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New York's New Strollervilles

In search of affordable housing, young families are putting down roots in places like Sunset Park in Brooklyn and Morris Park in the Bronx.

By STEFANOS CHEN

A few years ago, the gateways to the courtyard of Peter Bracichowicz's co-op in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, were empty. Now, there are wall-to-wall baby strollers.

"I actually counted them: 10 on one side, eight on the other," said Mr. Bracichowicz, a Corcoran agent who used to live in the complex.

"And that's just in the entrance."

With its namesake sprawling green space and playgrounds, [Sunset Park](#) has always welcomed families. That the census district, which includes nearby Windsor Terrace, had the third highest birthrate in the city last year is more surprising. It joins a list of unassuming neighborhoods, mostly outside of Manhattan, where new and growing families are putting down roots — or at least seeking respite from runaway housing prices in more expensive areas.

How long these neighborhoods remain affordable is another matter. Even as

most local markets cool, bidding wars are still common in a number of these fast-growing family outposts, and prices are climbing. In some precincts, stroller-fication is already rattling some longtime residents.

Borough Park and [Kensington](#) in Brooklyn topped the list in 2017, with 11.5 percent of women in the area giving birth that year, according to an analysis of new census data. That district was followed by the Belmont/East Tremont area in the Bronx (9 percent); Sunset Park, Brooklyn (8.5 percent); Brownsville, Brooklyn (7.7 percent); and Ozone Park, Queens (7.4 percent). For comparison, the citywide birthrate was 4.6 percent.

The five-building complex, called Prospect Plaza, was developed by Oceanhill LLC, in collaboration with the nonprofit NYC Housing Partnership and with funding from the city, and it was entirely reserved for residents making less than 60 percent of the New York area's median income. Two-bedrooms, for example, were designated for families making about \$30,000 to \$42,000 a year. More than 100,000 applications were submitted for 394 units, said Gale D. Kaufman, of Duvernay + Brooks, one of the developers.

Some areas, like Borough Park and the Upper West Side, were already well-established family neighborhoods, but most areas that topped the list were relatively new to the stroller set.

The Times compared the share of women who gave birth in 55 census districts, which typically include more than one neighborhood and roughly coincide with the city’s 59 community districts. Among the areas with the highest share of births, four were in Brooklyn, three were in the Bronx, two were in Queens and only one — the Upper West Side — was in Manhattan. Compared to 2012, six of the districts were new to the top 10.

But families planning their next move should beware: Baby booms, like housing bubbles, can go bust. The most fruitful area in 2012, Crown Heights South, Prospect-Lefferts and Wingate, in central Brooklyn, had a 9.5 percent birthrate, the highest in the city. But by 2017, the district had fallen 36 ranks, to a birthrate of 3.7 percent. The drop-off coincided with one of the sharpest price hikes in the city: The median sales price in the area more than doubled, from \$420,000 in 2012 to \$865,000 in 2017, according to StreetEasy, the real-estate data website.

“The prices have gone crazy, that’s what happened,” said Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociology professor at Queens College and the president of [Social Explorer](#), a research firm that analyzed the data. As bargain hunters spread farther along mass transit routes, they find comparatively cheaper housing, but push prices higher in the process. Crown Heights is an example of what can happen when word of affordable housing spreads: Prices soar, and the next wave of buyers, including new families, has to look elsewhere.

Affordability is not the only factor that influences the shifting birthrate, Dr. Beveridge said. In Borough Park, for instance, the consistently high birthrate can be partially attributed to the large Hasidic community, whose members tend to have more children. But there is also evidence that families getting priced out of wealthier areas are leading the shift.

Martine Langatta, 30, an artist, and her husband, Julian Cavin, 28, were living with family in Park Slope, Brooklyn, before the arrival of their son, Valentine, who is now 10 months old. Mr. Cavin, who was born and raised in the neighborhood, wanted to stay there, but the couple could not afford anything in the area.

