



Home, Interrupted

Rising Floods for Basement Apartment Dwellers

Over 100,000 people live in New York City basement apartments – most are immigrants. It’s an open secret that, while basement apartments offer cheap rent, they are potential death traps in a city experiencing more frequent and severe flooding due to climate change. Government programs to address the problem have largely failed. Producer Emmy Brett asks where people go when there is nowhere safe or affordable to call home.

Iggy Monda: Let me let you in on a little secret of mine.

I’ve lived in New York my entire life, and I’ve never ever visited the Statue of Liberty. Honestly, people who were born in New York and grew up here, we tend to avoid all of our monuments. But, we understand their significance.

With the Statue of Liberty, it’s literally written at the bottom, and you’ve probably heard it. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Lady Liberty symbolizes hope in the search for a new home, a new chance.

My parents and my sisters came to the United States from Jamaica and Italy right before I was born. They moved into a nice second-floor apartment in Manhattan. They still call that place home.

But people’s lives don’t always work out that way.

I’m Iggy Monda. From Feet in 2 Worlds this is Home, Interrupted, a podcast series where we look at the intersection between immigrants and climate change.

New York has a housing crisis. Like many other cities in the US, rents are skyrocketing, homelessness keeps increasing, and waves of asylum seekers keep arriving looking for a place to settle down and be safe.

So what are people doing? Many move underground ... literally. New York has thousands of basement apartments. They’ve existed for years, but now in this time of more intense flooding caused by climate change, living in a basement can mean risking your life, or losing it.

As producer Emmy Brett discovered, basement apartment dwellers have very few choices. And sometimes... the only choice... is to leave.

Emmy Brett: September 1st, 2021.

Bibiane Chamorro: Everything was fine until that day.

Emmy: This is Bibiane Chamorro. She came to the states 20 years ago from Colombia and worked as a housekeeper until she met her husband, Mario.

Bibiane Chamorro: I live in Colombia. My husband live in his country in Mexico.

Emmy: But you fell in love in New York.

Bibiane: Uh huh. Yes.

Emmy: The two of them lived with her little dog Lily in a basement apartment in Flushing, Queens for 13 years. Until the day of Hurricane Ida.

Bibiane: That day was horror.

Emmy: That day was horror. Bibiane and her husband went to bed early since they had to be up at 4 for work. In the middle of the night, Bibiane woke to the sound of her little dog Lily, wading through the water that had started to fill their bedroom

Bibiane: I suppose I thought it was a nightmare.

Emmy: At first, Bibiane says, she thought she was dreaming. Then, the water started to rise.

Bibiane: The water come so fast. Through the walls, the, the door. It was very, very fast. So my husband say, wake up. Wake up. We are going to die here.

Emmy: Bibiane's husband tells her they need to leave. He wades out of their room and starts to head towards the apartment's one exit. Bibiane tries to follow him.

Bibiane: When I get out of my room, the water was in my knee. In few seconds, the water cover until my waist, and after that, I can't walk. I have to, to swim, and when I get up to the living room, the ceiling touch my head.

Emmy: Bibiane starts swimming through what was once her living room, her head brushing against the ceiling as she tries to hold her dog Lily above the water.

Bibiane: I get only my little dog in my hand because she was a baby.

Emmy: As the waters rise on Bibiane and Lily, they make it to the exit hallway. But then:

Bibiane: When I get to the last door, I push my head // in the top // In that moment, I can't do it.

Emmy: Bibiane hits her head on the doorframe. She lets go of Lily. She stops swimming.

And she begins to drown.

Bibiane: But my husband, seconds before he going to, to out, and when he don't see me, he come back between the water, and he take out me.

Bibiane: I, I lost my life. And he, he saved my life.

Emmy: Bibiane's husband swims back to the apartment, and pulls her through the doorway. She and Lily both survive that night.

In a video Mario took later you can still see flood water still pooled in the hallway and grime clinging to their overturned furniture, glistening in the dim light that filters in from the tiny windows mounted high on the basement walls.

Mario Gamino: A ver si se ve bien en esta imagen, el agua llegó hasta arriba, mira.

