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‘The Kids Started to Behave Badly’:

How New York City Blamed Poor, Nonwhite Youths for its Exaggerated Arson Crisis,  
1977-1986

One image of New York City in the 1970s and 1980s remains pervasive: that of the city engulfed in flames. Recent scholarly works, popular histories, and novels that look back on the era boast titles like *City on Fire* (2015), *The Flamethrowers* (2013), and *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire* (2011).<sup>1</sup> The blazes examined in these works and in other accounts speak to broader concerns that faced New York in the wake of the fiscal crisis of 1975. Were the fires cleansing the city of its ostensibly pathological decadence, best illustrated by its bloated welfare system? Or, were they instead representative of a city government more concerned with business interests and tourism than with decent housing for poor New Yorkers? Like many local residents, sociologist John Hull Mollenkopf wondered whether a new, economically solvent, socially just, and safe city could emerge from the flames like “a phoenix in the ashes.”<sup>2</sup>

However one chooses to interpret the fires, the origins of the blazes were clear to government officials and policymakers of the era as well as to recent novelists and scholars. They maintained that the fires were not accidental but rather deliberately set: New York in the 1970s and 1980s experienced an arson crisis. Scholarly and popular

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<sup>1</sup> Garth Risk Hallberg, *City on Fire: A Novel* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015); Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers: A Novel* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2013); Will Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York that Changed Music Forever* (New York, NY: Faber and Faber, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> John Hull Mollenkopf, *A Phoenix in the Ashes: The Rise and Fall of the Koch Coalition in New York City Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 47.

assumption remains that unruly tenants unhappy with their abodes or heartless landlords seeking to collect insurance claims intentionally set fire to their buildings, causing the vast majority of New York's 835,669 fires that swept through the city between 1970 and 1989.<sup>3</sup> Many New Yorkers, novelists, and even scholars are more specific in their recollections. They remember nonwhite, poor, potentially-pyromanical outer-borough youths burning apartments to punish scornful lovers; minority youths stripping buildings of valuable materials like copper pipes; fires consolidating the power of local gangs; and juveniles setting them merely to alleviate boredom. New Yorkers lost their lives and homes and the city began to deteriorate, when, to quote New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The kids started to behave badly."<sup>4</sup>

Yet these recollections are historically questionable. According to city reports, between 1970 and 1989, arson accounted for between 12 and 26 percent of all New York City fires.<sup>5</sup> (See Appendix I, Figure 1.) The percentage of arsons might have been lower still. Investigative reporter Joe Flood argues that even at its peak, arson rates stayed south of 7 percent of total fires.<sup>6</sup> Most fires, in fact, were *accidental* in nature. They resulted from, among other issues, faulty or aging electrical wiring and outlets, old or defective

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<sup>3</sup> Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1993. Municipal Archives, the New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; Arson Strike Force, "Semi-Annual Report to the City Council #3, July 1, 1979-December 31, 1979," Box 10, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Forward (1985)," in *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City*, Jill Jonnes (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002), xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York," 1983-1993; Arson Strike Force, "Semi-Annual Report to the City Council #3."

<sup>6</sup> Joe Flood, *The Fires: How A Computer Formula, Big Ideas, and the Best of Intentions Burned Down New York City—and Determined the Future of Cities* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2010), 271. While Flood has clearly crunched numbers to arrive at this percentage, and indeed, works with numbers throughout the book, he rarely cites what sources he uses. Consequently, I am unable to determine how he arrived at arsons representing less than 7 percent of total fires.

household appliances, and leaky oil- and gas-burning furnaces.<sup>7</sup> That many apartments in poor neighborhoods were overcrowded and badly in need of restoration hardly helped matters. In short, many more fires could be attributed to a lack of city renovations and negligence in government oversight than to tenant arson. Nor were the masterminds of arson poor, nonwhite, outer-borough youths motivated by revenge or pyromania. While the majority of those arrested for arson were nonwhite males under the age of 29, most of these individuals were merely hired hands who caused arson only in a direct physical sense. (See Appendix I, Figures 2, 3, and 4.) These black and Latino youths, teenagers, and young adults were “torches,” perpetrators hired by landlords.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of criminal landlords were never brought to justice.

In the face of these clear-cut facts, why then did city officials insist that there was a pervasive arson crisis endemic to poor communities? Why did they seemingly target young, nonwhite “arsonists,” rather than devote their attention to the more pressing issue of accidental fires? In this paper, I will argue that following the fiscal crisis of 1975 and the blackout of 1977, politicians bowed to influential public intellectuals associated with periodicals like *The Public Interest* and think tanks like the Manhattan Institute. In the process, they began to cut welfare and government aid to nonwhite neighborhoods and increasingly blamed blacks and Latinos for the dilapidation of their own communities.

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<sup>7</sup> Flood, *The Fires*, 172; Deborah Wallace and Rodrick Wallace, *A Plague On Your Houses: How New York was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled* (New York, NY: Verso, 1998), 24-27.

<sup>8</sup> Randall E. Fadem, ed., *Tools: A Handbook for Anti-Arson Programs and Laws* (Boston, MA: Urban Educational Systems, Inc., 1979), Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY. Unfortunately, since the majority of landlord driven-arson-for-profit schemes were never uncovered, it is impossible to know what percentage of arsons were ordered or orchestrated by landlords. That said, Fadem’s handbook and other documents released by Urban Educational Systems, Inc., a Boston-based tenant advocacy group, make it clear that tenants were responsible for a fraction of total arsons.

While accidental fires had plagued poor neighborhoods since the 1960s, city officials only began to address the issue when, in the wake of the fiscal crisis and the blackout, businesses and tourists pointed to the blazes as evidence that New York City was dangerous. Rather than admit the city government's negligence in restoring dilapidated buildings and their lack of interest in fighting fires in poor communities, the administrations of Mayors Abe Beame and Ed Koch seized upon the crime of arson and contended that nonwhite neighborhoods replete with "socially pathological" youths were responsible for the flames that engulfed New York.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, they drew heavily on the rhetoric of neoconservative intellectuals. As outraged upper- and middle-class New Yorkers, businesses, and tourists demanded a solution to the city's exaggerated arson problem, officials found it easier and cheaper to arrest young, nonwhite firesetters than to conduct lengthy investigations into landlord arson schemes. By arresting large numbers of nonwhite youths, the city made it seem as though it was making considerable progress in the fight against arson.

In this paper, I will examine how city officials exaggerated New York's arson crisis and targeted black and Latino youths from poor communities as deviant arsonists. Since most accidental blazes and official cases of arson ravaged neighborhoods in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, I will pay close attention to fire statistics from these boroughs. (See Appendix 1, Figure 5.) I begin with a discussion of how city officials ignored and even exacerbated the fire epidemic that plagued nonwhite communities in the

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Borg and Leonard David, "Arson: A Multi-Dimensional Problem," April 29, 1976, Box 4, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, the New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; Vera Institute of Justice, "Neighborhood Arson Prevention Program Proposal to Department of Housing and Urban Development Neighborhood Preservation Program," May 28, 1986, Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

1960s and 1970s. I try to contextualize this negligence by examining New York's near brush with bankruptcy. I show how as the city's fiscal woes worsened, elected officials increasingly took advice from corporate leaders and public intellectuals. These advisors counseled the city to cut basic services like firefighting to the city's poorest and most fire-prone neighborhoods. The last section demonstrates how these punitive recommendations informed Beame and Koch's war on arson. I show how Beame and Koch's respective Arson Strike Forces blamed nonwhite youths for the arson crisis.