“Even though it’s such a huge city, there aren’t a lot of options,” said Mr. Cavin, an owner of the Williamsburg branch of the Italian specialty store Regina’s Grocery.

Highest Birth Rates in New York City

Community districts* in New York City with the highest proportion of women who gave birth in 2017, and how prices in those districts changed from 2012 to 2017.

2017 district rank	Birth rate	Median sale price	Price increase since 2012	2012 rank
1 Borough Park, Kensington Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn	12%	\$875,000	+46%	2
2 Belmont, Crotona Park East, East Tremont, Bronx	9	\$405,000	+47	8
3 Sunset Park, Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn	9	\$990,000	+80	10
4 Brownsville, Ocean Hill, Brooklyn	8	\$570,220	+57	20
5 Howard Beach, Ozone Park, Queens	7	\$479,495	+43	34
6 Bedford Park, Fordham North, Norwood, Bronx	7	\$212,626	+54	3
7 Pelham Parkway, Morris Park, Laconia, Bronx	6	\$452,900	+22	54
8 Briarwood, Fresh Meadows, Hillcrest, Queens	6	\$438,048	+10	27
9 Sheepshead Bay, Gerritsen Beach, Homecrest, Brooklyn	6	\$550,000	+28	11
10 Upper West Side, West Side, Manhattan	6	\$1,280,000	+42	36
All New York City Districts	6	\$619,500	+42	

Their agent, Ugo Russino of Warburg Realty, suggested Sunset Park, about 20 blocks south of where they were living, where homes traded at a fraction of the cost. Last year, they bought a one-bedroom on the park for \$400,000; a similar home in Park Slope might have cost \$600,000 to \$700,000, Mr. Russino said.

The neighborhood's diversity, with thriving Hispanic and Chinese communities, was a major draw for the couple, whose morning routine now involves walking past 7 a.m. soccer games and Tai-chi classes in the park.

The move to more far-flung neighborhoods also reflects a fundamental question for some: Who needs Manhattan?

"How the city functions and flows, and how it was set up two generations ago, is kind of getting turned on its head," said Brad Bateman, an agent with Stribling & Associates, who has noticed an uptick in the number of young families living and also working in Brooklyn.

Maria Suarez, 30, and her husband, Franco Salgado, 25, work in Red Hook, near the industrial Brooklyn waterfront, where Ms. Suarez is the production manager at EFS Designs, a textile and screen printing shop. They were renting a one-bedroom apartment nearby for \$1,750 a month, but with their first child on the way, they needed more space, Ms. Suarez said, and the limited two-bedroom options they saw were too expensive, too small or both.

Now the couple lives in a two-bedroom ground-floor apartment in a Sunset Park brownstone, where they pay \$2,200 a month — around \$300 a month less than they would have paid for any of the two-bedrooms they saw in Red Hook. They have already scoped out a number of child-friendly perks: rows of nearby markets and mom-and-pop restaurants, a public pool that was packed this summer and friendly neighbors. (Their daughter, Isabella, was born in early October.)

Also, "a lot of lovely grandmas," Ms. Suarez said. "They're super-sweet and always ask how I am. They seem to know a lot about the kids in the neighborhood."

How long Sunset Park will remain an affordable option for young families priced out of other parts of Brooklyn or Manhattan is unclear. In the past five years, "prices have basically doubled," said Mr. Bracichowicz, the Corcoran agent.

The trend is citywide. In a May study, StreetEasy found that, between 2010 and 2017, the share of two-bedroom apartments listed for less than \$1 million [fell by more than 50 percent](#), said Grant Long, the site's senior economist. But that is starting to change, Mr. Long said, as more developers build relatively affordable units, including two-bedrooms, now that the [luxury market is softening](#).

Other neighborhoods are just beginning to heat up. The area of [Morris Park](#), Pelham Parkway and Laconia, in the Bronx, had the second-lowest birthrate in the city in 2012, with fewer than 2 percent of women there giving birth. In the 2017 survey, the area's birthrate had jumped to 6.3 percent, the seventh highest in the city.