Emmy: When Mario tilts the camera, you can see that the ceiling Bibiane almost drowned beneath is stained brown from sewage.

Mario: Como si hubiera pasado un tornado aquí adentro. Que barbaridad.

Emmy: As if a tornado had passed through here, he says as he walks through puddles in their basement apartment.

Bibiane: We lost everything. We don't save nothing, nothing. And we swallow too much black water.

Emmy: Bibiane and Mario spent days in the hospital being treated for all the sewage they swallowed. After that, they lived in a Red Cross hotel for weeks. Bibian says they tried to use FEMA money to get a new apartment, but the only one they could afford turned out to be illegal, so after paying \$8,000 of advance rent, they never even moved in. In the end, it was their old landlord that got them out of the hotel and into another home, this time, on the first floor.

By the end of Hurricane Ida, 13 people had died, 11 of them in Queens, all of them, basement tenants.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: We saw a horrifying storm last night, unlike anything we have ever seen before. And this is a reality we have to face.

Emmy: This is then-Mayor-of-New-York Bill de Blasio. In the weeks after Ida, he was one of the many, many politicians that came out to neighborhoods like Bibiane's to speak about the disaster. State senators, city council members, governor Kathy Hochul. Even President Biden showed up.

President Joe Biden: My message to everyone grappling with this devastation is we're here. We're not going home til this gets done. Well, I really mean that. We're not leaving. We're going to continue to shout as long as it takes to get real progress here

Emmy: But then Biden did go home, back to Washington. De Blasio went back to City Hall. Bibiane and Mario went to the hotel and then to their landlord's apartment, where they live to this day.

Since Ida, there have been at least half a dozen instances where rain in New York has surpassed what the sewer system could handle. This past September, 2023, record-breaking rainfall hit New York again, with some neighborhoods seeing more than 8 inches of rain. No one died, but the city had to conduct at least six basement apartment

rescues. In some New York neighborhoods, residents have started staying up at night whenever there's rain in the forecast. Residents like Amit Shiprivasad.

Amit Shiprivasad: Every time it rains for just 5 to 10 minutes, this entire block floods.

Emmy: Amit and his parents own a two-story building in Hollis, Queens. Before Ida, Amit's family lived upstairs and helped out a former coworker of Amit's and his family by letting them stay in the basement and chip in for utilities when they could. But that night, water pressure trapped two of those tenants in the basement. Amit tried to make it down to them through a side entrance, but the pressure was so great the door burst off the hinges and both tenants died.

Amit: I don't like to talk back about it because it brings back the memories, and I've suffered a lot with this within the last two years. I could tell you a little bit but, I try not to talk much about it because I... it's taken a toll on my body so bad that even my doctor doesn't want me to bring this up.

Emmy: Amit and his parents migrated from Guyana back in the nineties. Their first apartment was a basement.

Amit: Basement got flooded a couple of times as well. Lost everything, and, you know, went to another one until, finally, we bought the house and we moved out.

Emmy: When the family finally had enough money, they bought a home in Queens on a street with several other Guyanese migrants. For years, Amit says, whenever it would flood, he would send out messages in a community WhatsApp, go out and try to pry debris off sewer covers to keep the streets from flooding. But in the days after Ida, none of that mattered.

Amit: I actually sat in my wet clothes for almost two days. I had nowhere to turn, I had nowhere to go. I was like, what am I going to do? And thanks to my dad's younger brother, my uncle, he helped us out to get a place to go. My neighbors actually took them into their house just to get some rest while I did everything that I had to do.

I put my laptop in the middle of the street. I got electricity and power from my neighbors and Internet from one of my neighbors next door. And that's how we did everyone's applications. We had Zoom calls in the middle of the street with officials just to make sure everyone got help; nothing ever came out of that.

Emmy: To this day, Amit advocates for basement reform to city council members, the mayor, anyone who will listen. His own parents were homeless for 19 months after Ida.

Amit: I told Mayor Adams that. I actually had a call with him, and I let him know that as well. If it was your parents, how would you feel? Put yourself in my shoes and what I'm trying to do and what I'm trying to accomplish. And I'm not just doing this for me and for my parents. I'm doing this for everyone in the community who needs the help.