### The City's Response to the Fires of the 1960s and early-to-mid-1970s

While city officials began their war on arson in 1977, they largely ignored and even exacerbated the fire epidemic of the 1960s and mid-1970s. This is surprising given the fact that blazes of this era were at least as prevalent and destructive as those of the late 1970s and 1980s. As I will show, the city did little to combat the fires of the 1960s and as the blazes worsened in the 1970s, officials actually began to cut fire services to poor, fire-prone neighborhoods in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. Only in the wake of the fiscal crisis of 1975 and the blackout of 1977, as the government increasingly drew council from corporate leaders and public intellectuals, did the city begin to address the fire epidemic. They did so, however, under the guise of an exaggerated arson crisis.

The blazes of the 1960s and 1970s disproportionately affected poor neighborhoods with substandard housing like the South Bronx, Harlem, Williamsburg, and Bushwick. Citywide, 60 percent of multi-family rental units were built before 1929 and 24 percent were constructed before 1901; these percentages were far higher in the

city's poorest neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, although the city was experiencing a housing deficit, with net vacancy hovering at an incredibly low 2.77 percent, between 1970 and 1975, the city lost 6,000 units per year to abandonment, structural collapse, and fire.<sup>11</sup> Nor could most residents afford to live in newly constructed apartment complexes. Indeed, almost 80 percent of all private units built in 1974 had monthly rents of \$300 or more.<sup>12</sup> This was prohibitively expensive for most poor families. In addition to being old and overcrowded, apartments in poor neighborhoods rarely complied with governmental safety requirements. The city government was almost wholly responsible for their lack of compliance: by the 1970s, the city could not meet its obligations to provide regular electrical, construction, and building inspections.<sup>13</sup> Citywide, between 1970 and 1975, the number of electrical inspectors fell from 250 to 78, housing inspectors dropped from 700 to 400, and construction inspections plummeted from 187 to 96. By the end of the decade, the Electrical Inspection Bureau had a backlog of 80,000 uninspected building applications and had yet to investigate 80,300 pending building violations.<sup>14</sup>

Overcrowded buildings in states of disrepair began to burn in the early 1960s. While annual fires in New York City had hovered at around 24,000 for most of the 1950s, from 1965 to 1983, yearly rates never dropped below 35,000. Between 1964 and 1968, the Fire Department's workload increased by 60 percent and from 1968 to 1976

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<sup>10</sup> Homefront: Citywide Action Group Against Neighborhood Destruction and For Low-Rent Housing, "Housing Abandonment in New York City," Box 9, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>11</sup> Vera Institute of Justice, "A Proposal For Neighborhood Arson Prevention Program," October 21, 1977, Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; Homefront, "Housing Abandonment in New York City."

<sup>12</sup> Vera Institute of Justice, "A Proposal For Neighborhood Arson Prevention Program."

<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Golubski, "New Bill is Wired for Action," *New York Daily News*, July 7, 1983, Box 8, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>14</sup> Golubski, "New Bill is Wired for Action;" Vera Institute of Justice, "A Proposal For Neighborhood Arson Prevention Program."

they were battling 46,000 to 56,000 blazes a year.<sup>15</sup> As flames engulfed her South Bronx community, one mother shared a complaint that could have been uttered by countless Lower East Siders, Harlemites, Bushwickians, or Brownsvillians. She lamented, “If my kids had any lullaby to go to sleep, it was the fire engines.”<sup>16</sup> Owing in part to the fires, between 1970 and 1975, vacant residential buildings increased from 3,520 to 8,511 citywide, from 423 to 1,213 in the Bronx, from 1,988 to 4,829 in Brooklyn and from 815 to 1,397 in Manhattan.<sup>17</sup>

City officials largely ignored the first wave of fires in the 1960s and nowhere was this apathy more pronounced than in the Bronx. One veteran fireman remarked that accidental fires and suspected cases of arson were “officially ignored” and that he often got the feeling that the fire commissioner and his chiefs “wished this place would go away, that they could sell it to Westchester County and get rid of it.”<sup>18</sup> It took until 1974 for local activists to get city officials to visit Charlotte Street, one of the most fire-prone blocks in the South Bronx, and residents recalled that politicians like Congressman Herman Badillo and Planning Commissioner John Zuccotti remained unmoved by the sights. Community organizer Father Neil A. Connolly remembered District Attorney Mario Merola staring at the charred remains of Charlotte Street and exclaiming, “Fires? What fires?”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Flood, *The Fires*, 175; Arson Strike Force, “Arson in New York,” 1983-1993; Arson Strike Force, “Semi-Annual Report to the City Council #3;” Wallace and Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> Another Bronx resident noted matter-of-factly, “we accepted the fires as an everyday occurrence.” Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002), 233, 266.

<sup>17</sup> John M. Quigley, “Housing Policy: Providing Appropriate Incentives,” in *New York Affairs: Setting Regional Priorities* (Special Issue), 5:2 (1978), Box 9, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>18</sup> Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising*, 232.

<sup>19</sup> One South Bronx resident, Genevieve Brooks remarked, “No one, but no one, was interested. Everyone thought that because this was a predominantly minority area it was just junkies and welfare folks.

By 1972 the city had shifted its policy on the fire epidemic. Instead of ignoring the blazes, starting under Mayor John Lindsay, the city had begun to cut fire services to the communities that needed them most. Between 1972 and 1991, the city closed 42 fire companies.<sup>20</sup> A whopping 36 of these fire stations were located in the Bronx, Brooklyn, or Manhattan. (See Appendix I, Figure 6.) Seven companies were shuttered in the South Bronx, six in Brownsville, and four in the Lower East Side.<sup>21</sup> Where busy engines once had five to seven firefighters per shift, now most had to make do with four.<sup>22</sup> Of the cuts, one Brooklyn-based firefighter remarked that on busy nights, “The commanders are pleading for help, and the dispatchers have no help to give them.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the city routinely bestowed its reduced fire services to the wealthiest New Yorkers. Fire companies in well-off neighborhoods that experienced fewer annual blazes remained open and if citywide fire services were stretched thin, officials gave top priority to fighting fires in affluent locales like Greenwich Village, Chelsea, and Murray Hill.<sup>24</sup>

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No one in authority was trying to combat...[the fires].” Nor was such neglect confined to the Bronx. In 1979, after years of rampant blazes, Brooklyn Borough President Howard Golden implored Mayor Koch to deploy more fire marshals to Kings County. Noting that the mayor’s silence on the issue “distressed me greatly,” Golden wrote, “The necessity for more fire marshalls [sic] in Brooklyn, deployed in potentially vulnerable neighborhoods, such as Flatbush, is both clear and pressing....In view of the soaring numbers of fires which are destroying our neighborhoods, I must urge you to reconsider your position and support my proposal for additional manpower. This is a vital issue.” Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising*, 261, 252; Howard Golden, “Letter to Mayor Edward I. Koch,” May 14, 1979, Box 050328, Edward I. Koch Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY.

