



# **KEY FINDINGS REPORT**

## **Mothers on the Move Tenant Survey**

### **Results of community-based documentation of housing conditions in the South Bronx**

**A Report by the Community Development Project  
of the Urban Justice Center  
June 2003**

## **Acknowledgements**

This report was compiled and written in June 2003 by Laine Romero-Alston and Kristen Luppino from the Research and Policy Initiative of the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center. First and foremost, we would like to thank Mothers on the Move (MOM) tenant leaders who provided their time, ideas, input and energy in the design and implementation of this research initiative. In particular, we would like to recognize Serlender Glover, Dalila Morales, Eunice Malone, Geraldine, Helen Johnson, Lucia Moreno, Evelyn Rios, Donald Green, and Cristina Castellero. We would also like to thank the staff of MOM, specifically Wanda Salaman, Lisa Ortega and Katie Falgoust, who provided important support and orientation to us and the tenants throughout this project, and with whom we look forward to working in the future.

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Finally, we would like to thank the corps of volunteers who braved the cold in the bleak winter evenings to door knock and warmly invite tenants' voices to be heard through this survey and project, and who stared down the computer screen carefully entering the answers of each survey into the database. Particularly, we would like to thank Lindsay Kaden, Lara Fife, Carrie Kingsley, Nell Murphy, Adhi Nagraj, Abby Beal, James Ratner, Jessica Beauvais, Brigit Greeson-Alvarez, Tim Dennehy, Francesca Campagnoli and Stephanie Beebe.

## **Organizational descriptions**

### ***Mothers On the Move***

Mothers on the Move (MOM) is a social justice community organization working to build a just society where there is equal economic, social and political opportunity for all. MOM believes in respect, dignity and equality for everyone, regardless of ability, age, culture, gender, sexual orientation or any other defining characteristic. MOM is a membership-based group of South Bronx residents living in the neighborhoods of Hunts Point, Longwood, Morrisania, Melrose and Port Morris.

### ***The Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center***

Started in September of 2001, the Community Development Project (CDP) of the Urban Justice Center (UJC) provides legal, technical, and research and policy assistance to grassroots community groups working for positive social change in low-income communities. With the goal of supporting grassroots community groups' efforts to improve conditions in low-income communities in New York City, we strive to help community groups in the following areas: grassroots community organizing; affordable housing and tenant organizing; development of alternative institutions and sustainable economic development; technical assistance to not-for-profits; worker rights; environmental justice; and immigrant rights and organizing.

## Table of contents

<b><u>Section 1: Introduction and Overview of Project</u></b> .....	<b>3</b>
Introduction	3
Banana Kelly Tenant Organizing Campaign	3
MOM-UJC Survey Project	4
<i>Research Methodology</i>	
<i>Demographic information of survey participants</i>	
Outline of Report	7
<b><u>Section 2: Key Findings</u></b> .....	<b>8</b>
Problems with Rent	8
Problems with Apartment and Repair Needs	8
Response of Management to Tenants' Repair Needs	9
Beyond Repairs and Rent : Health and Security Issues	11
View of Alternatives	15
<b><u>Section 3: Applying the research to social change action</u></b> .....	<b>17</b>
Planned follow-up for action	17

## **SECTION 1: Introduction and Overview of Project**

### **Introduction**

A decent place to live and affordable housing is a basic right of every New Yorker. Unlike most of the nation, which has a homeownership rate of roughly 66%, New York City is a city of renters, where the percentage of homeowners to renters is reversed: roughly 66% of New York City residents are renters. Moreover, substandard living conditions that include high levels of lead poisoning, unsafe conditions and unfit management continue to plague homes and families. Residents of low-income communities have been particularly beleaguered by these conditions due to mismanagement, corrupt and unaccountable landlords, and government systems that fail to support them as they struggle to address their housing related problems.

In response, tenants, through waves of organizing and advocacy work, are demanding and, in many cases, winning improved living conditions and affordable housing. Over the past year, tenants and members of Mothers on the Move (MOM) have joined this important movement to fight for fair and just living conditions. The Banana Kelly Organizing Campaign, of which this report is a part, is an example of MOM's efforts. Tenants are tired of the abuse and lack of response from landlords. It is imperative that the opinions, experiences and voices of tenants guide and direct the priorities for organizing and define related policy that will win improved housing conditions. The community-based documentation carried out through the Tenant Survey Project is an effort to bring those voices to the forefront of discussion.

This preliminary report is the result of a collaborative effort between community members, tenants and staff of MOM, and staff and volunteers from the Research and Policy Initiative of the Community Development Project (CDP) of the Urban Justice Center (UJC). The specific goal of the Tenant Survey Project was to carry out community-based documentation as a tool to support and strengthen the organizing and advocacy strategies of MOM members in their efforts to improve their living conditions and that of other tenants living in buildings throughout the South Bronx that had been exposed to years of mishandled ownership by the Banana Kelly Community Development Corporation, and more recently under the mismanagement of the Southeast Bronx Community Organization (SEBCO). This project aimed to generate critically needed data, incorporating relevant, however frequently unasked questions and issues related to housing conditions in the South Bronx.

The results of this research process and report will hopefully serve as a resource for you, other tenants, community members in general, and organizations that are working to improve living conditions in the South Bronx and throughout New York City.

The following is a brief summary of MOM's broader Banana Kelly campaign that was connected to and which inspired the community-based documentation and research project. We then describe the process of developing and implementing the research methodology and survey.

### **Banana Kelly Tenant Organizing Campaign**

Beginning in August 2002, over 550 families in buildings owned by Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association (Banana Kelly) launched a campaign to win major repairs

and democratic control over their homes. Pressure from the tenants and their Urban Justice Center attorneys forced the state Attorney General's office to reach an out of court settlement in November that removed Yolanda Rivera, Chairperson and Chief Executive, from Banana Kelly and created a new five-person interim board.

