"Good Schools": Ethnographic Accounts of NYC's Specialized High School Admissions Process

INTRODUCTION

As I began visiting Sabin School of Science, a public middle school in New York City's Lower East Side, I found myself caught in the annual frenzy that takes place among the school's 8th grade classrooms: the high school admissions process. Each week that I returned, I was immersed in conversations about potential schools to attend in the fall—in particular, a small set of public high schools that students had dubbed "good schools". It was hearing this phrase repeatedly that focused my observations on the admissions process for New York City's specialized high schools. Admissions decisions are based on a single standardized test for this network of eight schools (nine, including LaGuardia, which uses auditions and transcripts in lieu of the test). For this study, I was interested in how conversations about the test and admission to "good schools" reveal and reinforce the academic climate these students experience, and the values that instills. Those conversations speak to perceptions of exclusivity and prestige, the role of privilege in school choice, and the pressure exerted on students.

I was surprised on my first visit to Sabin, when I realized within moments of entering the class that I could count the number of Black and Latinx students on one hand. I was made aware throughout my fieldwork that Sabin's classrooms were far less diverse than the NYCDOE's total student body. As a follow-up study, I plan to conduct fieldwork with the same observation focus at another public middle school in a district with a larger Black/Latinx presence. By comparing my data from two different districts, I hope to contrast students' experiences with the high school admissions process. Moreover, I aim to use that comparison to better understand how those experiences connect to the specialized high schools' exclusion of certain demographics. Finally, my overall vision is that these studies together will inform a broader movement toward equity and access in New York City schools.

RELATED LITERATURE

Looking at the movement toward school choice on a national level may help us to understand how New York City's specialized high school system was generated. *School choice* is the alternative to the traditional practice of zoning a student into a school based on their place of residence. Instead, families choose among multiple schools for their child. With the emergence of technical schools, gifted programs, magnet schools, and charter schools, school choice has branched out into numerous methods of school assignment. Minow's theoretical framework for understanding these divergent modes of school choice categorizes existing systems as either "school choice as collective character" or "school choice as private consumption"[1]. "School choice as collective character" aims to differentiate schools in a way that serves all students in the system regardless of which school they attend. Conversely, "school choice as private consumption" frames education as a commodity for the individual, rather than the public as a whole. It is within this category that the extrema of New York City's specialized high schools fall. For these eight schools, admission depends solely on the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), which consists of math and English language arts sections. Students applying to any of the schools in this network must take the test in the fall of their 8th grade year. They rank the schools that they're applying to in order of preference, and their acceptance to one of those schools is dependent on their performance in comparison to other test takers. Preference rankings based on prestige, schools' resources, and other alleged measurements of quality create a hierarchy among the schools in the network. The autonomy that the private consumption model allots families concentrates their focus on a very small number of schools at the top of that hierarchy, and honors those with the means to gain admittance to one.

[1] Minow, M. "Confronting the Seduction of Choice: Law, Education, and American Pluralism", 842.

Minow describes New York City as a site of "self-segregation": though current admissions procedures are not legally recognized as discriminatory, the specialized schools can attract or divide students by identity factors that have historically been linked to inequality, such as race, immigration status, gender, dis/ability, and income[2].

Thinking about how the use of the SHSAT has been critical in the reproduction of inequality along these multiple axes led me toward existing research on the fallacies of the test itself. Extensive studies have been conducted on the test, its methodological faults, its predictive validity, and its potential for revision. Feinman analyzes the statistical methods that the SHSAT employs, pointing out flaws in the scaling of raw scores and derivation of each specialized high school's "cut-off score" (the test score of the lowest-ranking student admitted into a given school)[3]. According to Feinman, students who understand those flaws gain a huge test-taking advantage. Those students, he claims, often receive that knowledge from select social networks or expensive tutoring services. Collectively, Feinman and Minow speak to the presence of *privilege* and the overlooked role of social, cultural, or economic capital in a process that's praised as meritocratic. In this system, just as students select their schools, those schools must select their students. But what are schools selecting *for*? Corcoran et al. investigate this by dissecting the whole of the admissions process, or "middle-school-to high-school pipeline", into four points: application, admission, acceptance, and matriculation[4]. The authors show how at each point, groups bearing particular identity factors are whittled down, eventually resulting in their drastic underrepresentation in the student body compositions of specialized high schools. The numbers of Black, Latinx, English Language Learner, free or reduced price lunch, or special