<sup>20</sup> Wallace and Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses*, 40. It bears mentioning that the city government later restored seven of these companies.

<sup>21</sup> Wallace and Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses*, 40. The city later restored one of closed South Bronx fire companies.

<sup>22</sup> Flood, *The Fires*, 269. While at the turn of the decade, the standard company would bring three engines and two ladders to combat fires, by the mid-1970s, the city government reduced the standard response unit by one engine. Frank J. Prial, “New York’s Budget Problem is Adding to Heat Felt by Firemen,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1976, Box 7, Abraham D. Beame Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY; Wallace and Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses*, 33, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Prial, “New York’s Budget Problem is Adding to Heat Felt by Firemen.”

<sup>24</sup> The city even built new fire stations in predominately white, suburban communities in Staten Island and Throggs Neck, both of which had escaped the citywide fire epidemic. Wallace and Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses*, 34-35; Flood, *The Fires*, 211.



In order to make sense of the reduction of fire services to poor communities, it is necessary to examine New York's near brush with bankruptcy. In 1975, the city ran a deficit of \$726 million. As New York neared insolvency, elected officials like Mayor Abe Beame were increasingly forced to take advice from the city's finance, insurance, and real estate leaders (the FIRE sector) and from public intellectuals who worked for periodicals like *The Public Interest* and think tanks like the Manhattan Institute. Both camps recommended that the city greatly reduce its reckless spending habits and make welfare cuts. They also called for the large-scale privatization of municipal and social services.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Owing to space constraints, I cannot discuss the details of the fiscal crisis in as great detail as I would like. However, here is a brief overview of the city's financial emergency: During the fiscal crisis of 1975, New York governor Hugh Carey turned to public intellectuals as well as to the FIRE sector for help. The governor pressured Beame, who was only in his second full year in office, to embrace these outside voices. Carey forced Beame to implement austerity measures drawn up by a group of FIRE leaders known as the Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC). MAC's demands included a wage freeze for and lay-offs of city workers, a transit fare increase, the elimination of universal free tuition at City College, a vast curtailment of rent control, and cuts in welfare benefits. In a significant act of compliance, Beame was partially successful in laying-off 1,1774 firemen and 140 fire officers. While many of these cuts saved the city little money, they nonetheless served to empower the FIRE industry and bestow it with unprecedented governmental power. The creation of the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB) further entrenched FIRE leaders in influential city government positions. Formed by Carey, the EFCB was charged with enacting the MAC's austerity measures. Although the majority of EFCB members were elected officials, FIRE leaders within the EFCB nonetheless held veto power over the board. In fact, the FIRE industry contingent of the EFCB was so powerful it effectively controlled the city's revenue. While the federal government under President Gerald Ford had strenuously objected to aiding the city, opinion changed after the EFCB successfully pressured local unions to donate \$2.3 million of their pensions to keep New York solvent. Shortly thereafter, in December of 1975, Ford signed the Seasonal Financing Act that granted New York City \$2.3 billion in short-term loans. While these loans ended the city's fiscal crisis, the MAC, the EFCB, and the federal government had fundamentally changed city governance. Corporate leaders were more powerful than ever and the welfare state was under siege. Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis was Sold to the World* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 127; Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2000), 270; Frank Lombardi, "Arbitrator Halts Firemen Layoffs," *New York Daily News*, February 18, 1976, Box 7, Abraham D. Beame Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY; Emmanuel Perlmutter, "Arbitrator Bars Firemen Layoffs," *New York Times*, February 16, 1976, Box 7, Abraham D. Beame Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY; "A Wounded City," *New York Post*, February 16, 1976, Box 7, Abraham D. Beame Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY; "City Will Fight the Layoff Ruling," *New York Post*, February 18, 1976, Box 7, Abraham D. Beame Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY.

Intellectuals associated with *The Public Interest* and the Manhattan Institute pushed welfare and fire service cuts for ideological as well as economic reasons. These intellectuals included Roger Starr, Edward C. Banfield, Nathan Glazer, and James Q. Wilson. In the late 1960s and 1970s, they pointed to high rates of fire in nonwhite communities as proof that the urban poor were destroying their neighborhoods and the city as a whole. Poor New Yorkers, they claimed, could not be saved through government intervention. On the contrary, welfare spending made conditions worse across the city and needed to be cut or eliminated altogether. These intellectuals and likeminded politicians, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, blamed the city's urban crisis on the "culture of poverty," "social pathology," and changing character of the mostly nonwhite urban poor.<sup>26</sup> They dismissed the effects of endemic poverty, dilapidated housing, substandard schooling, and rampant unemployment on the city's urban crisis.

Needless to say, these critiques were often racially fueled. For homegrown intellectuals such as Irving Kristol, who founded and edited *The Public Interest*, New York City was symbolic of the failed promises of urban liberalism. According to historian Alice O'Connor, this disaffection with liberalism that Kristol shared with many of his *Public Interest* peers was "galvanized, but not singularly caused, by mounting racial conflict."<sup>27</sup> For many intellectuals, the urban crisis was embodied in the racialized battles over New York's late-1960s efforts to decentralize schools, the city's 1975 fiscal crisis, and, importantly, in the countless fires set citywide during the summer blackout of

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<sup>26</sup> Alice O'Connor, "The Privatized City: The Manhattan Institute, the Urban Crisis, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 34: 333 (2008): 339; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Superintendent of Documents, United States Government Print Office, 1965), 30.

<sup>27</sup> O'Connor, "The Privatized City," 335.

1977.<sup>28</sup> For his part, Edward C. Banfield, Kristol's peer and collaborator, attributed urban racial violence and inner city fires to "outbreaks of animal spirits...by slum dwellers."<sup>29</sup>

Five years before the fiscal crisis of 1975 and seven years prior to the infamous blackout, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then advisor to President Richard Nixon and future New York Senator, tied the prevalence of fire in poor, nonwhite communities to a new form of urban, "social pathology."<sup>30</sup> In his coauthored book with Nathan Glazer, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), and in his report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), Moynihan argued that unlike earlier generations of white immigrants, African Americans and Latinos demonstrated an unwillingness to "follow the path of self-help and cultural assimilation."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, he averred that young nonwhite New Yorkers who grew up in female-headed households were the socially maladjusted victims of an inner-city "culture of pathology."<sup>32</sup> In his 1970 memorandum to President Nixon, Moynihan contended that it was this culture of pathology and inability to assimilate that made nonwhite New Yorkers natural arsonists. Employing circular reasoning, he wrote that "slums produce" firesetters and that "fires are a 'leading indicator' of social pathology for a neighborhood."<sup>33</sup> Citing the prevalence of arson within urban communities, Moynihan encouraged Nixon to implement a national policy of "benign neglect" and to cut aid to nonwhite neighborhoods.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>29</sup> Edward C. Banfield, "Rioting Mainly for Fun and Profit," in *The Metropolitan Enigma*, ed. James Q. Wilson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 297.