The tenants involved in the Banana Kelly campaign have continued to fight for their rights to live in safe and habitable housing and are taking empowering steps to hold the new Banana Kelly board of directors accountable. Tenant leaders from various buildings had several accountability meetings with Harold DeRienzo, Banana Kelly's appointed director. In addition, tenant associations in different buildings have continued to have individual meetings in their buildings and have also invited Mr. DeRienzo to come, listen and consent to their demands. Some of the most recent accomplishments include:

- Tenants attained their goal of having a recognized Tenant Resident Council, composed of tenants, that meets on a regular basis and advises Harold DeRienzo.
- The Hoe Avenue Tenant Association has had significant input in the replacement of their superintendent and tenants have obtained some basic repairs for their apartments and their building. They have also had input in developing a work scope for the rehabilitation of their building.
- The 788 Fox Street Tenant Association has formed a Relocation Committee that has played a major role in the upcoming rehabilitation of their building. With the assistance of the Urban Justice Center's attorneys, the Relocation Committee negotiated a relocation agreement with Banana Kelly and 788 Fox Street tenants are in the process of relocating temporarily while their building is rehabilitated.

Most importantly, some tenant leaders continue to be involved in MOM's Housing Committee and are currently taking leadership roles with MOM. Recently, the Housing Committee had a meeting with several landlords from the area and the Bronx District Attorney to discuss building wide safety issues and to hold landlords accountable.

### **MOM-UJC Survey Project**

As a part of the Banana Kelly campaign, tenants, MOM members and staff decided that it would be important to talk to as many tenants in targeted buildings owned by Banana Kelly and managed by SEBCO in the South Bronx in order to document the rent, repair and health issues they are experiencing as a result of their living conditions, as well as the response of management to tenants' needs. Therefore, in December 2002, a group of tenants and MOM staff worked with staff and volunteers from the Research and Policy Initiative of the CDP to identify the most critical issues that should be explored through the research project and to develop the questions to be asked. We then developed a survey that included general questions about the following key areas:

- Living conditions;
- Rent issues;
- Repair needs;

- Management's response to tenants' needs;
- Tenants experience with and treatment by management;
- Physical and mental health issues and their relation to living conditions;
- Security concerns;
- Interest in tenant ownership; and
- Evaluation of MOM organizing efforts.

### ***Research Methodology***

Outreach was conducted to a total of 403 apartments in 18 buildings owned by Banana Kelly and managed by SEBCO from late February, 2003 until early May, 2003. When possible, surveys were implemented by tenant leaders and MOM members in their building. Otherwise, staff and volunteers from the Urban Justice Center went door to door to talk about the survey and invite tenants to participate. Surveyors knocked on the doors of all apartments in each building. All buildings were visited approximately 4-8 times. Of the 403 apartments, 72 (18%) were known to be empty at the time of outreach and 49 households (15% of occupied units) indicated to surveyors that they were not interested in participating in the survey project. Surveyors successfully spoke to individuals in 218 (66%) of the occupied units and 169 households (51% of occupied units) completed surveys. Surveys were conducted in both English and Spanish.

### ***Demographic information of survey participants***

The following provides a general picture of who participated in the survey project:

❖ **More than half of occupied units, or 169 households participated in the survey.**

❖ **Sex:** 66% female; 30% male (4% no answer)

❖ **Age range:**

under 30 years old	11%
31-40 years old	26%
41-50 years old	22%
51-60 years old	17%
above 60 years old	14%
(9% no answer)	

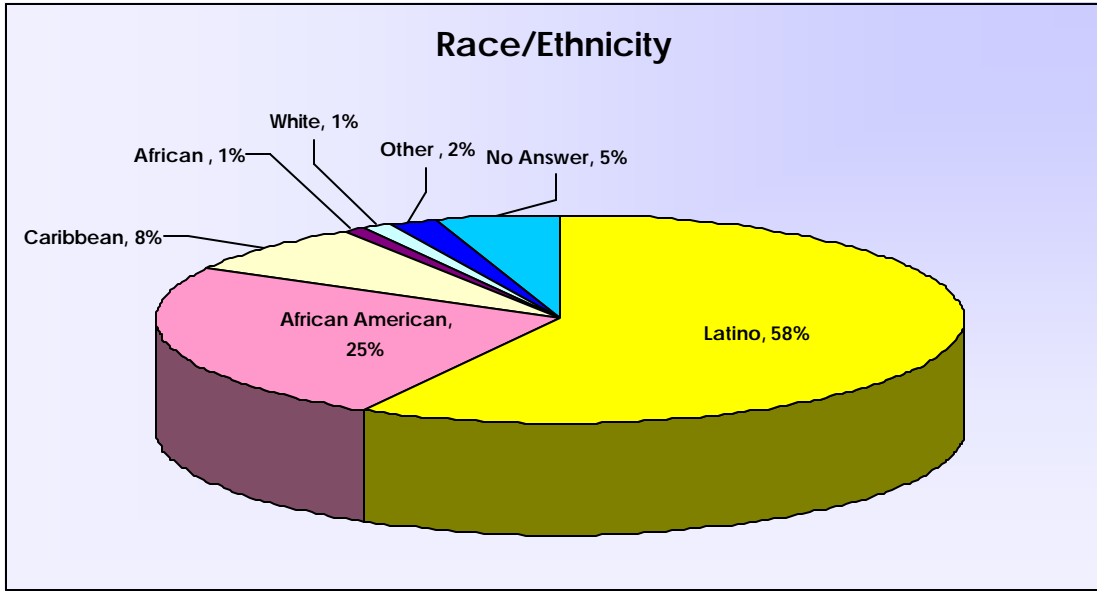
❖ **Single or Double-headed Household**

64% single-headed households (single, divorced, widowed and separated)

