experience and I didn't think was any different than other parts of New York City.

I thought if they knew more about the community, that would widen their lens of working in any community and approach any community with eyes wide open and with ears more attentive to hearing from those community voices.

**Collette Sosnowy:** How is health a social justice issue?

**Lynn Roberts:** Very much so. I think that social justice is necessary for health. When you have social justice you have health and wellness, all the positive attributes we associate with that. You have clean air. You have clean water. You have equity in terms of resources such as education, employment ... You have a diversity of ideas and background. You have democracy. You have people who get to decide what will happen in their community, in their society, in their country and that is fundamentally good in terms of these people overall well-being but also just how they also feel about themselves and how much they feel willing to participate civically and have raised

expectations for themselves, for their families, for their entire communities. I think they're intertwined. I think they're one in the same. I don't think you can have one without the other.

**Collette Sosnowy:** As you were talking about before, some academics are hesitant to get involved in controversial issues like those confronting East Harlem. What do you say to critics who might question your "objectivity" as a scholar?

**Lynn Roberts:** First of all, I probably identify first as an activist and second, or simultaneously, as a scholar. They're both a part of who I am. I don't think scientists or scholars really can practice objectivity. I think all questions are based on our lived experiences, our exposures. What we consider valid depends on that. We're all subjective in terms of how we pursue knowledge and what knowledge we consider important.

That's not a quest of mine. I'm probably more inclined to just disclose what my subjectivities are, whatever my biases are as I know them. Not all of them are known to me but being more accepting of that, I'm much more inclined to be accepting of that in others. I'm much more inclined to engage with others in a way that I think, maybe it's an objective but is open. If I'm open I can probably look at things and consider another point of view in a way that makes me more accessible and makes others with whom I interact more accessible to sharing.

I see it as an advantage in terms of my scholarship. How that plays out on the academy depends on, again, someone else's perspective on that, so that can be a challenge.

**Collette Sosnowy:** A major focus of JustPublics@365 is bringing together academics and activists and journalists in ways that promote social justice through civic engagement and greater democracy. What sort of “lessons learned” do you have from your experience as an academic / activist in going into some of these fields that are usually more in the area of activism and journalism?

**Lynn Roberts:** First and foremost I go as a listener but that doesn't mean that I don't also bring who I am and my own point of view. It means sometimes hearing first and then hoping that we all come to some conclusions where I'm also listened to. I know that as an academic, in some instances, my voice might be given more credence than someone else's, so needing to balance that and have some humility around that is really important.

Then using my voice may be perceived a greater agency or power, if you will. Effectively but again, in collaboration, not in speaking for or instead of others. I can contribute to in ways that others might not but I don't really distinguish doing that in or outside of the academy. I really don't. I think a lot of those lines are rather artificial.

There's a lot of wisdom everywhere. There's expertise everywhere and it's just realizing that and when you approach it that way you tend to get a lot more done and people, once you dispel that notion of difference ... I just find it's just really easy to work with people.

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/04/24/lynn-roberts-scholar-activist-social-justice/>

## Edwin Mayorga on Public Engagement and Digital Access in East Harlem

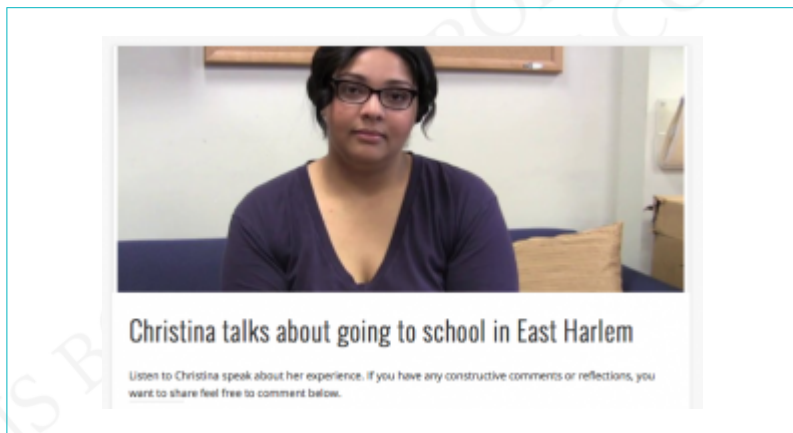


[Edwin Mayorga](#) describes himself as an educator-scholar-activist of color, as well as a parent, organizer, and doctoral candidate in Urban Education at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His recent work facilitating a digital