Emmy: What did Mayor Adams say when you said that to him?

Amit: He said point taken that, we're going to work. But I think that conversation has gone on deaf ears.

Emmy: Amit wants the city to either buy out his neighborhood or pay to raise them all out of the flood zone. But he says, as long as people can't afford better, they'll end up in basements. And no one should judge them for that.

Amit: at the end of the day is, you know, people can demonize people for living in a basement. Understand... but they won't understand unless you, you're in it. You know, you have to experience this to understand how it feels to not have nothing, but at the same time, just finding a place to put your head down at night to sleep or have somewhere that you could call your apartment for you to stay.

Amit: So, you know, rather than people just say, hey, you know what people should not have lived there. People should not live in a basement. Ask them the reason why they're doing it. What can we do more for them to be a little better?

Emmy: What can we do for them to be better? Amit doesn't believe people should still be living in basements. But if they're going to, he says, they've got to be safer.

Sylvia Morse: Saying no one should live in basement apartments is a completely empty statement. Because regardless of whether they should, they are. Okay, if they are and they shouldn't be, then why are they?

Emmy: This is Sylvia Morse. She's the policy program manager at Pratt Center for Community Development. The Pratt Center is a member of the BASE campaign, short for Basement Apartments Safe for Everyone; a group of activist organizations advocating for basement apartment legalization in New York.

Sylvia: We do not have enough low and moderate income housing. We do not have housing that's broadly accessible to people, including people who are, you know, new to this country and this city. That is a real problem. How are we going to address it?

Emmy: Sylvia says, as long as we are in a housing crisis, people are going to rely on basement apartments whether or not they're legal.

Sylvia: a housing and vacancy survey found that fewer than one percent of apartments under 1,500 a month are vacant.

Emmy: Fewer than one percent. That survey was back in 2021. In January of 2024, a Google search could tell you the average New York studio is \$3,350, and the average one bedroom is over \$4,000. But if you went on Craigslist and searched "basement studio," the results included a fully furnished studio in Forest Hills, Queens, for \$1350, less than half of the city average. Or a basement 1 bedroom in Woodside with laundry and a bathroom for \$1250. In another city, these prices might sound insane. But in New York, they're bargains.

Scrolling these listings, you can also see that many of them aren't in English. Most of the basement ads are in Spanish, a couple are in Chinese. That's because the story of basement apartments isn't always the story you might expect, of rich New York landlords scamming their new migrant tenants. The landlords can be migrants themselves. Take Amit's family. If you're a first-time homeowner, like they were, renting out an illegal basement is one way to pay for your own, rising housing expenses. Because whether you're a landlord or a tenant; New York is in a housing crisis. And it's getting worse.

But how did we get into this crisis to begin with?

I ask Howard Slatkin, a housing expert with the Citizens Planning and Housing Council.

Howard Slatkin: On average, in the last two decades, about 200,000 new units built in the course of a decade, which is about what we built during the 1930s. And it's not enough to keep up with rising demand for housing

Emmy: New York is still stuck building new homes at the same rate we were during the Great Depression. With over 100,000 migrants arriving last year, it's no wonder people are living in basements; we haven't built anywhere else for them to go.

And the affordable housing the city does have? Very little of that is going to new migrants.

Howard: A lot of the kinds of assistance that are available rely on the ability to document your legal status or to document your income over the past year. And those things are really challenging for this population. So traditionally in New York City and elsewhere, word of mouth, finding a room for rent, an apartment for rent is what people have done.

Emmy: Even if you have proof of residency, income records, the kind of things most new migrants don't, affordable housing can still be halfway impossible to get into. I talked to a woman from Honduras who was on a waitlist for 12 years before she won her Manhattan apartment. 12 years. If you've just arrived in the city, if you're trying to stay out of the shelters and off the streets, you don't have 12 years. You need a place to sleep now.

And if that place happens to be a basement, how can the city keep you safe there?

Ryan Chavez: You can no longer simply look the other way and pretend that these spaces do not exist. And you can no longer do sporadic, ineffective crackdowns here and there along the margins.