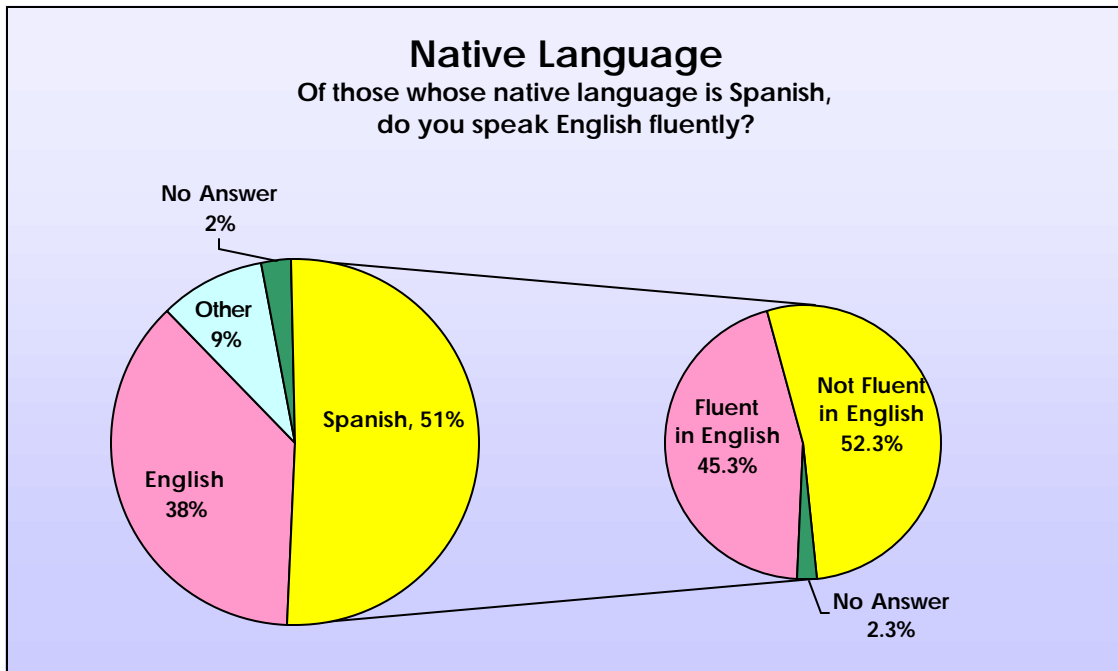
29% double-headed households (married and common law union)

(7% no answer)

❖ 88% of the individuals surveyed were **heads of household**



- ❖ 58% percent of tenants surveyed identified themselves as Latino, 25% as African-American, 8% as Caribbean, 1% as African and White respectively, and 5% did not answer.



- ❖ 51% of tenants surveyed reported Spanish as their native language. Of those, 52% are not fluent in English
- ❖ 32% of individuals surveyed were foreign born.

## **Outline of Report**

This document seeks to provide a brief overview of the project and present some initial findings from the data collected. A complete report to be distributed to tenants and others interested will be finished during the summer of 2003, and a policy oriented report will be released in late fall of this year.

The second section of the report shares the initial key findings from the data collected through the surveys, highlighting some of the most relevant and striking results. The final section, perhaps the most important section, outlines the planned and potential actions and strategies that will take place as follow up to the research carried out. This section is incomplete and needs the input and ideas of community members and advocates in order to ensure that the information collected, and the power that this information can help to leverage, is fully taken advantage of in order to benefit Mothers on the Move, its members and tenants throughout the South Bronx.



## **SECTION 2: Key Results**

This section outlines the key results found through the survey. We have yet to exhaust the data; however these preliminary findings allow us to paint an initial picture of the situation of tenants, particularly those living in Banana Kelly-owned buildings, however reflective of the situation of residents living in low-income neighborhoods throughout the Bronx and other parts of New York City.

### **Problems with Rent**

Tenants surveyed reported significant problems related to how Banana Kelly and SEBCO were charging rent.

#### ***Management charging wrong rent amounts:***

- 25%, or one fourth of all surveyed tenants had been asked to pay more than their monthly rent on the rent stub provided to them by management.
- Of those, 57% reported that this happened repeatedly, therefore showing this was not a one-time mistake made by management, rather a re-occurring problem.
- 60% said that this had happened since November 2002, which was the date of entry of the new Banana Kelly Board of Directors.

#### ***Management wrongly charging back rent:***

- 36% of individuals surveyed said that the total balance on their rent stub had been more than it should have been.
- Over half of those (51%) said this has happened repeatedly, therefore showing that this was not a one-time mistake.
- 61% said that this had happened since November 2002 (date of entry of new Banana Kelly Board of Directors).

### **Problems with Apartments and Repair Needs**

#### ***Tenants report significant numbers of repair needs and problems in their apartment***

Tenants surveyed overwhelmingly reported that they have had problems that required repair assistance from management in their apartments.

- 85% have had some kind of repair need requiring the attention of SEBCO.

Moreover, tenants who reported having had repair needs that required management's assistance also reported that they have had numerous repair needs. Of those who have had repair needs:

- 21% reported having had more 11 or more repair needs;
- 12% reported between 6-10;
- 37% reported 3-5; and
- 23% said they have had 1-2 repair needs.

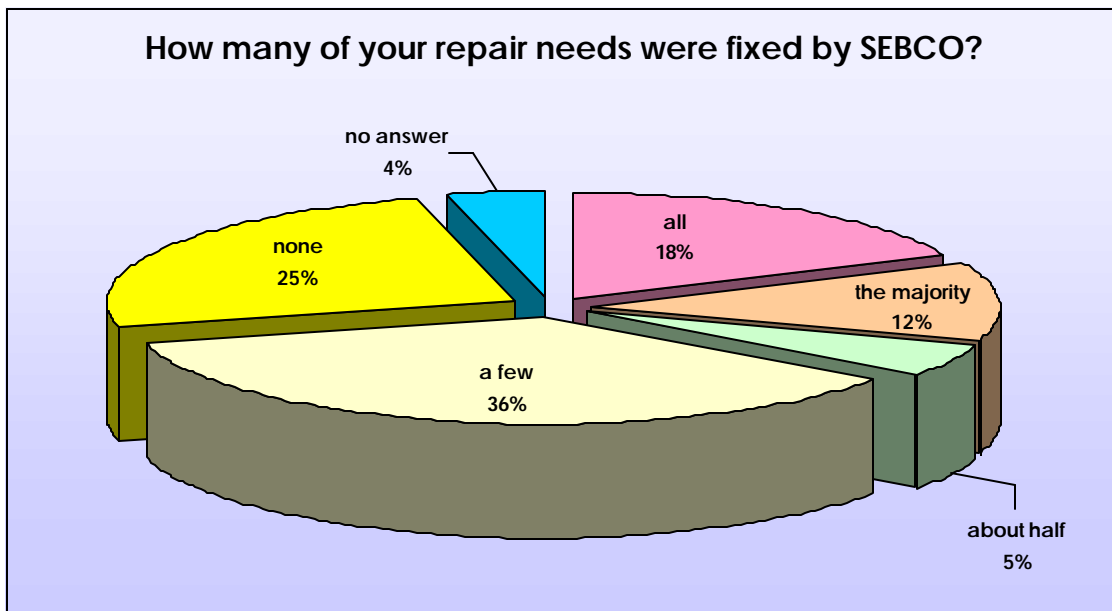
***Tenants report living with repair needs that were considered to be an emergency***

