

A Better Everyday Life in New York:

50 Practical Ideas to Renew NYC's Promise of Opportunity

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Introduction

“In New York City, there are certain words that have taken on ideological associations,” Mayor Zohran Mamdani recently observed. “Quality of life has come to be seen as somehow a right-wing concern.” “Efficiency” and “rooting out fraud and waste,” he added, have taken on similar ideological connotations. Yet the mayor argued that it would be a mistake for the Left to therefore neglect the basics of urban governance: “If politics cannot deliver on the block where you live, why would you trust it to deliver anywhere in your city?”¹

About Us

The Manhattan Institute is a community of scholars, journalists, activists, and civic leaders committed to advancing economic opportunity, individual liberty, and the rule of law in America and its great cities.

The mayor is right that improving the quality of life is a cause that ought to transcend partisanship or ideology. New Yorkers across the political spectrum want a city where they can find work, get ahead, afford a home, and raise a family. They expect safe neighborhoods and good schools, and they deserve public services that justify the taxes they pay. Addressing these quality-of-life concerns should be a source of common ground.

The phrase itself is broader than its more recent partisan associations. Although it is more than a century old, “quality of life” entered the modern policy vocabulary in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of describing aspects of human welfare that income or economic growth alone could not capture: health, housing, education, the environment, and the texture of everyday life. In New York, it acquired a more specific political meaning during the Giuliani years, when it became shorthand for safe and orderly streets, clean public spaces, and a municipal government attentive to the small but cumulative conditions that shape daily experience.



We use the term in that broad yet practical sense. Quality of life is the set of conditions that determines whether ordinary New Yorkers can build a good life in the city; whether they can find useful work and earn enough to afford a home and raise a family; whether their children attend good schools; whether streets, parks, and transit feel safe and orderly; and whether city government delivers competent services at a reasonable cost. It is the accumulation of everyday experiences that tells residents whether New York is working for them.

Measured in those terms, New York's promise is under pressure. Key sources of employment for service and blue-collar workers have contracted. Income growth has delivered little improvement in purchasing power for much of the population, while housing and childcare remain punishingly expensive. Persistent problems with public safety and underperforming schools compound these pressures. The evidence set out in this brief raises uncomfortable questions about whether people of ordinary means can still establish themselves in New York and build a better life there.

That should concern anyone who cares about the city's future. New York should welcome successful people and companies while ensuring that those coming after them have a chance to succeed as well. New York's promise has always held particular meaning for people seeking to get ahead. Preserving that possibility should be a shared project.

This issue brief documents these current pressures and offers 50 practical recommendations to improve New Yorkers' quality of life and help restore the city's promise of opportunity. Each recommendation draws from the Manhattan Institute's extensive catalog of New York City policy analysis and proposals.

Work and the Cost of Living

A major source of New Yorkers' quality-of-life concerns is their ability to find work and afford to remain in the city. The recent employment record is especially worrisome for people trying to establish themselves or support a family without a high-paying professional job.

The New School's Center for New York City Affairs found that New York lost more than 76,000 jobs in middle-wage industries between 2019 and 2023—a decline of 4.7%.² Of these job losses, the construction sector suffered the largest share. Employment in lower-wage industries, more generally, grew by just 1.5% (**Table 1**).³

TABLE 1

Employment Growth in NYC by Industry Wage Group, 2019–23

Industry Wage Group	Employment Change
Lower-wage industries	+1.5%
Middle-wage industries	–4.7%
Higher-wage industries	+2.7%

Source: Center for New York City Affairs, October 2024; industries grouped by average pay



The labor-market weakness outlasted the initial pandemic recovery. According to the state comptroller, employment in construction, manufacturing, retail, wholesale trade, leisure and hospitality, and other services remained below December 2019 levels in December 2025.⁴ These industries have employed disproportionate shares of young people, immigrants, and black and Hispanic workers. Unemployment among New Yorkers aged 16–24 averaged 11.9% in 2025, still above its pre-pandemic level.

These figures describe industries containing a range of occupations. They nevertheless identify a central problem for a city that wants to sustain economic mobility: several important sources of accessible work and advancement have struggled to recover. A growing financial or technology sector cannot, on its own, supply every New Yorker with a route to a good living. As Michael Dresdale has argued in *City Journal*, reviving the city's middle class requires a broader base of employment and enterprise.⁵

The income figures are similarly sobering. A September 2026 city comptroller analysis found that average income per tax unit, adjusted for inflation using the New York–area Consumer Price Index, rose 8.9% between 2019 and 2024.⁶ For people in the bottom 90%, it fell 0.8%. Adjusting for the growing share of single filers changes that result in a gain of just 0.4% (**Table 2**). The figures, by the way, measure income before taxes and government transfers, not household disposable income.