[2] Minow, M., 835.
[3] Feinman, J. *High Stakes, but Low Validity? A Case Study of Standardized Tests and Admissions into New York City Specialized High Schools*, 6.
[4] Corcoran, S. P., and C. Baker-Smith. "Pathways to an Elite Education: Application, Admission, and Matriculation to New York City's Specialized High Schools.", 256.

education students admitted to those schools were nowhere near representative of their numbers in the initial applicant pool—bearing in mind that those demographics are less likely to take the SHSAT in the first place. This phenomenon coincides with the massive expansion of white, and even more considerably, Asian, populations at each point in the pipeline. In 2013, white students comprised 13.5% of students in the New York City public school system. Yet their presence grew to 18% of specialized high school applicants, and 29.1% of accepted students. For Asian students, these figures are even more drastic: the group represented 14.2% of the NYCDOE's total student body, 29.1% of specialized high school applicants, and 54% of accepted students[5].

One noteworthy identity factor that Corcoran et al. studied was students' residence borough, which heavily correlated to race and income as a result of the city's racial and economic residential segregation. Although Bronx residents constitute 23.1% of the NYCDOE student body, they made up 16.5% of specialized high school applicants, and only 6.1% of accepted students[6]. This is in spite of the fact that two of the specialized high schools (Bronx Science and The High School of American Studies at Lehman College) are located in the Bronx. By employing the SHSAT, specialized high schools currently select against some of the populations that the NYCDOE has notoriously underserved.

METHODS

I gained access to Sabin School of Science as a TA, placed by the Barnard Education Department. I was sent there to shadow Jack, an 8th grade humanities teacher, and observe his pedagogical methods for teaching reading comprehension. After a couple of weeks spent analyzing his lesson plans, I began to pay closer attention to his students. Eventually, as I started

[5] Corcoran, S. P., and C. Baker-Smith, 266.
[6] Corcoran, S. P., and C. Baker-Smith, 266.

to take note of their verbal conversations, I became fascinated by the class's most popular topic of discussion: what high school each student would attend next year. Observing Sabin students allowed me to get extremely close to the public high school admissions process—specifically, that of New York's specialized high schools, which constituted many students' "top choices". I both overheard and engaged in countless conversations about the SHSAT, school preferences, and parental pressure. I witnessed Sabin students' variety of admissions advantages, garnered from both their families and their school. In the spring term I will get to see the process through to the end, as these 8th graders enroll in high schools across the city. The classroom access that I was fortunate enough to be granted provided a valuable standpoint from which to observe the individuals most directly affected by specialized high school admissions policies.

During the fall term of the 2018 school year, I spent Fridays in Jack's classroom. On those days, I got to sit in on both his general education section and Incorporated Co-Teaching section (in which half of the class are considered special education students). Students talked to me unabashedly about their teachers, their peers, and their lives at home. They were happy to contribute to my documentation of non-traditional intelligence forms, and also excited to talk about their own passions and accomplishments. It was from these informal interviews that I derived most of my data. Being a participant-observer allowed me to ask my own questions and nudge conversations toward my observation focus. While being able to hear students' personal experiences and integrate them into my findings was a major advantage of my position and data collection methods, I also recognized the limitation of context-specificity in my research. I studied two classes, within one school, within one district, within New York City. The fact that Sabin is a screened school suggests that its demographics may not reflect those of District 2, let alone those of New York City schools collectively. This disparity is confirmed by NYCDOE data (see Figure 1). Consequently, my observations are far from generalizable. My findings

differ drastically from what researchers have uncovered in other school districts, where the majority of students don't apply to the specialized high school system in the first place[7].

Figure 1: Public School Demographics in the 2017-18 School Year

	% Asian	% Black	%Latinx	%White	%Other	% receiving free or reduced price lunch
Sabin School of Science	16	2	11	61	10	11
District 2	22	15	32	26	5	54
New York City	16	26	41	15	2	74

Source: New York City Department of Education Information and Data Overview

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

I.) "Good Schools"

Students' excitement and apprehension over where they would attend high school next fall dominated classroom conversations. To them, school assignment seemed to be the primary determinant of whom they'd be friends with, what programs they'd have access to, what colleges they'd eventually be admitted to, and ultimately, how their futures would unfold. As I engaged in these conversations, I watched Minow's theory of "school choice as private consumption" materialize. Each student and their family sought the high school that could best serve them, or provide them with whatever educational components they deemed essential. Those components took the forms of specialized curricula, exceptional facilities, an abundance of resources and finances, or sheer prestige. A school with such offerings was colloquially referred to as a "good school"—a phrase that became a major inductive code in my study. I encountered a more comprehensive explanation of "good" when asking Lewis, one of Jack's students, about his own school choice process—namely, his interest in filmmaking and what that meant in terms of his educational future.