Emmy: This is Ryan Chavez, the director of the Cypress Hills East New York Pilot Program, one of the few concrete, city-supported solutions to its basement crisis. It's a conversion program created in 2019 for basement owners, people who want to make their basements safer, not by raising them above ground, like Amit wants, or by evicting folks who live there, but by modifying basements to make them safe and legal. And turns out, there's a lot of those people.

Ryan: when the word first went out that there was this new pilot program in East New York, we saw just an overwhelming number of interest. I think we had nearly 900 homeowners.

Emmy: 900 homeowners. Almost a thousand basements that were supposed to undergo renovations. But here in 2024, 900 basements haven't been converted. 500 basements haven't either. Not 100. Not even 50. As of March 2024, exactly one home in the East New York pilot program is undergoing construction, and only two are still enrolled in the program at all.

So: what happened?

Well, quite a few things.

From the get go, Ryan says the city's budget was only enough to convert 40 homes. Then: Covid hit. And the city slashed that budget to a mere ten apartments. But even then; fewer than 10 people are currently enrolled in the Program. How did we get from 900 to 2?

Well, even with city help, the East New York Pilot Program cost landlords. They didn't just have to fix their doors and exits. They had to abide by all kinds of other zoning laws, changing things like ceiling heights, window size, parking requirements.

And not everyone can make those changes. Depending on the home, they can be physically impossible. Or, even with the city's help they can add up to a bottom line the landlord just can't afford.

Which leaves us with two basements. Out of 900: two.

David: It's not surprising. It's not surprising.

Emmy: This is David, a Haitian-American landlord with properties in Brooklyn.

David: And the reason why I think it's not surprising is that I think it gets to a point where as a landlord, you start questioning whether or not this is economically feasible to continue.

Emmy: David isn't his real name. He preferred to stay anonymous because after his parents moved from Haiti, he bought a property with an illegal basement apartment, like Amit's, and he started renting it.

David: I think for my parents there was this understanding that in order for you to be successful in America you had to purchase a home.

You know, as a first generation American, you're putting yourself in a position where you're starting to generate wealth. I think if you look at the statistics, Black or minority ownership, it's not where it needs to be, especially in areas like East New York. And I think the other side of that is if you think about New York and you think about landlords, the first thing that comes to mind are, are like ultra wealthy, big conglomerates that are taking over these like single family, multi-family homes and they have no care or worries about tenants.

Emmy: David says he wants to rent all of his apartment units to those from the community, which tend to be people of color and people just entering New York's housing market. He says might be interested in something like the pilot program for his apartment, but he'd be pretty hesitant.

David: what I've encountered, though, is whenever the city, gets involved in matters around like private ownership of property, it's never the most efficient approach

Emmy: David's reluctance makes sense. The city isn't exactly known for its efficiency.

If you're a new landlord trying to stay afloat and build generational wealth: a program like the basement pilot? With multiple phases of consultation before construction can even begin? That can be expensive, time consuming.

Plus, for migrants, especially first-generation migrants, entering into any kind of relationship with the city can feel tenuous at best. Maybe you're not here legally. Maybe your tenant isn't. And even if you and your tenant are both documented, on good terms with the city, if your apartment's illegal and you're reported to the city, you can be given a Vacate order, fined up to \$25,000, and – according to one policy activist – have your tenant forced to move out of the building in under 24 hours. The city doesn't have to find them a place to go. They can leave them on the street.

And while David admits there are some landlords without their tenants' best interests at heart, lots of basement landlords are renting to people they already know. In David's parents' home, his aunt and uncle lived in the basement. Amit was renting to a coworker. I talked to other basement tenants who were renting from siblings. No one wants to see their family on the street, like Amit had to.

Iggy: We're gonna take a quick break. When we get back, reporter Emmy Brett continues her search for answers to New York's basement crisis and how landlords, tenants, and the city are trying to keep homes and lives safe from the growing flood zone.

This is Home, Interrupted. Stay tuned.

Ad Break

Iggy: Welcome back to Home, Interrupted. As New York continues to endure a record amount of rainy weather, residents of the city are having to ask themselves—is my home safe from flooding? And will it stay that way? Reporter Emmy Brett continues her story.