<sup>30</sup> Moynihan, *The Negro Family*, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1963); Moynihan, *The Negro Family*; O'Connor, "The Privatized City," 341.

<sup>32</sup> Moynihan, *The Negro Family*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> "Text of the Moynihan Memorandum on the State of Negroes," *New York Times*, January 30, 1970, 3.

Roger Starr, who Beame had appointed head of New York's Housing and Development Administration (HDA) in 1974, first articulated a local variant of benign neglect in 1976. Known as planned shrinkage, the policy sought to reduce the size of slums and contain their spread into more affluent parts of the city. Like Moynihan, Starr had ties to *The Public Interest*; the newly appointed director of the HDA was the onetime editor of the periodical.<sup>34</sup> Concurring with the nascent coalition of FIRE leaders and intellectuals that he once represented, Starr called for a reduction of government aid to deteriorating communities. Starr and his *Public Interest* colleagues depicted fire-prone neighborhoods like the South Bronx, Harlem, and Flatbush as "human cesspools"; they were infected by a plague of poverty and cultural depravity that threatened to infect the rest of the city.<sup>35</sup>

Starr saw planned shrinkage as a form of containment or quarantine to safeguard New York as a whole. By greatly decreasing government aid to poor neighborhoods and "thin[ning] out" firefighting, police, and subway services, Starr hoped that blacks and Latinos would leave the city.<sup>36</sup> As he saw it, when these culturally pathological residents departed, the city would no longer have to contend with a fire epidemic. Moreover, once their former abodes were abandoned, they could be repossessed by the city and converted into more profitable private apartment complexes or office spaces.<sup>37</sup> Planned shrinkage,

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<sup>34</sup> Nathan Glazer, "Neoconservatism and Liberal New York," in *Rethinking the Urban Agenda: Reinvigorating the Liberal Tradition in New York City and Urban America*, eds. John Mollenkopf and Ken Emerson (New York, NY: The Century Foundation Press, 2001), 25.

<sup>35</sup> James Q. Wilson, "Urban Problems in Perspective," in *The Metropolitan Enigma: Inquiries into the Nature and Dimensions of America's "Urban Crisis"*, ed. James Q. Wilson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 403.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Fried, "City's Housing Administrator Proposes 'Planned Shrinkage' of Some Slums," *New York Times*, February 3, 1976, B1.

<sup>37</sup> Roger Starr, "Refusal to Face Facts a Peril to City," *New York Times*, October 3, 1976, 1, 6. Box 6, Abraham D. Beame Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College,

Starr maintained, would replace unemployed blacks and Latinos who had blue-collar skills with white, middle-class workers who were better suited to the city's new service economy. This was the goal of many FIRE executives and public intellectuals who felt that New York City in the 1960s and 1970s suffered from a "jobs-skills mismatch."<sup>38</sup> Starr asserted that planned shrinkage was designed to encourage nonwhite New Yorkers to relocate to cities and towns where blue-collar jobs existed; he argued that the policy would "Stop the Puerto Ricans and the rural blacks from living in the city."<sup>39</sup> In his estimations, the city would save a fortune on welfare spending and the maintenance of crumbling infrastructure with fewer poor, unemployed residents. Behind closed doors, Starr and many policymakers would likely have agreed with one anonymous FIRE industry advisor who viewed the cause of New York's economic woes through a distinctly racial lens: "It's the fucking blacks and Puerto Ricans. They use too many city services and they don't pay any taxes. New York's in trouble because it's got too many fucking blacks and Puerto Ricans."<sup>40</sup> Those same officials would have also seen blacks and Puerto Ricans as arsonists.

While the public outcry over planned shrinkage eventually led Beame to demand Starr's resignation in 1976, planned shrinkage and similar measures proposed by intellectuals and FIRE leaders had already become de facto city policy.<sup>41</sup> Indeed,

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Queens, NY; Roger Starr, "Making New York Smaller," *New York Times Magazine*, November 14, 1976, 32-34, 99-106.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Fitch, *The Assassination of New York* (New York, NY: Verso, 1993), vii.

<sup>39</sup> Starr, "Making New York Smaller," 33.

<sup>40</sup> Fitch, *The Assassination of New York*, vii.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph P. Fried, "Starr, New York City's Housing Chief Will Leave Post by Fall, Officials Say," May 22, 1976, 29; "Starr Resigning as Chief of New York City Housing," *New York Times*, July 9, 1976, 30. United States Representatives Herman Badillo and Charles Rangel, who represented the South Bronx and Harlem, respectively, were especially critical of planned shrinkage. Badillo called the measure a "callous disregard for human lives" that privileged the "the interests of bankers over those of the people." Rangel decried that the policy amounted to "an attempt to deport blacks and Puerto Ricans...[from] our

although the Beame and Koch administrations never explicitly called their actions planned shrinkage, it is clear that variations of the policy existed as early as the 1960s when city officials withheld and even cut basic services like firefighting to nonwhite communities. Planned shrinkage was something of an ‘unofficial’ policy throughout the 1960s and early-1970s, long before Starr first articulated it in 1976. Planned shrinkage as an unofficial policy would remain in effect after Koch took office in 1978. Like his mayoral predecessors, Koch continued to reduce crucial fire services to poor communities in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.<sup>42</sup> While Koch would continue to chip away at fire services for poor communities, unlike Mayors Lindsay and Beame, he realized that the fire epidemic had to be addressed in some capacity if the city had any hope of attracting businesses and tourists back to New York. His solution was to wage a war on arson.

### Nonwhite Youths and the Invention of the Arson Crisis

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city.” Thomas A. Johnson, “Rohaytn Scored By Congressmen: Badillo and Rangel Critical of Blighted-Areas Plan,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1986, 18.

<sup>42</sup> During one address to the Manhattan Institute, Koch defended these cuts by arguing, “you can only do that which you pay for. There are no free lunches.... There’s a limit to what the government can do for the people.” Yet, when he did reduce fire services, many journalists and New Yorkers quickly accused him of implementing planned shrinkage. Writing for the *Guardian*, Joe Floss noted how Koch shuttered fire companies and asserted, “Many...communities in New York City have already been razed by fire after being beleaguered by a campaign of systematic, deliberate neglect.... The idea is to strip working-class and poor communities of essential services so that residents are forced to leave these designated areas. The city then turns certain areas into havens for the corporations and the urban gentry.” Floss goes on to quote one Brooklyn resident who lamented, “All they want to do is let this area collapse completely and then they’ll take over at a nice cheap price and build up what they need.” Needless to say, the words of this Brooklyn resident and of his peers across the city were unheeded. Manhattan Institute, “New York Unbound: Proceedings of the Manhattan Institute’s Conference on December 5th and December 6th 1988 at the Harvard Club,” December 5, 1988, Box 080075, Edward I. Koch Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY; Joe Floss, “‘Firehouse’: Fighting, Winning,” *Guardian*, February 27, 1980, Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

While Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Roger Starr, and their peers at *The Public Interest* had always seen nonwhites as firesetters and arson itself as a threat to the city, it was only following the blackout of 1977 that local officials became aware of arson and its linkage to the urban poor. It is no coincidence that Mayor Beame established the city's first agency to combat arson, the Mayor's Arson Task Force (MATF), in August 1977, merely a month after most of the city had lost power for 25 straight hours.<sup>43</sup> In addition to mass looting, the fire department responded to 1,037 fires and the police arrested 3,776 people.<sup>44</sup> *Public Interest* contributors like Midge Decter quickly tied the blazes and the looting to nonwhite, pathological New Yorkers. She wrote that blacks and Latinos, who were "on a rampage of looting and arson," were little more than "urban insect life...having the time of their lives" as the city fell into chaos.<sup>45</sup> Seeking to explain the wave of crime in poor neighborhoods during the blackout, city officials and policymakers increasingly began to see African Americans and Latinos as culturally degenerate. Noting the burned down buildings in the South Bronx, Frank Puig, the chairman of Community Board No. 4, declared that arson had become "part of the culture."<sup>46</sup> Paul DeCicco, the director of Environmental Urban Studies at the Polytechnic Institute of New York in Brooklyn, was even more forceful in linking racial and cultural identity to arson. "There is no doubt," he remarked, "that Latin blood is more volatile and revenge modes more pronounced....Norwegians don't do this sort of thing."<sup>47</sup><sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Jacobson, "Memorandum: Re: Activities of New York City's Fire Marshals' Welfare Frauds Unit."

<sup>44</sup> Greenberg, *Branding New York*, 186.

<sup>45</sup> Midge Decter, "Looting and Liberal Racism," *Commentary*, 64:3 (September 1977): 48, 52.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Curvin and Bruce Porter, *Blackout Looting!: New York City, July 13, 1977* (New York, NY: Gardner Press, Inc., 1979), 136.

<sup>47</sup> Many white New Yorkers also criticized their nonwhite peers. Echoing Moynihan and Glazer's assertion that blacks and Latinos were seemingly unassimilable, one anonymous Jewish man wrote to *The New York Times*, exclaiming, "My grandfather pushed a pushcart all over the Lower East Side to earn

Mayor Beame's fledgling MATF operated for a few months before it was forced to close because of interagency conflicts between fire and police department leaders.<sup>49</sup> On August 29, 1978, newly elected Mayor Ed Koch created the Arson Strike Force (ASF), which continued to operate well into the 1990s.<sup>50</sup> The Strike Force specifically targeted the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, since they were the most fire-prone boroughs in the city. Between 1979 and 1986, 80 percent or more of total structural arsons (arsons in buildings) occurred within these three boroughs; likewise, from 1983 to 1986, over 80 percent of those arrested for arson were apprehended in the Bronx, Brooklyn, or Manhattan.<sup>51</sup> (See Appendix I, Figures 5 and 7.)

Koch started the ASF and launched his war on arson largely to attract businesses and tourists back to the city. Starting with the blackout, images of the city burning became media spectacles, garnering front-page headlines and national and international television coverage.<sup>52</sup> The fires were bad for business and they were not exactly welcoming sights for visitors. As the mayor funneled over \$4 million into tourism and advertising campaigns that featured Broadway theaters and newly constructed convention centers, he intended to portray the city as a safe and clean environment—"a financial

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enough to feed and raise his family. He worked to make it. Why can't they?" Curvin and Porter, *Blackout Looting!*, 138; "'My Grandfather' and the Looters," *New York Times*, July 23, 1977, 13. Emphasis original.

<sup>48</sup> "'My Grandfather' and the Looters," *New York Times*, July 23, 1977, 13. Emphasis original.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobson, "Memorandum: Re: Activities of New York City's Fire Marshals' Welfare Frauds Unit."

<sup>50</sup> "Local Laws of the City of New York for the Year 1978: No. 23, Title F: Arson Strike Force," August 29, 1978, Box 050328, Edward I. Koch Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY.

<sup>51</sup> Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1987. Municipal Archives, the New York City Department of Records, New York, NY. Note that the city did not keep track of structural arsons by borough before 1979; nor did they document arson arrests by borough before 1983.

<sup>52</sup> As sociologist Miriam Greenberg has argued, these images served as "a counter-hegemonic visual force...providing the nation with its paradigmatic representation of the decline of urban America." Greenberg, *Branding New York*, 163.



center and a tourist destination.”<sup>53</sup> The blazes flew in the face of Koch’s attempts to project “a common vision of New York,” one based entirely on consumption.<sup>54</sup> Such a new metropolis would primarily reflect the desires of out-of-towners, the corporate community, and an aspiring middle-class. Poor, unsafe outer-borough communities and their pathological residents could only hamper Koch’s image of a resurgent New York. Thus, the establishment of the ASF should be seen as part of the mayor’s plan to help fix the city’s “image crisis.”<sup>55</sup>

When conceptualizing the role of the ASF, it is clear that Koch was greatly informed by the concepts laid out in *The Public Interest* and by members of the Manhattan Institute. Indeed, the mayor would go on to praise the latter organization for providing “the wealth that made New York City great. The wealth of ideas.”<sup>56</sup> Taking a page from Moynihan, Starr, and Banfield, who was convinced that “from the very earliest times... arson ha[s]... been [a] favorite pastime of the young,” the ASF targeted black and Latino youths living in poor neighborhoods.<sup>57</sup>

The members of the ASF determined that there were three types of arson: vandalism arson, arson-for-revenge, and arson-for-profit.<sup>58</sup> While the Strike Force arrested nonwhite youths for all three, it maintained that they were psychologically

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>56</sup> “New York Unbound.” President of the Manhattan Institute, W.M.H. Hammett would, in turn, compare Koch to Margaret Thatcher. Of Koch, Hammett remarked, “I consider you to be one of the few politicians with the depth and courage necessary for real leadership.” W.M.H. Hammett, “Letter to The Honorable Edward I. Koch,” December 13, 1988, Box 080075, Edward I. Koch Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY.

<sup>57</sup> Banfield, “Rioting Mainly for Fun and Profit,” 287.

<sup>58</sup> John Nealon, “Arson,” n.d., Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; “Untitled Document Detailing the Types of Arson,” n.d., Box 10, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

predisposed to the first two types of arson.<sup>59</sup> Some ASF members equated arson-for-revenge so strongly with young people that they called it “juvenile” or “teen-age arson.”<sup>60</sup> Given that many in the Strike Force viewed nonwhite youths as particularly revenge-oriented, one is left to wonder whether the ASF members would have agreed with Paul DeCiccio’s contention “that Latin” and perhaps black “blood is more volatile and revenge modes more pronounced.”<sup>61</sup>

Employing the rhetoric used by writers for *The Public Interest*, ASF reports often deemed arson to be “evidence of extreme social pathology” and described how “children, drug addicts, and other people with various psychological and/or social pathologies” were burning the city to the ground.<sup>62</sup> As if to underscore this social pathology, one report likened juvenile firesetters to murderers, burglars, embezzlers, and psychopaths, while another noted that “[t]he line between [juvenile] vandalism and psychotic disorders is a thin one.”<sup>63</sup> Despite the fact that the New York Fire Marshal himself asserted that pyromania was responsible for less than 1 percent of the city’s arson problem, ASF members routinely conflated youths with pyromaniacs. According to those on the Strike Force, both juveniles and pyromaniacs were usually male and set fires to “relieve

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<sup>59</sup> Nealon, “Arson;” “Untitled Document Detailing the Types of Arson.”