> "Art schools?" Lewis pauses, scrunching his face in thought. "I don't know if I would necessarily want to go to one. You'll end up with connections, but I'm more

[7] Corcoran, S. P., and C. Baker-Smith, 266.

> interested in becoming an indie creator." If he were to pursue filmmaking through a high school program, his top choices would be at Frank Sinatra School of the Arts or Art and Design High School. "But that might be on the side. My goal is just to go to a good high school." I ask him what he means by good, and he launches into an explanation of the city's eight specialized schools, calling them the, "Ivy Leagues of the New York school system."
>
> "It's a mini college process…and some kids take it too far. They start studying for the SHSAT in sixth grade!" Lewis listed Brooklyn Tech as his top choice for next year, "because you can study anything there." Apparently, students studying architecture there build a two-story house as their final project.
>
> "What about Stuy?" Nick, who is sitting nearby, pitches in.
>
> "Stuyvesant is too stressful," Lewis shakes his head knowingly and leans back in his chair. "All of the schools are rigorous, but that has a culture of being *extremely* rigorous. A lot of people view it as the ultimate specialized high school—*Stuy or Die,* as they say."

Lewis qualified "good" as the most important, if not only, attribute being taken into account in his high school search. The explanation that followed, which likened these "good schools" to the circle of famously exclusive American universities, highlighted the competition, stress culture, and preparation that both defined students' middle school experiences and contributed to the specialized schools' reputations. Moreover, Lewis mentioned that a major part of what made Brooklyn Tech "good"— the best, for him personally—was the extent of their educational resources, which grant their students the opportunities to study highly specialized fields that many traditional public schools cannot offer. The conception of a "good school" that Lewis shared builds upon the earlier definition of the term as a commodity, or set of commodities, that student consumers believe will best serve their educational interests.

Of note is that students and academics alike seem to share similar lexicons of "good schools". The specialized high school network in total offers seats to approximately one out of every five applicants each year, rendering each of its schools selective[8]. Yet even within that network exists an ordering of individual schools. When talking about "good schools", the students at Sabin almost always referred to Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech

[8] Feinman, J., 1.

(though Beacon and LaGuardia found their way in occasionally). Research on specialized high schools commonly refers to those as the "Big Three". The reputations that these three schools have warranted are not arbitrary, however. Rather, their status is at least in part a result of cutoff-score ranking. Students taking the SHSAT must rank the schools they're applying to by preference. The seats of the most sought after school—historically speaking, Stuyvesant—will fill up first, and the school's cutoff-score refers to the SHSAT score of the student who is offered the school's final seat. Cutoff-score rankings reflect schools' standings in regards to students' preferences. That said, beliefs that a school's cutoff-score is somehow indicative of an elite status may have an effect of students' preferences, producing a reputational feedback loop that simultaneously draws on and reproduces notions of certain schools' prestige. During a poetry workshop at Sabin I took part in a conversation with Piper, a student who found this elite status integral in the characterization of a "good school".

> "How do you expect to get into Stuyvesant if you can't spell 'break'?" Eddie asks Piper, pointing to a line in her notebook that says, *it speaks to me in the way that glass brakes.*
>
> "You're being really mean today, Eddie," Piper says.
>
> "Why do you want to go to Stuyvesant?" I ask her.
>
> "It's elite," she says simply, confident in that explanation.
>
> "Stuyvesant looks the best on paper, but no one actually likes it there," August informs me.
>
> "It has the highest suicide rate," Eddie adds.
>
> "There're only two a year," Piper interjects.
>
> "Bronx Science is worse," says August.
>
> "Is Columbia bad?" Piper asks me.
>
> "Yes," I say.
>
> "You like being stressed?" Eddie asks Piper.
>
> "No, I work well under pressure," she responds. "And I don't want to go to Clinton, the kids there just get high in Union Square all the time."
>
> "Everyone from every school just gets high in Union Square all the time," says August.