- 52% of tenants surveyed reported currently living with what they consider to be an emergency repair need.

**Response Of Management to Tenants' Repair Needs**

***Tenants report that repair needs are not being addressed by management***

- 61% of tenants who reported having repair needs responded that SEBCO fixed “a few” or “none” of their repair needs.

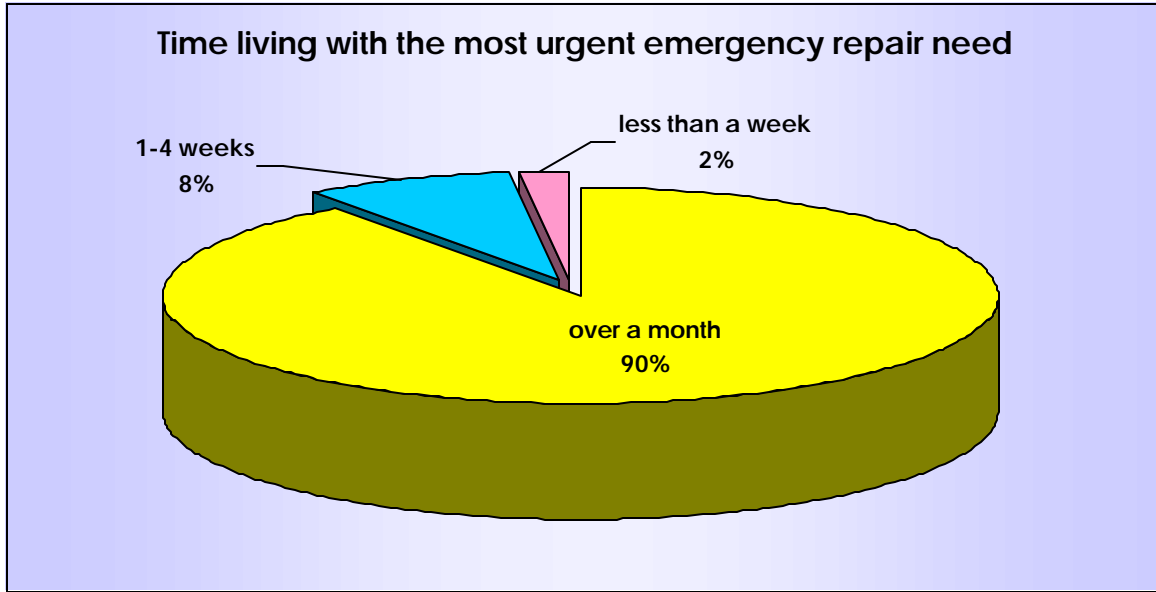


When asked how SEBCO has responded to repair needs:

- 34% reported that problems were fixed in an untimely manner;
- 23% reported that problems were never fixed; and
- 28% reported that problems were fixed in a timely manner.

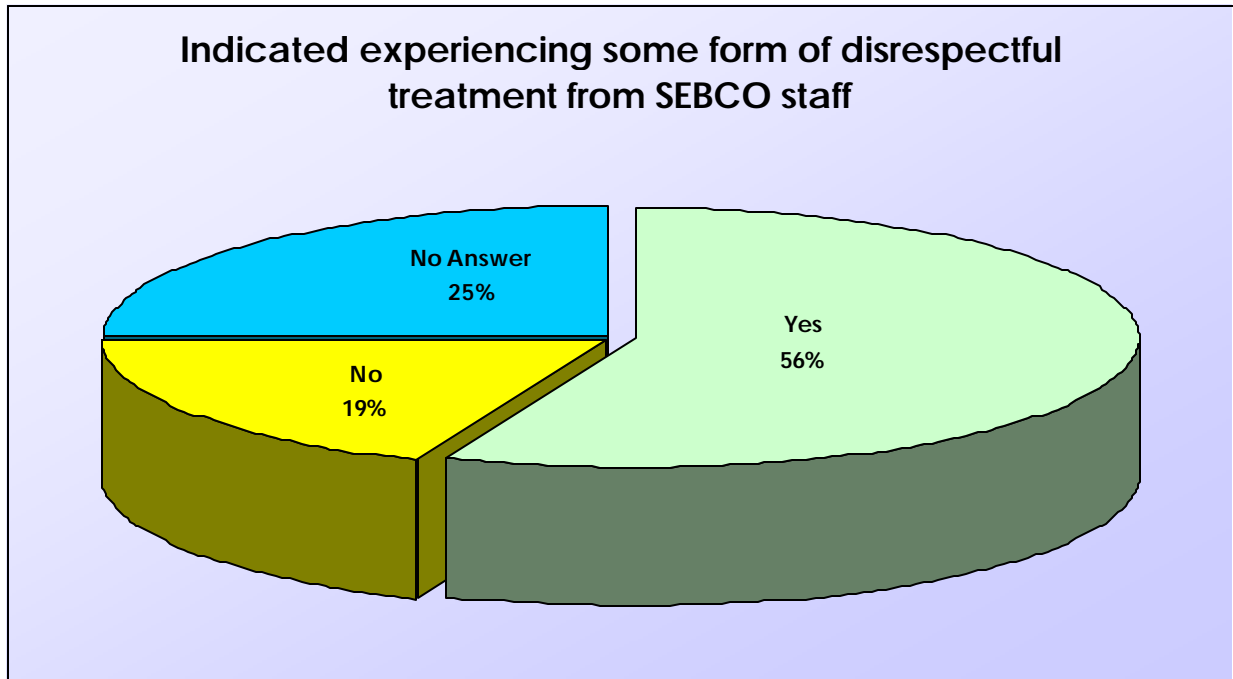
***Tenants report that emergency repairs are going unattended.***

- Of those surveyed who reported currently having an emergency repair need (52% of all tenants surveyed), 90% of those reported having lived with what they considered to be the most urgent of their emergency repair needs for over a month.