<sup>60</sup> “Remarks by City Council President Carol Bellamy to the National Arson Prevention Action Coalition Conference. Hosted by the People’s Firehouse,” April 11, 1981, Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; John Barracato, *Community Arson Awareness Program: The Best Answer* (New York, NY: Aetna Life & Casualty, n.d.), Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>61</sup> Curvin and Porter, *Blackout Looting!*, 136.

<sup>62</sup> Borg and David, “Arson: A Multi-Dimensional Problem;” Vera Institute of Justice, “Neighborhood Arson Prevention Program Proposal to Department of Housing and Urban Development Neighborhood Preservation Program.”

<sup>63</sup> Barracato, *Community Arson Awareness Program*; Don Carufo, Ellen Bitkower, and Carole Sayle, *Predicting Arson Risk in New York City: A First Report* (New York, NY: Don Carufo, September 1980), Box 7, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

boredom or frustration,” and as “another weird way to get kicks.”<sup>64</sup> While a number of Strike Force members linked juvenile arson to gang membership and drug or alcohol use, arrest reports collected by the ASF do not indicate any correlation between firesetting and gang membership or drug and alcohol use.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, race mattered at least as much as age to ASF members when determining whether a community was fire-prone. Documents reveal that the ASF equated nonwhiteness with a propensity towards firesetting. In their reports, the ASF listed “change in [the] ethnicity of [a] neighborhood” alongside buildings with high

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<sup>64</sup> Carole Shifman and Nancy Wheeler, eds., *Profiles: A Handbook on Community Arson Prevention* (Boston, MA: Urban Educational Systems, Inc., 1981), Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; “Community News No. 7,” December, 1980, Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; John Nealon, “Community Outreach Project Notes,” n.d., Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; Nealon, “Arson;” Barracato, *Community Arson Awareness Program*.

<sup>65</sup> “Community News No. 7;” Nealon, “Arson;” Arson Strike Force, “Untitled Document Detailing Arson’s Relation to Crimes like Gang Membership and Drug Usage,” n.d., Box 8, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY. The manner in which the ASF viewed poor youths is perhaps most cogently reflected in the actions of the Community Outreach Project (COP). Founded in 1980 and led by John Nealon, the COP was designed to “educate...[and] almost ‘scare’ kids away from setting fires and to get kids involved in pro-neighborhood action.” In addition to sending out newsletters, sponsoring anti-arson art contests for schoolchildren, and organizing anti-arson youth patrols, the COP created an “Anti-Arson Skit,” which was initially performed by and for Williamsburg high school students in 1980. The play, which features three teenage characters, portrays nonwhite youths and their communities in a remarkably negative fashion. There are only three characters, two teenage boys and a teenage girl. As the youths wander around their filthy and dangerous neighborhood (the over-the-top stage directions call for “junk all over...bottles, paper, wood, metal, clothing, shoes...Back alley noises, dog barking”), there are no parents or adults in sight to mentor the characters. Eric, who is described as an “[u]ndecided youth who, if the money sounds good, would do anything for it,” speaks in crude minstrel-like dialect, uttering phrases like “Now dig, man, that ain’t my thing.” He has no respect for Steve and Donna who hope to start a community group to clean up their neighborhood and stop arsonists. In fact, Eric tells Steve and Donna that there is a “dude” who is offering “100 dollars to throw a match.” While thinking about fires to come, Eric reveals his pyromanical tendencies—remarkingly, “Ain’t it pretty?” When Steve asks him who will clean the rubble, Eric responds as if he is unaware of the governmental service cuts to poor neighborhoods: “I don’t know, baby. Maybe the sanitation department will.” While Steve and Donna eventually talk Eric down, the skit hardly carries a positive message. The overwhelming theme is one of nonwhite youths run amok. The audience is left to wonder whether there are enough noble kids like Steve and Donna to stop destructive, poorly educated, pyromanical youths like Eric. Robert Siverls, “Anti-Arson Skit,” 1980, Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

vacancy rates and overcrowding as an indicator of arson.<sup>66</sup> They likewise noted that “[s]erious ethnic... conflicts may give rise to arson as a means of expressing hostility.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the Strike Force seemed worried that mixed race neighborhoods were particularly susceptible to fire. This might explain why the ASF produced two sets of pamphlets, one in English and the other in Spanish, with identical contents but vastly different covers. The cover for the leaflet entitled “Arson,” featured newspaper headlines reading “4th black church hit by suspicious fire” and “9 Dead in 2 Brooklyn Fires; 3 Men Accused of Homicide.”<sup>68</sup> By contrast, readers of “Incendio Sospechoso”<sup>69</sup> were greeted a different headline: “Mueren 7 hispanos en un incendio—Tres de ellos niños.”<sup>70</sup> Why did the ASF choose to include different newspaper headlines in an otherwise identical pamphlet? Did they perhaps assume that blacks and Latinos living side-by-side in neighborhoods like the South Bronx, Harlem, and Williamsburg did not value each other’s lives and property?

While in their post-1982 reports, the ASF occasionally broke arson arrests down by race, age, and sex, after 1983, the numbers that they do provide indicate that the vast majority of those arrested for the crime were black or Latino males aged 29 or under. In 1983 and 1984, the only two years that the ASF provided a racial breakdown, almost 80 percent of those arrested for arson were black or Latino. Moreover, between 1983 and

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<sup>66</sup> National Arson Prevention and Action Coalition, “National Arson Prevention and Action Coalition Member Group Survey,” n.d., Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>67</sup> Vera Institute of Justice, “A Proposal For Neighborhood Arson Prevention Program.”

<sup>68</sup> Nealon, “Arson.”

<sup>69</sup> “Suspicious Fire.”

<sup>70</sup> “7 Hispanics dead in a fire—three of them children.” John Nealon, “Incendio Sospechoso,” n.d., Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

1986, over 60 percent of individuals apprehended were 29 years of age or younger and over 80 percent were male.<sup>71</sup> (See Appendix I, Figures 2, 3, and 4.)