The selectness of the "good school" label also appeared to be bound to parents' opinions on school reputations. My conversation with Cleo about the upcoming release of report cards

exposed how her parents had instilled their own impressions of "good schools". Whether or not parents' definitions of the term operate on the same set of beliefs as their children's could not be determined from my fieldwork. What was apparent was that parents' definitions informed their children's experiences, imposing further pressure to attend a "good school".

> "My parents will be upset—they're always upset," Cleo tells me. "They just like, silently judge me. And then they yell at each other."
> "What do you want them to say?" I ask her.
> "I don't know. I want to feel valid. I had this science quiz, and like, I studied. And they were like, 'I don't even understand why you can't do well. You just don't try and you're not going to get into a good school'."

Gaining entry into a "good school" is the ultimate purpose of "school choice as private consumption" for many of the Sabin students I observed. In watching them navigate the admissions process, I witnessed how institutional mechanisms like cut-off scores and grading systems, parental pressure, and students' notions of elitism worked side by side to breed perceptions of a very select group of schools as superior.

II.) "Pipeline"

Corcoran's term "middle school to high school pipeline" emphasized middle school placement as the beginning of the high school admissions process. This term served as a critical deductive code throughout my work, as it became clear that the overrepresentation of certain racial groups in selective middle schools would beget the overrepresentation of those same groups in selective high schools. Sabin's student body is primarily white, with a significant number of Asian students as well. These are the same groups that Corcoran et al. find grow disproportionately larger at each point in the pipeline, from application, to admission, to acceptance of the admissions offer, to matriculation. In other words, as students go through the progression of pipeline points, the groups of white and Asian students that advance to the next point are proportionately larger than those same groups were at the last point. Interestingly, the

specialized high school system's white to Asian ratio is roughly the inverse of Sabin's. Whereas Sabin's white and Asian populations are 61% and 16%, respectively, the specialized high schools' are 26.5% and 51.7%[9]. While explaining this phenomenon goes beyond the scope of my study, one might take into account that Queens contains the NYCDOE's largest Asian population, and is the borough most represented in the specialized high school system.

The pipeline study also finds that certain middle schools themselves were overrepresented in the specialized high school network, which was supported by my own observations of the admissions process and conversations about its outcomes. Corcoran notes that half of all students admitted to specialized high schools come from 24 middle schools (4.5% of all middle schools in the city)—one of which is Sabin[10]. According to Jack, Sabin's most veteran teacher, 60% of Sabin students enroll in a specialized high school any given year. The New York Times' 2018 graphs of the number of admissions offers that each middle school receives confirm this estimate (See Figures 2-4 at the end of this section)[11]. The percentage of Sabin students that receive offers is astounding when we consider that it's approximately three times the overall acceptance rate of the specialized high school network, which ranges from 18-20%[12].

My own records of lessons, classroom dynamics, and student conversations provide a rudimentary explanation of Sabin students' apparent success in the application process. Students frequently mentioned SHSAT tutoring on weekends, touring potential schools, or their older friends' or siblings' experiences applying. All of this suggested a degree of privilege that these students possessed, and a subsequent set of advantages. In this study, privilege is understood as

[9] Corcoran, S. P., and C. Baker-Smith. 266.
[10] Corcoran, S. P., and C. Baker-Smith, 258.
[11] Lee, J. C. "See Where New York City's Elite High Schools Get Their Students." *The New York Times*, June 29, 2018.
[12] Feinman, J., 1.

the conditions of a student's disposition (District 2 residency or their family's wealth and income level, for example) whereas an advantage is a means by which that privilege is applied directly to the admissions process in order to increase their likelihood of receiving an offer. The advantages I observed include, but are

not limited to:

- •Teachers who incorporate SHSAT content into their curricula
- •SHSAT preparatory tutoring provided by the school
- •A culture within the classroom that normalizes participation in the specialized high school admissions process
- •School guidance to help families research schools and understand the admissions process, i.e. a calendar marking important dates for specialized high school admissions made available to parents

Additionally, there are advantages that Sabin students' families often purchase or acquire through social networks beyond the school administration, such as:

- •Additional SHSAT preparatory tutoring provided by privately hired tutors, at a family's own expense
- •The resources (technological, economic, social, or otherwise) to conduct further in depth research on schools, visit campuses, access information on admissions, and receive the admissions materials themselves

Furthermore, Sabin is a screened public middle school, meaning that District 2 residents who wish to attend must submit their elementary school grades, behavioral reports, and scores from the New York State math and English language arts tests. Students enrolled at Sabin have already gone through—and succeeded in—the middle school admissions process; high school admissions is their second round, so to speak. While this advantage isn't one that parents or the school explicitly pay for or provide, it is nonetheless a "head start" for students in the pipeline.