Emmy: Three years after Ida, New York City has a stalled pilot program, a housing crisis, and hundreds of thousands people still in basements. So in the meantime: what are those people doing?

Eating lunch, for one. This is Victoria. For the past four years, she's lived in a basement apartment in Corona, Queens just a few miles from where Bibiane's home flooded the night of Ida.

Victoria isn't her real name. She immigrated from Peru in 2005, but she's still here illegally. So, instead of a more formal interview, we talk over lunch with Gladys, our lunch host and translator, so Victoria will be more comfortable.

Victoria: Si, no por por por cosa de familia de mi hermana que tenía no estaba bien ahí. Y gracias. El problema es así en el apartamento. No le vivíamos con no te veíamos con eduardo.

Emmy: Before Victoria lived in her basement apartment, she and her sister lived with a friend; her sister, her nephew, and her own son all shared one room, but it was crowded, she says, and she worried about her son. She and her sister paid someone to help them find an apartment, and it turned out that the basement was the cheapest one she could find. It's only one bedroom, Victoria says, but she and her son sleep in the living room, and her sister and her nephew have the other room. They all share one bathroom.

When I ask Victoria how she likes her apartment, she pauses for a minute, and then says, she's gotten used to it.

Victoria: Acostumbrarme. No, Windows. No a no Las ventanas ventanas son muy. Si las somos pequeñas ambient ahí porque yo vivía. Yo vivía antes de un departamento. Pero eh, cosas de la vida.

Emmy: There are only two windows, she says, and they're very small. And there's a lot of dust. When they first moved in, there was a hole in the wall the landlord tried to hide behind a painting. She asked him to fix it, but he told her:

Victoria: Y dijo él es lo que hay.

Gladys Duran: It is what it is. That's what, you know, more or less.

Emmy: Victoria says flooding and heavy rain haven't affected her much. Her apartment is on the top of a hill, so she says she doesn't really worry about it. She doesn't know anyone whose basement has flooded. But she sees the news.

Victoria: en en televisión, nada más. Bien. Oh, news noticia, pero no no personas no persona no dear.

Emmy: So she knows that basement apartments flood. But she also knows that hers hasn't yet. And for right now, she's fine with that.

She likes things calm, she tells me. Her son has been through a lot already, and it means a lot to have a space that's their own. Just her, her sister, and their kids. It's not where they want to stay forever but:

Gladys: They're okay there for now, she said. Okay. También por ahí, por ahora. Sí, por ahora sí. Por ahora.

Emmy: No one knows what the future holds. And for the present, Victoria seems pretty happy. But, before September 2021, Bibiane was pretty happy too. Happy isn't the same thing as safe.

Basement apartments are still a trade off, a dangerous trade off. A trade off not every tenant is willing to make. I spoke to a Venezuelan woman named Reina, who's living in one of the city's shelters in Manhattan, who said even though the shelter was packed, even though her kids had gotten sick from the meals and she was trying to cook food in borrowed kitchens to sell on the subway, she would never live in a basement apartment.

Reina: Entonces pues yo, uno tiene que pensar primero en el bienestar de ellos. Entonces, preferiría que haga un poquitico más, pero fuera de peligro

Emmy: She tells me she heard about basement apartments from another woman from Venezuela, that they flood, that they have a greater risk for fire. If it was just me, she says, maybe. But not my kids.

Victoria may be right that no one can know exactly what the future will hold. But the past has held floods. The present has held them too. And now, climate experts are using the data we do have to predict the future of those floods as comprehensively as they possibly can.

Experts like Amy Chester, the managing director of Rebuild by Design.

Amy Chester: Without intervention, up to 40 percent of New Yorkers are at risk for primary or secondary displacement.

Emmy: Amy and her team used storm data to create a series of maps that chart New York's storm surge flooding not just as it stands right now, or where it stood during Ida, but where it will leave us decades from now. These maps show in bright red detail which New York neighborhoods are most likely to flood in the next 80 years. You can see the projections for 2020, 2050, and 2100. Each new map, that line of red, the line that marks flooding, starts to eat away at the edges of New York's landscape. This series of maps tells us that, by 2100, 40 percent of us will need to move. 40 percent. Full neighborhoods, rendered unlivable by the effects of climate change. Imagine losing all of Sunset Park. Or East Harlem. Far Rockaway. Imagine trying to relocate almost half of all New Yorkers.