TABLE 2

Change in Real Average Income per Tax Unit in NYC, 2019–24

Measure	Real Income Growth
All tax units	+8.9%
Bottom 90%	–0.8%
Bottom 90%, adjusted for changes in filing-status composition	+0.4%

Source: Office of the NYC Comptroller, “Recent Trends in Personal Income & Wage Inequality,” Sept. 2, 2026

Note: This includes pre-tax, pre-transfer income, including capital gains and estimated non-filer incomes. The adjusted result holds filing-status composition at its 2019 level. These are comparisons between groups, not the earnings histories of the same individuals.

This, of course, does not mean that every worker has stood still. The New School found real wage gains in the middle of the wage distribution even as middle-wage industries lost jobs on a net basis.⁷ Better pay for those in work is welcome, but the city also needs more opportunities for people trying to find work or move up the job ladder.

Rising local living costs help explain why income gains have translated into so little improvement in purchasing power for most New Yorkers. The city's median asking rent reached \$3,707 a month in the second quarter of 2026, more than 30% above its 2019 level—an increase of roughly \$10,400 a year.⁸ The city comptroller estimated that infant and toddler childcare cost an average of \$18,200 a year in family-based settings and \$26,000 in centers in 2024.⁹ Rent and care can leave little of a respectable salary for anything else.



These costs shape decisions about having children, starting a business, or staying in New York at all. They can also make it harder for employers to recruit. A city that needs electricians and restaurant workers must allow enough housing for them to live within reach of their jobs. Higher earnings will do less for living standards if scarce housing and childcare simply become more expensive.

Schools and Public Safety

Schools and public safety belong in the same discussion. Parents need confidence that their children will receive a good education, and residents should be able to use the streets and transit system without fear. These expectations are basic to life in a well-governed city. Mamdani is right that no political faction should have a monopoly on taking them seriously.

School attendance shows how basic some of the failures are. Manhattan Institute scholar Danyela Souza Egorov reports that 34.8% of city public-school students were chronically absent in 2023–24.¹⁰ Among students in temporary housing, the figure was 51.7%. Schools cannot do much to improve children's prospects when so many are routinely missing class.

On crime, there is progress to protect. Preliminary NYPD figures through September 20 showed murders down 24.4% in 2026, compared with the same period in 2025, and the total for the seven major crimes down 6.34%.¹¹ Although these are welcome improvements, they do not resolve the persistent violence in some neighborhoods or the harassment and disorder that make residents reluctant to use public spaces. Felony assaults remain stubbornly elevated, approximately 44% higher than in 2019.¹² Homicides in the transit system likewise persist at several times the annual average in the two decades before 2019.¹³

Families' decisions to leave should also concern city hall. The city comptroller found that middle-income households made up 51% of departing families with children under five in 2023, compared with 43% of such families overall.¹⁴ The analysis used a broad definition of middle income, from \$70,000 to \$316,000. In particular, outmigration has affected black families in the city, as they depend on city services of varying and inconsistent quality.¹⁵

People move for many reasons, so these figures cannot establish the effect of any one policy. They should nevertheless prompt the mayor to ask what would make staying more attractive. The answer matters just as much to residents who cannot readily leave.

50 Recommendations

These conditions are no accident. New York City's rents are high because decades of zoning rules and property-tax policies have made it too difficult and costly to build rental housing. Disorder persists on streets and subways where enforcement has slackened, and children miss school when no one is held responsible for ensuring that they attend. The pandemic and national economic trends alone cannot explain why these problems have persisted, or why so many families of ordinary means are deciding to move to other



parts of the country. Over many years and across administrations, choices made at city hall and in Albany have left many New Yorkers paying more in taxes for less effective public services. The right policies can boost the city's value proposition.

Taken together, these findings give substance to the concerns that the mayor has raised. New York remains a place of extraordinary opportunity, but too many residents struggle to translate its prosperity into improvements in their own lives. Addressing that problem should command support across the city's political divisions.

Agreement on the importance of quality of life will not settle disagreements about policy. It should, however, make it possible to consider proposals on their merits and work together where there is common ground. The mayor has invited his fellow progressives to take these concerns seriously. We are keen to contribute, too.

The following 50 recommendations are offered in that spirit. They draw on the Manhattan Institute's existing research and address problems that New Yorkers encounter in their daily lives. Some are within city hall's authority; others require cooperation with Albany or other public bodies. Overall, they reflect the broad understanding of quality of life set out above: economic opportunity, affordability, family life, public order, and competent government. If the mayor adopts them and makes progress, we will welcome it.