Students' accounts along with comparisons of Sabin and the specialized high schools' demographic data allowed me to define and connect the codes "good school" and "the middle school to high school pipeline". According to these research methods, a "good school": (1) Likely belongs to the "Big Three" (2) appeals to students through its exceptional educational

resources and prestige (3) enrolls a greater proportion of white and Asian students than does the NYCDOE as a whole, and (4) as a concept, ultimately encourages the private consumption of education by students and their families. Furthermore, the "middle school to high school pipeline": (1) illustrates how disparities in representations of racial groups and select middle schools grow throughout the admissions process (2) gives students who attend screened middle schools a "head start" (3) yields desirable results for students who apply their privileges, or take advantage of their parents' and school's resources. In sum, my preliminary findings shed light on students' beliefs about school quality and how the advantages from their experience at Sabin increase their access to the schools they deem "good" by aiding their advancement along the pipeline. The conclusion this points toward fits into previous studies on the specialized high school admissions process, reaffirming the case that students who utilize the economic and social capital possessed by families and schools in affluent districts are far more likely to find themselves enrolled at one of the "Big Three."

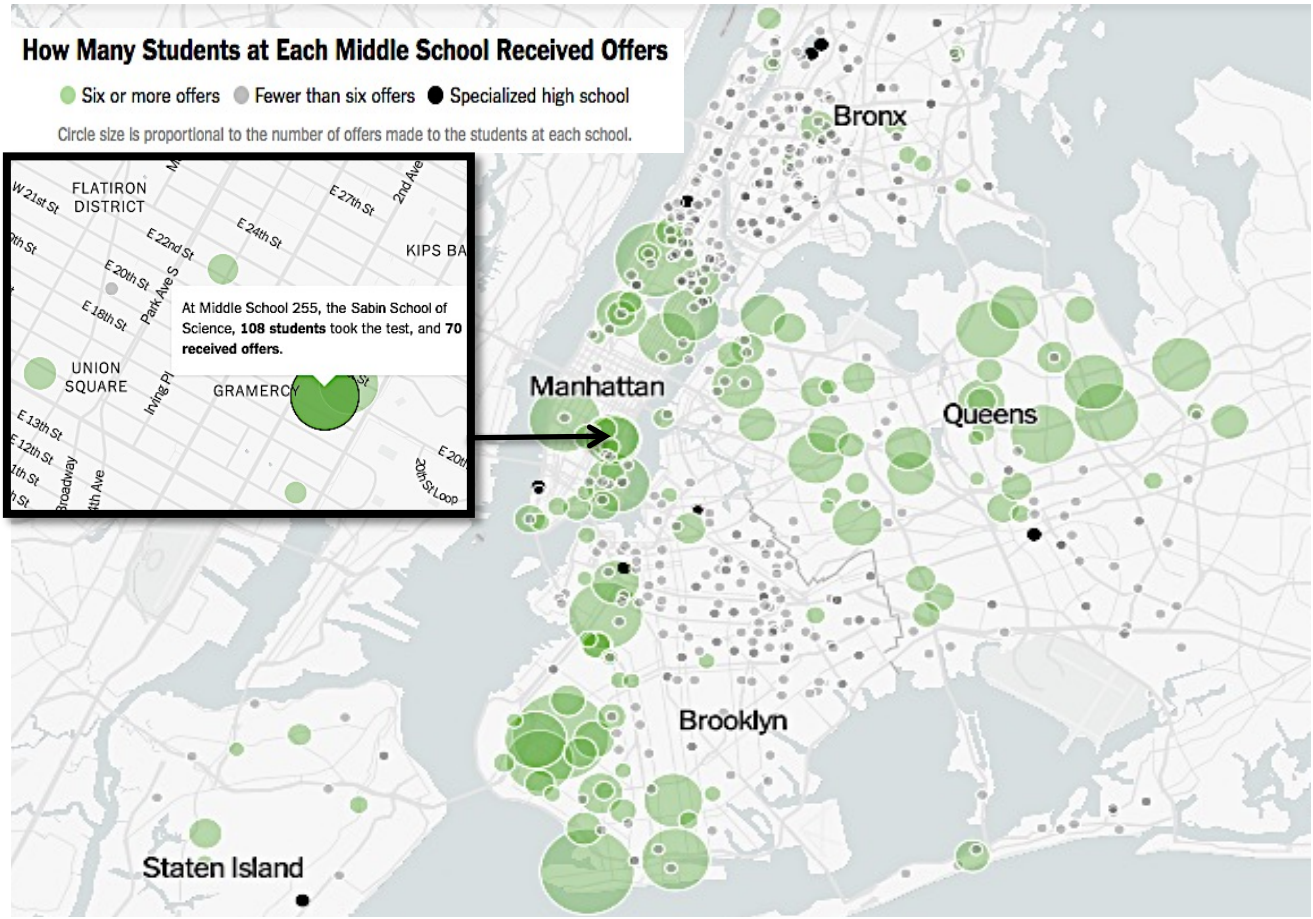

Figure 2: Specialized high school offers for middle schools in all New York City boroughs
Source: New York City Department of Education

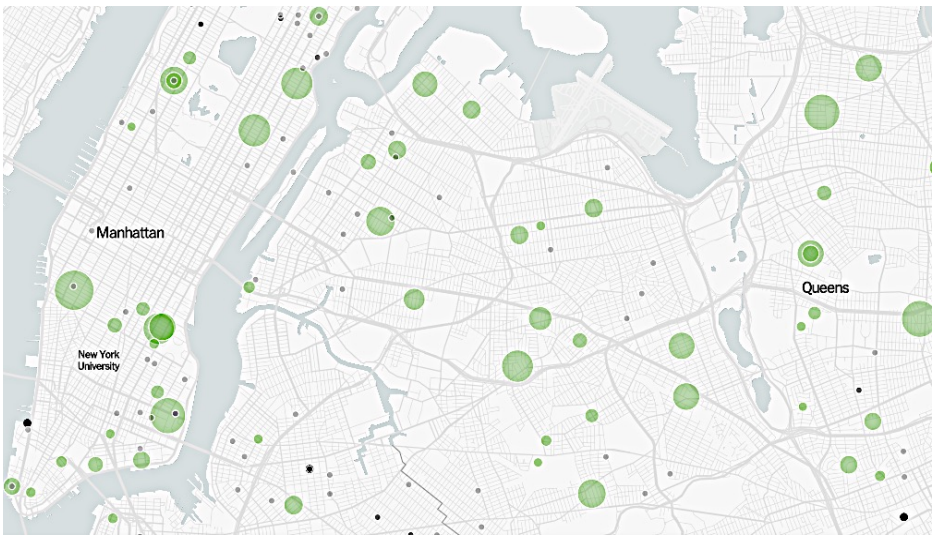

Figure 3: Manhattan and Queens

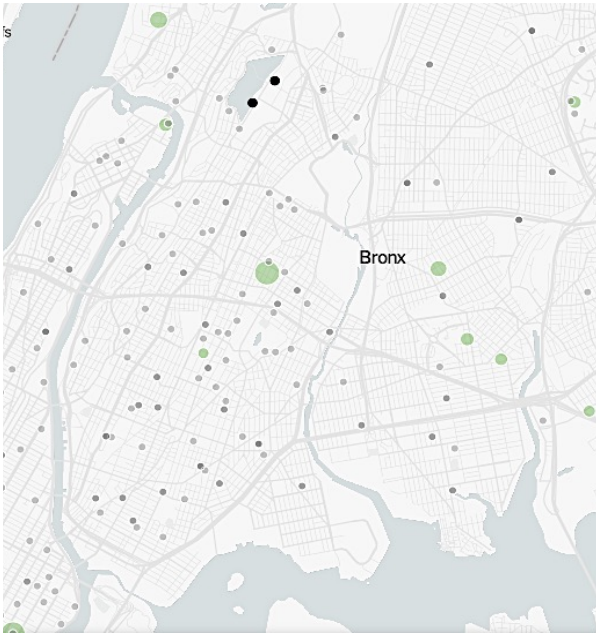

Figure 4: The Bronx

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