Amy: And that is a hard nut to swallow when you're living in a city that already has so much displacement and already has really high rent and actually home ownership costs.

So we have all this incredible information of knowing that if we don't start making room for our neighbors and start building more housing now in safer areas and giving people a choice and a time, you know, line to move that they are going to be stuck and in crisis. And that's, you know, kind of really scary and the map that we created with the 40 percent are only for the storm surge communities. It's not for the rain communities. So, it is a gross underestimation of what's to come.

Emmy: The kind of floods Amy's talking about, storm surge floods, those are the kind we can predict. The second kind of floods, rainfall floods, the kind Bibiane and Amit saw the night of Ida, Amy's maps don't even account for that.

So as drastic as that 40 percent sounds, the real number is actually bigger than that. By the end of the century, we won't just have migrants arriving from outside New York City. We'll have climate migrants within the city itself. Amy says, those numbers may sound catastrophic, but if the city takes action now, the worst can be avoided.

Amy: We believe that thinking about climate migration is actually an anti displacement strategy.

If we can start talking to people who are living in areas that we know are going to have to move in the future, we know the city isn't going to be able to protect them, and we now are thinking about where in that same community on higher land could they move to, then they won't be displaced from their community and they won't be displaced from New York City.

Some of the things that we wouldn't stand for before, we're going to have to accept, or we're going to have to change the way that we live and really learn to live with a lot more water.

There's no easy answers.

There's just a lot of trade offs.

Emmy: Lots of trade offs. And no easy answers.

The story of New York’s basement apartments is a story as old as the climate crisis. It’s a story of people doing the best they can with what they have. Climate experts trying to get folks to move out of the floodplain before it grows. The city, trying to manage the pilot program and get basement tenants to sign up for notifications when there’s heavy rain. And tenants, knocking on doors, installing flood sensors, doing the best they can to keep themselves and each other safe.

On Amy’s maps, I looked up the address of Bibiane and Mario’s new apartment—not the one that flooded, the one they moved into together after Ida, to see where it fell on the floodplain. For the rest of this century, it looks like they’re out of range of Amy’s tiny red line, safe from storm surge flooding. But as for the rainfall floods, no one knows.

At the end of my conversation with Bibiane, I asked what trade-off she thought Victoria should make, if she should move out of her basement apartment, or stay put. Bibiane’s answer was clear.

Juvenal: It’s better she try to move. Don’t risk her her life.

In one night, maybe we lost everything all material things. It’s only that things, but the opportunity to live and to appreciate the life is the best part, and God always help, and the life continue and it’s fine.

It’s fine.

Emmy: For Bibiane, the trade off is clear.

Life comes first. Everything else, second.

Iggy: This story was written and produced for Feet in 2 Worlds by Emmy Brett. It was mixed and mastered by our technical director Jocelyn Gonzales. Quincy Surasmith is our managing editor. Alejandro Salazar Dyer [DIE - err] is our director of marketing, and Shreya Agrawal is our intern. The Managing Director of Feet in 2 Worlds is Mia Warren. John Rudolph is Feet in 2 Worlds' founder and is Executive Producer of this series."The executive producer of Feet in 2 Worlds is John Rudolph.

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Home, Interrupted comes to you from Feet in 2 Worlds. Since 2004, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and training immigrant journalists. The Feet in 2 Worlds network includes hundreds of reporters and editors. Some, like me, have been Feet in 2 Worlds fellows. Others have attended our workshops and contributed to our podcast and website. Together, we're making American journalism more reflective of the diverse communities that we serve.

You can find links to additional stories in the series in our episode notes. To listen to earlier episodes of Home, Interrupted, visit Fi2W.org. That’s F, i, the number 2, W.org.

I’m Iggy Monda, Editorial Fellow with Feet in 2 Worlds. If you like the show, thank you. Please keep listening and please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your stories.

Quincy Surasmith:

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