***Tenants report receiving disrespectful treatment from Management***

- 56% of tenants reported experiencing some form of disrespectful treatment from SEBCO staff.

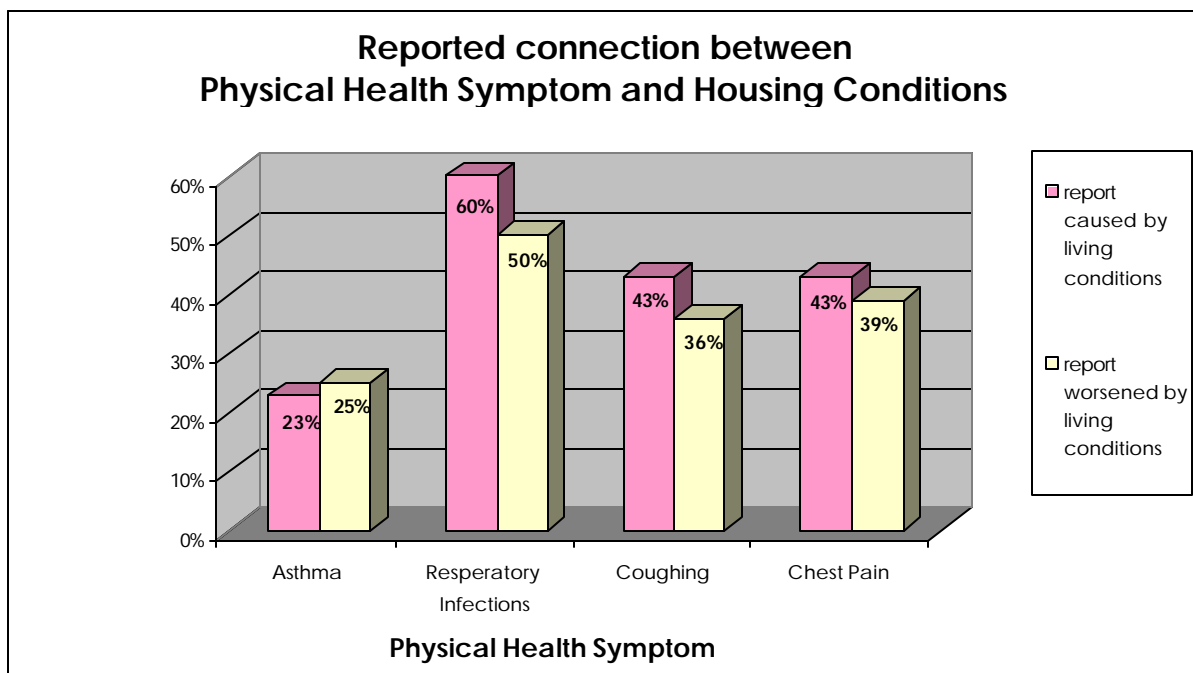
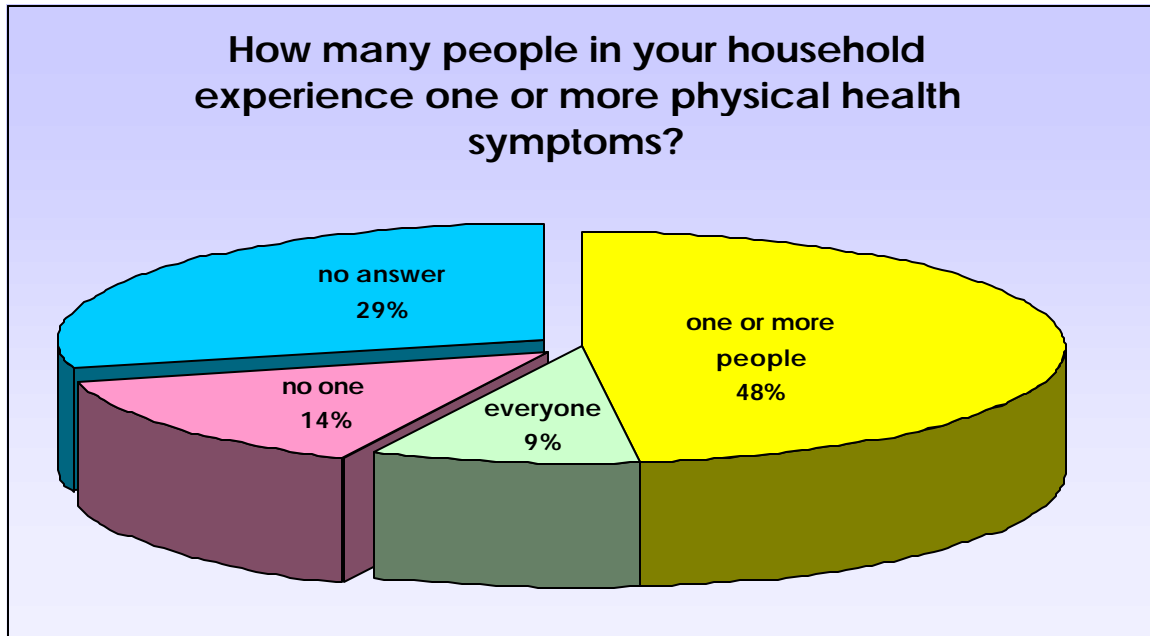


Disrespectful treatment includes being hung up on (14%), not being able to reach the office (16%), not being able to reach the appropriate person at the office (33%), being given the wrong information (13%), being given different information by different staff (15%), never getting a response from an in-person or written request (15%), or being harassed, yelled at, or other disrespectful treatment (12%).