It should not come as a surprise that the ASF focused the bulk of their attention on poor, nonwhite youths. After all, apprehending them en masse allowed Mayor Koch to boost his arrest numbers and argue that his war on arson was successful. While the national average arrest rate for arson in the late 1970s was 3 percent, the city was able to raise its rate to 7.6 percent by 1980.<sup>72</sup> This was achieved, in part, by prosecuting children as young 3 years old who had accidentally started fires after playing with matches and lighters.<sup>73</sup> Poor youths were easier to convict; most knew no lawyers and did not understand their legal rights. In the late 1970s, the city convicted defendants accused of arson or got them to take plea bargains in 80 percent of all depositions; courts in the South Bronx boasted a 92 percent conviction rate.<sup>74</sup> While in the late 1970s, less than 2

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<sup>71</sup> Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1987. While it is unclear as to whether a list of 1,075 individuals arrested for arson in 1977 and 508 in 1978 represent the total number of individuals arrested for the crime in those two years, the race, age, and sex of these individuals seem to be in keeping with those apprehended between 1983 and 1986.<sup>71</sup> According to the lists, in 1977 and 1978, over 80 percent of those arrested were male African Americans or Latinos; the median age was just over 24 years old. Arson Strike Force, "Lists of those Arrested for Arson, 1977 and 1978," Box 7, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>72</sup> Fadum, ed., *Tools*; Community-Based Disaster Planning Advisory Committee, "Community-Based Disaster Planning Project Advisory Minutes," February 2, 1980, Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>73</sup> "Lists of those Arrested for Arson, 1977 and 1978;" Illinois Advisory Committee on Arson Prevention, "Touched Off By Human Hands," n.d., Box 3, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; Arson Strike Force, "Arson Strike Force Annual Report, 1993," Municipal Archives, the New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>74</sup> John Novak, "Memorandum: Re: Nine Month Arson Report," October 27, 1978, Box 10, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; Arson Strike Force, "Indictments, Dispositions and Convictions: New York City Counties, 1977 & 1978," 1979, Box 10, Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; Vera Institute of Justice, "A Proposal of Neighborhood Arson Prevention."

percent of all citywide suspicious fires led to convictions, this rate was still a full percentage point higher than the national average.<sup>75</sup>

Nonwhite youths were also easy targets. The ASF and the Fire and Police Departments found it far less costly and time-consuming to apprehend and convict so-called vandals or revenge-arsonists than to arrest the landlords who ordered arsons and kept far away from the crime scene. As Randall E. Fadem, of the Boston-based tenant advocacy group Urban Educational Systems, remarked, “[t]he business risks of the arson profiteer are minimal.”<sup>76</sup> As is noted above, the criminal arrest and conviction rates were incredibly low and in most civil cases, the cost of litigation on the part of insurance companies was prohibitive—about \$25,000 per case.<sup>77</sup> Unfortunately, by jailing those youths hired by landlords to torch buildings, the city did little to address the real problem of arson-for-profit. Yet, since youths were easily caught, high arrest rates perpetuated the “popular mythology” that young people were responsible for most arson.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

By 1986, three years before Koch left office, total fires had fallen six years in a row and official citywide arsons had plummeted from 13,348 in 1977 to 4,142 in 1986—a 70 percent decrease.<sup>79</sup> Koch and city officials attributed this improvement largely to the formation of the Arson Strike Force, the creation of a computerized arson database, a

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<sup>75</sup> Novak, “Memorandum: Re: Nine Month Arson Report;” Vera Institute of Justice, “Neighborhood Arson Prevention Proposal to Department of Housing and Urban Development.”

<sup>76</sup> Fadem, ed., *Tools*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* According to researchers at Urban Educational Systems, this perception was “statistically untrue;” they asserted that fires were rarely “the work of simple juvenile vandals” and that youth firesetting was “the most overlooked and least understood aspect of arson.” Shifman and Wheeler, eds., *Profiles*; Fadem, ed., *Tools*.

<sup>79</sup> Arson Strike Force, “Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports,” 1983-1987.

1981 state law that made it harder for landlords to collect insurance money on buildings that caught on fire, and its initiative to cut welfare claims to suspected arsonists.<sup>80</sup> While some of these measures may have been successful in reducing both arson and accidental blazes, the fires only began to cease in the mid-1980s after whole neighborhoods had been largely abandoned or burned to the ground. Forty percent of the South Bronx was burned or abandoned by 1980.<sup>81</sup> Once vibrant neighborhoods like, Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Harlem, and the Lower East Side, lost between 70 and 90 percent of their buildings and residents.<sup>82</sup> In many poor communities, there were simply no buildings left to burn. Many residents left the city. Between 1970 and 1980, the city lost 823,233 people—a 10.4 percent population decrease and the largest drop in New York City history. While Manhattan’s population fell by 7.2 percent, the Bronx and Brooklyn lost 20.6 and 14.3 percent of their residents, respectively.<sup>83</sup> (See Appendix I, Figure 8.)

In 1986, with victory against the perceived threat of arson in sight, and after arresting 52 children under the age of 12 earlier in the year, Koch and the Arson Strike Force created the Juvenile Firesetters Intervention Program (JFIP). After the JFIP was

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<sup>80</sup> Patrick T. Hoey, “Memorandum to Edward I. Koch Re: Hearing of Assembly Subcommittee on Urban Arson,” March 6, 1984, Box 0000006, Edward I. Koch Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY; Edward I. Koch, “Testimony of Mayor Edward I. Koch Before New York State Assembly Subcommittee on Urban Arson, March 8, 1984, Lehman College, Bronx, NY,” March 8, 1984, Box 0000006, Edward I. Koch Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens, NY.

<sup>81</sup> In 1970, the South Bronx neighborhood of Soundview held 836 residential and commercial buildings; a decade later, only nine remained. Flood, *The Fires*, 14; Joe Flood, “Why the Bronx Burned,” *New York Post*, May 16, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Flood, *The Fires*, 277.

<sup>83</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of the Population, and Housing: 1960* (Washington, D.C., 1962), Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population and Housing, New York* (Washington, D.C., 1971), Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing, New York, NY* (Washington, D.C., August 1983), Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

implemented, the city ceased arresting youths under the age of 13 for setting fires.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps Koch and the ASF started the JFIP having realized that with fires decreasing, the public would not look kindly upon an agency that continued to arrest children as young as 3 years old.<sup>85</sup> Rather than arrest youths, the goal of the JFIP was to “educate the curious or accidental fire setter, and help the potentially delinquent or emotionally troubled child by referring him or her to professional counseling.”<sup>86</sup> (See Appendix I, Figure 9.) While it is significant that the ASF eventually learned to distinguish between arsonists and children who caused accidental fires, the program was still premised on the assumption that nonwhite youths were inherently dangerous. As late as 1989, and without substantiating evidence, the ASF noted that some of the children who participated in the JFIP “will be seen again in later years as adult arsonists or even as serial murderers.”<sup>87</sup> More importantly, the creation of the JFIP did nothing to better to the lives of those youths who the ASF had targeted since the 1970s. Informed by corporate interests and public intellectuals, city officials initially denied fire services to the communities that needed them the most and then orchestrated a concerted attack on poor, nonwhite youths and their neighborhoods. In the 1970s and 1980s, the City of New York failed to protect its communities and made a habit of arresting its youngest sons and daughters.

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<sup>84</sup> Arson Strike Force, “Arson Strike Force Annual Report, 1993;” Arson Strike Force, “Arson in New York City: 1986,” Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>85</sup> Arson Strike Force, “Arson Strike Force Annual Report, 1993.”

<sup>86</sup> Arson Strike Force, “Arson in New York City: 1987,” Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.

<sup>87</sup> Arson Strike Force, “Arson Strike Force Annual Report, 1989,” Arson Strike Force, General Subject Files, 1978-1984, Municipal Archives, The New York City Department of Records, New York, NY.