More Homes That People Can Afford

1. **Make renovating vacant apartments financially viable.** Work with Albany to allow rents in the city's estimated 57,000 vacant rent-regulated units to rise enough to make rehabilitation economically feasible.¹⁶
2. **Eliminate or recalibrate Mandatory Inclusionary Housing (MIH).** The city's MIH mandate makes fewer new developments viable. It was designed around the more generous 421-a tax abatement, which has since been replaced by 485-x, but the city has not recalibrated MIH requirements to reflect that shift.¹⁷
3. **Allow two-family homes in more neighborhoods.** Permit modest additions to housing supply in suitable areas now reserved for single-family development. For example, in single-family zones, the city could eliminate the restrictions on size and owner-occupancy for ancillary dwelling units.¹⁸
4. **Remove remaining parking mandates.** Let the market respond to communities' parking needs, rather than requiring spaces. Mandatory parking increases development costs and consumes space that could accommodate homes.¹⁹
5. **Allow redevelopment of pre-1974 rent-stabilized buildings.** Many rent-stabilized buildings are underbuilt relative to their lots' maximum potential, but it is often impossible to get the necessary approvals for demolition. These buildings should be more easily redeveloped so that the city can meet its supply needs.²⁰
6. **Reform the tax treatment of rental housing.** Pursue a more rational and consistent property-tax system with the city council, addressing burdens on large rental buildings that discourage construction and ultimately require tax abatements.²¹



7. **Make NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA) accountable for repairs.** Use enforceable management obligations and credible consequences for persistent failure. NYCHA residents should be able to expect functioning elevators, heat, and timely repairs, with their tenancy protections maintained.²²
8. **Roll back Local Law 97 (LL97).** New York City's hoped-for carbon reduction represents a negligible amount of global carbon emissions. Regardless, LL97 forces residents to pay higher costs, which will rise sharply in 2030 and will deter new residents from moving to the city that is already the lowest per-capita carbon emitter in the U.S.²³

Schools That Prepare Children for Adult Life

9. **Provide better data about absenteeism.** Publish data on school attendance monthly, rather than rely on annual releases. Currently, researchers are using figures from the 2024–25 school year, in contrast to such states as Connecticut and Rhode Island, which update public attendance dashboards monthly.²⁴
10. **Intervene early when children miss school.** Make principals responsible for intervening with families early upon discovering a trend of absences. Require school officials to stress the importance of regular attendance.²⁵
11. **Establish universal early screening in reading and math.** Adopt a K–3 screening requirement using evidence-based instruments administered several times a year, since New York currently identifies struggling readers only when third-grade exams are required, by which point gaps are already entrenched.²⁶
12. **Lift or eliminate the cap on charter schools.** Work with Albany to remove constraints on the expansion of successful schools and make suitable space available.²⁷
13. **Consolidate under-enrolled schools.** Prioritize schools with fewer than 150 students and those with the steepest enrollment declines since 2022 when developing a consolidation plan. MI estimates that bringing per-pupil funding for half the students in under-enrolled schools into line with the systemwide average could save approximately \$109 million.²⁸
14. **Maintain orderly classrooms.** Give teachers and principals workable tools to address persistent disruption, alongside appropriate student support and due process. Evaluate discipline policies by safety, fairness, and the amount of learning time they preserve.²⁹
15. **Expand Gifted and Talented (G&T) programs.** DOE should open a new Specialized High Schools Admissions Test (SHSAT) school in Queens and expand G&T seats and accelerated middle school options to meet demand.³⁰
16. **Create alternative career programs for students who are not college-bound.** The Department of Education (DOE) should expand Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs to teach them marketable skills and ensure that they remain enrolled.³¹
17. **Halt the growth in special-education Carter cases.** Return to annual adjudication of private special-ed placements, requiring DOE to present and defend its updated IEP every school year rather than granting renewal claims by default.³²



18. **Build Department of Education's in-house special-education evaluation capacity.** DOE should expand its own multidisciplinary evaluation teams to reduce the reliance on private evaluators, whose recommendations do not necessarily reflect what public programs can provide.³³
19. **Adopt a mediation-first approach to special-education disputes.** NYC should resolve disputes through mediation before parents file a due-process case, rather than its current default of filing first and negotiating later, which has driven legal costs higher.³⁴
20. **Establish developmentally based statewide guidelines for student AI use.** Prohibit student-facing AI in grades K–2, limit it to structured, teacher-directed contexts in grades 3–5, require formal AI literacy instruction with constrained use in grades 6–8, and permit expanded but pedagogically governed use in grades 9–12.³⁵
21. **Make retraining programs compatible with adult responsibilities.** Expand relevant evening and weekend occupational programs at CUNY schools. Working adults need routes to new skills that accommodate employment and family life.³⁶