## Beyond Repairs and Rent: Health and Security Issues

### *Physical Health Impact of Living Conditions*

- More than half, or 57%, report that at least one person in their household suffers from one or more physical symptoms commonly connected to housing-related health conditions, including asthma, asbestosis, lead poisoning, and others.

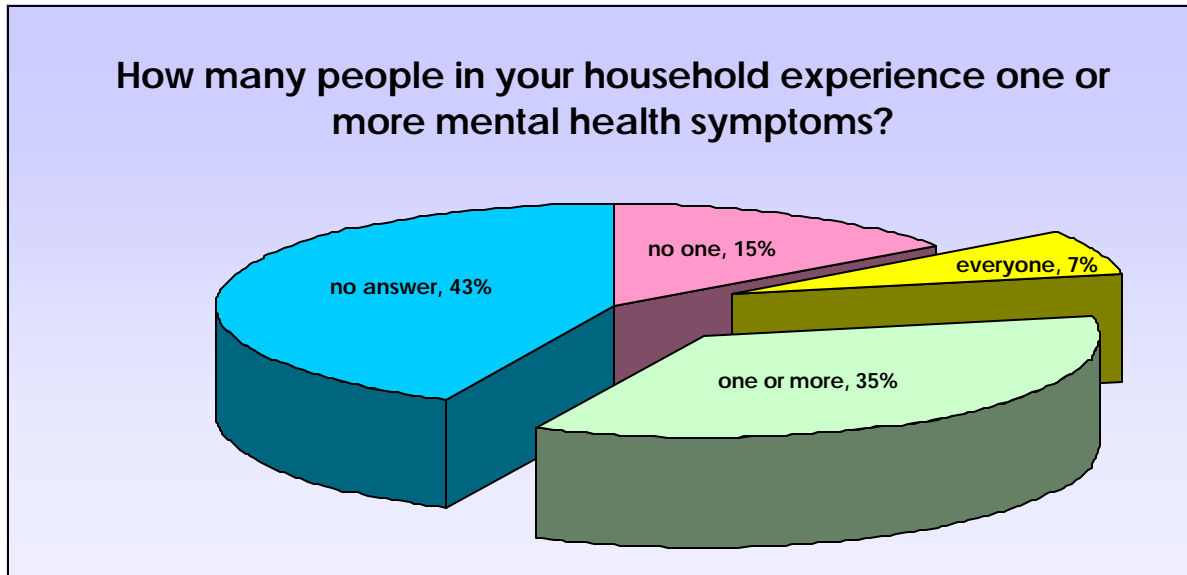


Of those individuals surveyed who said that they or someone in their household suffered from specific physical health symptoms<sup>1</sup>, many indicated that those conditions were caused or worsened by their living conditions. For example:

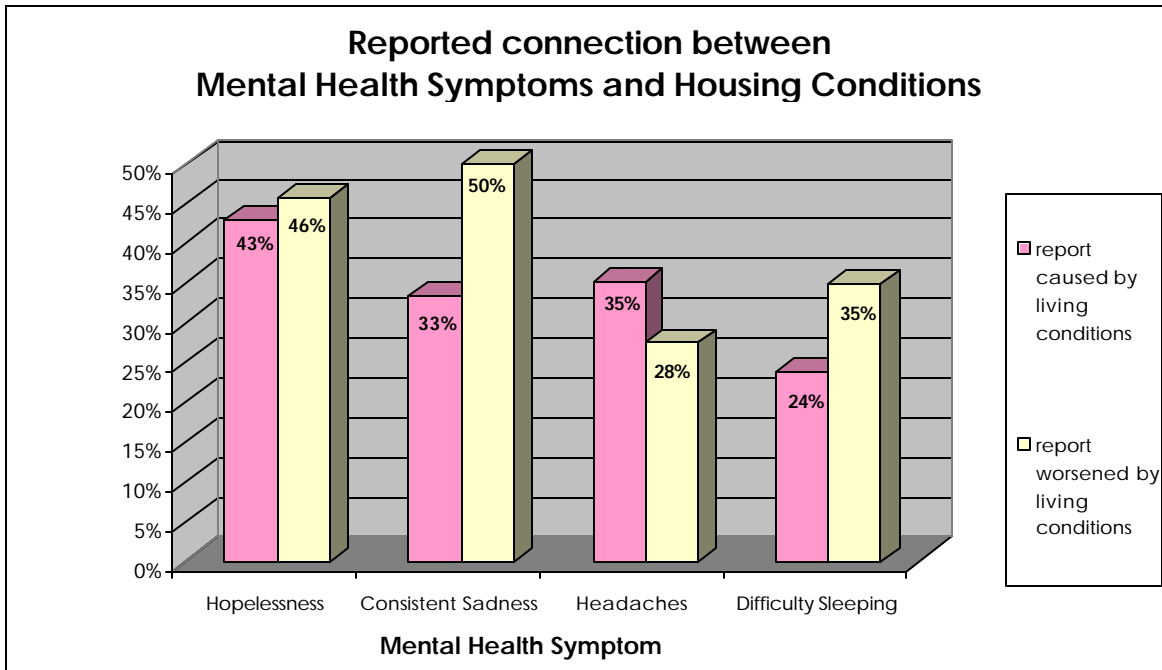
- 42% of tenants surveyed reported that they or someone in their household suffer from **asthma**. 23% of those believe that this condition was caused by and, a quarter, 25% said that it has been worsened by their living conditions.
- 12% said that they suffer from **respiratory infection**. Of those, 60% said that they believe this condition was caused by their living condition and 50% said they believe that it has been worsened by their living condition.
- 28% report that they or someone in their household suffer from **coughing**. 43% said they believe the symptom was caused by their living condition and 36% said that it has been worsened by their living conditions.
- 17% reported that they or someone in their household suffers from **chest pain**. 43% said they believe the chest pain was caused by their living conditions, and 39% believe the symptom has been worsened by their living condition.