## Appendix I

*Figure 1*

Total Documented Structural Arsons and Structural Fires Citywide and Percentage of Structural Fires Deemed Arson, 1970-1986

<b>Year</b>	<b>Structural Arsons</b>	<b>Structural Fires</b>	<b>Percentage of Fires Deemed Arson</b>
<b>1970</b>	8,741	46,746	18.7%
<b>1971</b>	8,190	48,904	16.7%
<b>1972</b>	8,377	47,745	17.5%
<b>1973</b>	9,013	49,533	18.2%
<b>1974</b>	10,441	52,473	19.9%
<b>1975</b>	11,523	54,957	21.0%
<b>1976</b>	13,752	56,810	24.2%
<b>1977</b>	13,348	50,941	26.2%
<b>1978</b>	10,302	44,670	23.1%
<b>1979</b>	7,754	43,072	18.0%
<b>1980</b>	8,312	44,151	18.8%
<b>1981</b>	7,709	42,388	18.2%
<b>1982</b>	6,806	39,251	17.3%
<b>1983</b>	5,557	36,525	15.2%
<b>1984</b>	5,104	34,673	14.7%
<b>1985</b>	5,075	34,237	14.8%
<b>1986</b>	4,142	31,124	14.8%

Sources: Sources: Arson Strike Force, "Semi-Annual Report to the City Council #3: July 1, 1979-December 31, 1979" and Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1986

Figure 2

Arson Arrests by Race and as a Percentage of Total Arson Arrests, 1983-1984

<b>Race</b>	<b>1983</b>	<b>1984</b>
Black	262 (41.6%)	291 (45.4)
Hispanic	225 (37.7%)	204 (31.8%)
White	136 (21.6%)	135 (21.1%)
Other	7 (1.1%)	11 (1.7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>630 (100%)</b>	<b>641 (100%)</b>

Sources: Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1994.

Figure 3

Number and Percentage of those Arrested for Arson who were 29 Years of Age and Under, 1983-1986

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number and Percentage of those Arrested for Arson who were 29 and Under</b>	<b>Total Number Arrested for Arson</b>
1983	404 (64.1%)	630
1984	402 (62.7%)	641
1985	302 (62.6%)	671
1986	206 (62.4%)	330

Sources: Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1986.

Figure 4

Arson Arrests by Sex and as a Percentage of Total Yearly Arson Arrests, 1983-1986

<b>Sex</b>	<b>1983</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1986</b>
Male	548 (87.0%)	542 (84.6%)	559 (83.3%)	264 (80.0%)
Female	82 (13%)	99 (15.4%)	112 (16.7%)	66 (20%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>630 (100%)</b>	<b>641 (100%)</b>	<b>671 (100%)</b>	<b>330 (100%)</b>

Sources: Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1986.

Figure 5

Documented Structural Arsons by Borough and as a Percentage of Total Documented Structural Arsons Citywide, 1979-1986

<b>Borough</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1981</b>	<b>1982</b>	<b>1983</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1986</b>
Brooklyn	3,040 (39.2%)	3,405 (41.0%)	2,887 (37.5%)	2,610 (38.3%)	2,063 (37.1%)	1,844 (36.1%)	1,737 (34.2%)	1,439 (34.7%)
The Bronx	2,247 (29.0%)	2,535 (30.3%)	2,365 (30.7%)	2,069 (30.4%)	1,636 (29.4%)	1,363 (26.7%)	1,339 (26.4%)	1,074 (25.9%)
Manhattan	1,348 (17.4)	1,332 (15.9%)	1,329 (17.2%)	1,122 (16.5%)	1,078 (19.4%)	1,088 (21.3%)	1,117 (22.0%)	904 (21.8%)
Queens	864 (11.1%)	806 (9.6%)	845 (11%)	753 (11.1%)	578 (10.4%)	586 (11.5%)	656 (12.9%)	556 (13.4%)
Staten Island	255 (3.3%)	295 (3.5%)	279 (3.6%)	252 (3.7%)	202 (3.6%)	223 (4.4%)	226 (4.5%)	169 (4.1%)
<b>Total</b>	7,754 (100%)	8,312 (100%)	7,709 (100%)	6,806 (100%)	5,557 (100%)	5,104 (100%)	5,075 (100%)	4,142 (100%)

Sources: Arson Strike Force, "Semi-Annual Report to the City Council #3: July 1, 1979-December 31, 1979" and Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1986

Figure 6

Fire Company Closings, 1972-1991

<b>Borough</b>	<b>Neighborhood</b>	<b>Number of Closed Fire Companies</b>
<b>Brooklyn</b>	Brownsville	6
	Bedford-Stuyvesant	2
	Crown Heights	1
	Greenpoint	2 (1 restored)
	Park Slope	2 (1 restored)
	Red Hook	1
	Brooklyn Heights	1
<b>The Bronx</b>	South Bronx	7 (1 restored)
	City Island	1 (restored)
<b>Manhattan</b>	Lower East Side	4
	Lower West Side	3 (2 restored)
	Times Square	1
	Upper West Side	2
	Harlem	3
<b>Queens</b>	Flushing	1
	Richmond Hills	1 (closed and reopened twice)
	Rockaway	2
	Stapleton	1
	Tottenville	1 (restored)
<b>Total</b>		42 (8 restored)

Source: Deborah Wallace and Rodrick Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses*, 40.

Figure 7

Arson Arrests by Borough and as a Percentage of Total Citywide Arrests, 1983-1986

<b>Borough</b>	<b>1983</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1986</b>
Brooklyn	195 (30.6%)	209 (32.6%)	217 (32.0%)	202 (33.2%)
The Bronx	165 (26.2%)	164 (25.6%)	166 (24.5%)	163 (26.8%)
Manhattan	148 (23.5%)	156 (24.3%)	166 (24.5%)	129 (21.2%)
Queens	78 (12.4%)	85 (13.3%)	112 (16.5%)	96 (15.8%)
Staten Island	44 (7.0%)	27 (4.2%)	17 (2.5%)	19 (3.1%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>630 (100%)</b>	<b>641 (100%)</b>	<b>678 (100%)</b>	<b>609 (100%)</b>

Sources: Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York: Arson Strike Force Annual Reports," 1983-1986

Figure 8

Population by Borough and Citywide in 1960, 1970, and 1980

<b>Borough</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>
Brooklyn	2,627,319	2,602,012	2,230,936
The Bronx	1,424,815	1,471,701	1,168,972
Manhattan	1,698,281	1,539,233	1,428,285
Queens	1,809,578	1,986,473	1,891,325
Staten Island	221,991	295,443	352,121
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,781,984</b>	<b>7,894,862</b>	<b>7,071,639</b>

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of the Population, and Housing: 1960*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population and Housing, New York*; U.S. Bureau of the Census; *1980 Census of Population and Housing, New York, NY*.

*Figure 9*

Number of Children Put in the Juvenile Firesetters Intervention Program (JFIP),  
Ages 2-12, in 1986

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of Children Put in JFIP</b>
2 years old	2
3 years old	7
4 years old	11
5 years old	4
6 years old	4
7 years old	7
8 years old	8
9 years old	4
10 years old	4
11 years old	4
12 years old	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>

Source: Arson Strike Force, "Arson Strike Force Annual Reports, 1986"

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