“Not a day goes by that we don’t count our blessings, that we bought when we bought,” said Brenda Morales, 42, who works in real estate financing. She and her husband, Richard Velez, bought a three-bedroom home in Morris Park in the mid-\$500,000s this year. From 2012 to 2017, the median sales price in the area rose to roughly \$453,000, up 22 percent, according to StreetEasy.

Ms. Morales, a Bronx native, Mr. Velez and their nine-year-old son, Ian, left a “cooped-up” apartment in Co-op City for the suburban feel of Morris Park. She said their new block has a number of families with young children, and she expects the area to get pricier soon: A Metro-North station is being planned nearby, which will make the commute to Manhattan faster.

“There are always people asking me” for real estate leads, said Dan Scaglione, an owner of Scaglione Brothers’ Bakery & Deli and a part-time agent with the Pantiga Group real estate brokerage. He joined the company five years ago, in part because of the surging demand for housing in the area, which has [very low turnover](#). “I could get five or six calls a day on one sign,” he said, referring to for-sale signs in the neighborhood.

Developers are also paying attention. The Horizon Group is building a 63-unit condo at 264 Webster Avenue, in the Kensington area of Brooklyn, part of the district with the highest birthrate in the city. David Marom, the company’s managing partner, said he was drawn to the area by the number of schools and family amenities nearby.

In an unusual move, the project revised its plans to build 72 rental units in favor of fewer, larger condos, including several two- and three-bedroom apartments, on the strength of the family market, he said. Prices will start at \$325,000 for a studio and \$895,000 for a three-bedroom. The project is also expected to qualify for city tax abatements that builders in some more expensive neighborhoods can no longer claim. As a result, buyers could pay as little as \$4.55 a month in taxes the first year.

Low monthly costs were one of the reasons Sharlene Kemler, 35, bought a two-bedroom co-op in Kensington for \$440,000 in 2016. She and her husband, Jordan, pay about \$600 a month in maintenance in a recently updated building, whereas monthly fees in Park Slope, at their last home, could be hundreds more. Not to mention that they couldn’t compete with buyers there.

“We were getting outbid,” said Ms. Kemler, a philanthropy consultant who works with charities. “You’re competing with 10 other people, and some are coming in all-cash.”

The best part about their new home, she said, is that their one-year-old son, Milo, will grow up with friends that have diverse backgrounds. The area has a mix of East Asian, Uzbeki, Russian and Hispanic residents, among others. Pricier Park Slope, Ms. Kemler said, can feel more homogeneous by comparison.

The push toward more affordable neighborhoods, however, underscores a persistent housing problem: Incoming bargain hunters are raising the prices for longtime residents.

Brownsville, in Brooklyn, for instance, was part of the district that had the fourth highest share of births in 2017, a large jump from 2012, when it came in 20th place. But it is also one of the poorest areas on the list. The median household income there last year was less than \$20,300.

“It’s like gentrification refugees,” said Gerard D. Miller Jr., a housing counselor with Brooklyn Neighborhood Services, a nonprofit group. “East New York is rapidly developing. Canarsie is up. Now Brownsville is the last-ditch effort for affordability.”

Gaylene Durrant, 43, was getting priced out of her two-bedroom apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, where she had lived for years with her two sons. Two years ago, she qualified for a below-market-rate apartment in a new complex in Brownsville.

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Ms. Durrant, who works in retail services, now pays about \$900 a month, after additional subsidies, for a two-bedroom apartment in one of the buildings.

She has since revisited her old apartment in Bed-Stuy, where the landlord did major work after she moved out and increased the rent significantly. “You wouldn’t believe how nice it is now,” she said.

It is not just the housing that has gotten more expensive in her old neighborhood, she said, but also the services: Her local grocery was recently renovated, and when it reopened the prices were noticeably higher.

Sometimes she wonders where she would have gone if she had not entered the affordable housing lottery. “If push came to shove, I probably might have moved to Florida,” she said.