### ***Mental Health Impact of Living Conditions***

- 42% reported that at least one person in their household suffers from one or more mental health symptoms commonly connected to depression, stress, anxiety and trauma.



<sup>1</sup> Surveyors found that many participants were hesitant to answer questions related to physical and mental health conditions, both due to the sensitive nature of the issues and the difficulty in wording on the survey. Therefore, a significant number of surveys left the answers to these questions blank. However, even with high percentages of “no answer” we believe that the number of individuals that did say they or someone in their household experienced a variety of health symptoms was telling of the impact that living conditions are having on the physical and mental health of tenants.

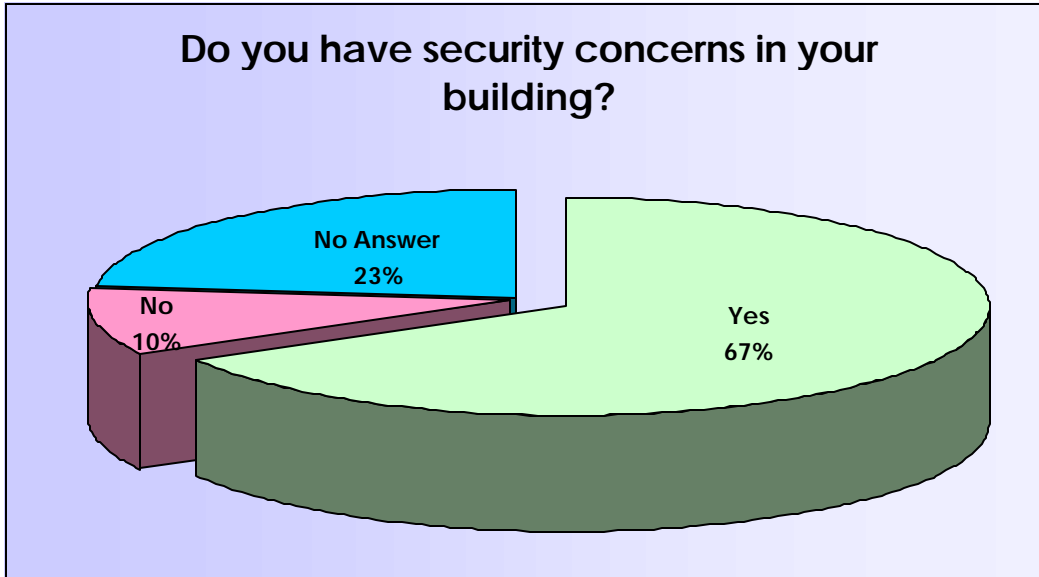


Of those individuals surveyed who said that they or someone in their household suffered from specific mental health symptoms, many indicated that those conditions were caused or worsened by their living conditions. For example:

- 20% reported that they or someone in their household suffer from **hopelessness**. Of those, 43% said they believe this symptom is caused by their living conditions and 46% said they believe it has been worsened by their living conditions.
- 18% said that they or someone in their household suffer from **consistent sadness**. Of those, 33% said this is caused by their living conditions and 50% said that this symptom has been made worse by their living conditions.
- 30% reported that they or someone in their household suffer from **headaches**. Of those, 35% said the symptom is caused by their living condition and 28% said it is worsened by their living conditions.
- 27% reported that they or someone in their household suffer from **trouble sleeping**. Of those, 24% said that it is caused by their living condition and 35% said that it is worsened by their living condition.

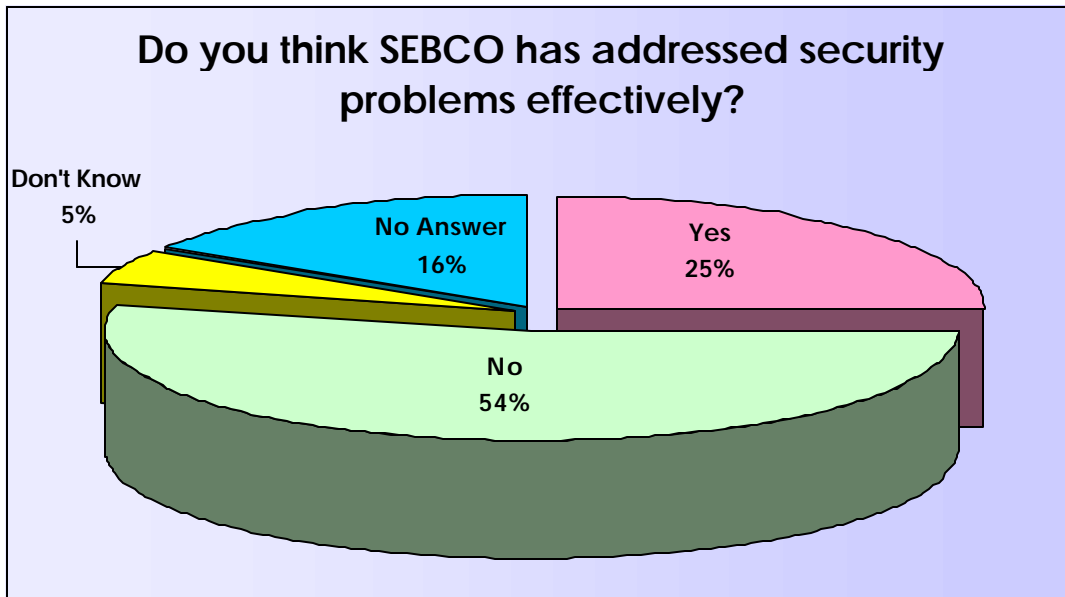
#### ***Security Concerns***

- 67% of tenants surveyed expressed that they had security concerns related to their building.