participatory action research project explored how NYC education policies during the Bloomberg administration (2001-2013) have impacted “Latino core” communities like East Harlem. He and two youth co-researchers, Mariely Mena and Honory Peña, both East Harlem residents, designed and conducted the project, which they called [Education in our Barrios](#).

The goal of the project was to gather the perspectives of parents, youth, community leaders, activists, educators, and educational leaders who have been connected to public education in East Harlem/El Barrio. The team recorded video

interviews, digitally recorded stories (using [vojo.co](https://vojo.co)), collected archival materials, census data, and policy documents. This data informed their critical analysis of educational and related social policies to document how several generations of people see and experience public education reform in East Harlem.



While the researchers wanted to use digital technologies as a way to connect to the community, the challenges they posed highlighted how the landscape of digital access, which is among other structural inequalities, impacts residents at both the individual level and larger social and economic level.

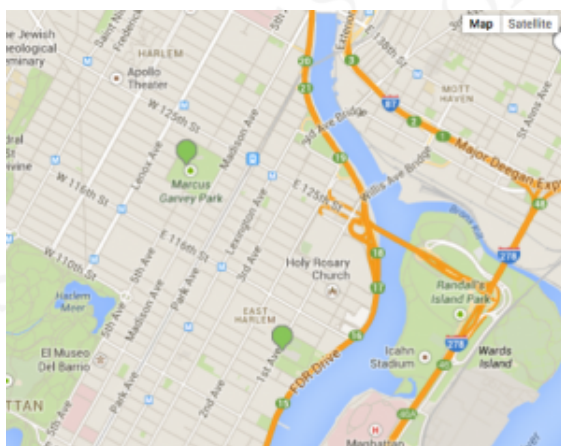
In a recent [talk](#) at the CUNY Graduate Center, Edwin talked about some the challenges of engaging the community with digital media, and understanding how they make use of it. He said,

**“The digital does introduce new ways of engaging the world but not everyone is quick to adopt those practices.”**

One simple, yet significant obstacle to adopting digital networked technologies is access and affordability. In recent



years, New York has become a more digital city, but for whom? City parks have become increasingly wi-fi accessible, but as Edwin pointed out, most of the park land in East Harlem is on Randall's Island, which is both less accessible and becoming increasingly privatized. Free wi-fi spots in East Harlem and many other low-income residential neighborhoods, are few, as this map from the [NYC Parks department](#) illustrates.



In an area like East Harlem, many may not be able to afford in-home broadband access, making free, publicly-available networks that much more

important. In the neighborhood, the public library and McDonald's are the primary spaces that have it. Despite being a vital community resource, the library suffers from disrepair and, like all NYC public libraries, decreased funding which cause them to shorten hours and limit services. A recent [article](#) on NY City Lens, an online news site, compared the recently renovated Washington Heights library and the Aguilar Library, which is located in East Harlem. The article highlights the great demand

for access to library computers and the frustrations users experience from long waits, time limits, and slow access.

Mayor Bill de Blasio called attention to the problem of uneven access as an issue of equality, social justice and economic mobility during his campaign and has said that the issue is a top priority for his administration. He has said that he will use the city's regulatory, purchasing and franchising powers to pressure Verizon and other providers to increase access and lower costs to consumers.

In the meantime, the New York City Housing Authority has two [vans](#) equipped with eight computers and a printer, as well as high-speed wireless access that travel to parts of the city where connectivity is low. Hopefully, this innovative project, and other efforts to increase access and create a public network, will begin to balance out this inequality.



[image source](#)

**Blog post:** <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/05/30/edwin-mayorga-public-engagement-digital-access-east-harlem/>