Security concerns indicated most frequently by tenants are drug dealing (37%), drug use in public places (30%), drug use in apartments (18%), break-ins (23%), entrance door lock broken (52%), tenants do not have keys to entrance door (21%), and mailboxes broken (30%). Other concerns tenants identified were dysfunctional intercoms and buzzers, roof door not locked, and people “hanging out” in halls and on roof.

- 54% of tenants surveyed were dissatisfied with the way SEBCO is dealing with security issues in the building.

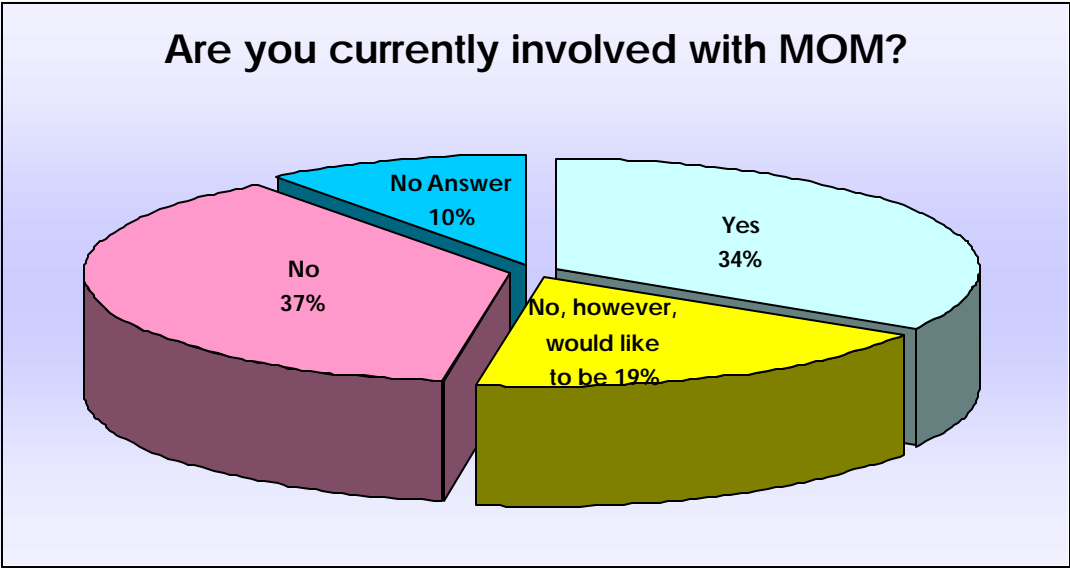


**View of Alternatives**

Tenants recognized that there were important alternatives to help address the above mentioned problems and expressed their interest in participating.

***Mothers on the Move***

- 89% of tenants surveyed knew about MOM’s efforts to organize their building.
- 34% are currently involved with MOM
- Of those who are not involved, a third indicated that they would like to be involved.

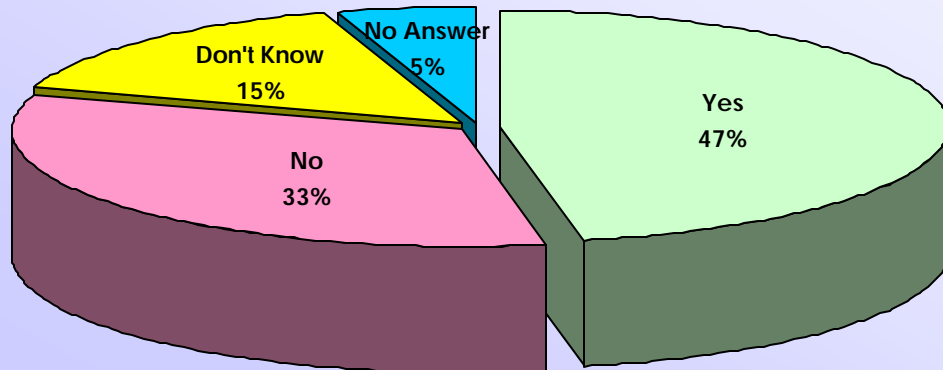


***Tenant ownership***

- Nearly half, or 47% of all tenants surveys said they would be interested in either owning their apartment or being a part of a group of tenants who own their building. An additional 15% said that they did not know.



**Would you be interested in owning your own apartment or being part of a group of tenants who owned your building?**



- Of those who either said they would be interested in tenant control or who did not know, 49% said they would like to own their apartment, 18% said they would like to be a part of a tenant group that owned the building, and 19% said they did not know.
- 49% said they would need more information
- 81% said that they would be interested in attending a training to learn more about tenant ownership.

### **SECTION 3: Applying the research to social change action**

As mentioned, the underlying purpose of carrying out the community-based documentation and producing this report is to strengthen the efforts of community members, tenants and MOM as they organize and advocate with management to improve living conditions. Not only do we now have comprehensive documentation and concrete data of what is happening in a significant number of buildings in the South Bronx, we also have outreached to several hundred community members who could potentially become involved in MOM's efforts.

Beyond being a resource for Banana Kelly tenants, we hope that that this information can be helpful for other tenants throughout the South Bronx, as we know the situation of Banana Kelly tenants is very reflective of what is happening in buildings all over the area.

#### **Planned follow-up for action**

- ✓ A broader report, with breakdowns by building, is currently being written and will be distributed to all tenants in the 18 buildings that participated in the survey. This reader-friendly and useful report will also be available to community members in other buildings.
- ✓ The information from this report will be shared with the Banana Kelly tenant advisory board and the tenant associations in the various buildings that participated to be used as a tool in their organizing and negotiations.
- ✓ Finally, we will be releasing a broader policy report at the end of the year using the data from this survey to support recommendations related to policy change and to be used by community members, tenants association and other organizations in their advocacy efforts on a local and city-wide level. This report will be distributed widely within the South Bronx community and to housing advocate, as well as to decision-makers and political leaders to inform and influence policy that will improve the living conditions of low-income tenants throughout New York City.

The Urban Justice Center, Mothers on the Move and the tenants involved in this initiative invite you to think about how this data can be useful for you and your efforts. Knowledge can be powerful, and there is a lot of information and knowledge that has come out of this survey!