Childcare That Fits Family Life

22. **Relax requirements for childcare sites.** Modernize requirements around childcare location and building requirements. More usable locations would give providers additional opportunities to open near the families who need them.³⁷
23. **Make qualified home-based care easier to provide.** Support a clear approval route for home-based providers, paired with appropriate oversight. Families should have access to a range of safe arrangements that suit their children and circumstances.³⁸
24. **Make childcare assistance predictable.** Provide stable voucher-based funding for childcare and reduce abrupt losses of support as earnings rise. Parents and providers should be able to plan around assistance that maintains work and care arrangements.³⁹
25. **Support childcare outside conventional office hours.** Expand childcare hours outside conventional office hours, such as by partnering with private schools to offer childcare after school into the early evening.⁴⁰

Safe Streets, Parks, and Transit

26. **Expand quality-of-life policing.** Build on NYPD's existing initiative to address recurring public-space problems. Curbing public drug use, street homelessness, and excessive noise can reduce the anxieties that many New Yorkers feel when they walk the streets, spend time in parks, and take public transit.⁴¹
27. **Hire more police officers.** Felony assaults in 2025 were 44% above 2019 levels and 84% higher than 2008, even as murders and shootings fell. Transit homicides are likewise far more common than before 2019. Expanding NYPD's officer count would support a more visible police presence alongside targeted enforcement against the most serious offenders.⁴²



28. **Maintain the gang database and Strategic Response Group (SRG).** NYPD has achieved noteworthy reductions in homicides and shootings, partly thanks to the precision policing made possible through the gang database and SRG.⁴³
29. **Don't close Rikers Island; fix it.** The borough jail plan, aside from costing over \$16 billion, would provide capacity for only about 4,000 detainees. The city currently has about 6,500 detainees at Rikers Island, making the borough plan both fiscally infeasible and unsafe. Rikers should remain open and receive extensive renovations to make it humane and safe.⁴⁴
30. **Remove graffiti, trash, and other visible signs of public disorder.** Maintaining clean and orderly public spaces encourages use and instills confidence in government.⁴⁵
31. **Expand access to evidence-based addiction treatment.** Ensure that city-funded services offer appropriate medications and continuity of care, including after release from jail.⁴⁶
32. **Build treatment and bed capacity.** The debate about the best mental-health responder model should instead be directed toward building treatment infrastructure, continuing Mayor Adams's push (alongside Kathy Hochul's) to add inpatient psychiatric bed capacity.⁴⁷
33. **Make fare-evasion penalties swift and certain rather than harsher.** Bus and subway fare evasion can be reduced through consistent enforcement. The certainty of enforcement—not its severity—changes rider behavior.⁴⁸
34. **Change local rules to allow driverless cars.** Apply last decade's lesson of Uber and Lyft by setting local rules on autonomous-vehicle volume and integration with transit. Rather than prohibit autonomous vehicles, setting caps and other regulations would give New Yorkers more transportation options while reducing harmful effects. (State law still prevents fully driverless cars, but the city would be well placed to create regulations so as to be prepared upon changes to state law.)⁴⁹

More Opportunities to Work and Start a Business

35. **Recognize relevant licenses from other jurisdictions.** Work with Albany to make occupational-license recognition easier for qualified workers in good standing in other states. Moving to New York should not require unnecessarily repeating training already completed or abandoning an established livelihood.⁵⁰
36. **Expand lawful opportunities for street vendors.** Simplify the process to obtain permission to vend while raising the fee closer to the license's market value, and enforce clear food-safety and public-space rules. Today's fee is so far below what licenses fetch on the secondary market that holders profit by leasing them to working vendors rather than vending themselves.⁵¹
37. **Make room for more grocery competition.** Relax supermarket size and zoning restrictions in suitable manufacturing districts to allow for more competition and lower prices for consumers.⁵²



Better Public Services and Value for Money

38. **Shorten government response times and improve service.** Encourage the use of approved, low-risk administrative uses of AI, with staff responsible for checking results. Evaluate tools by demonstrated outcomes, such as shorter waits for residents and staff time freed for work requiring judgment.⁵³
39. **Use AI to triage 311 calls.** The city should pair AI data analysis with human review to determine which 311 complaints warrant priority response and which—such as likely-fraudulent calls—should be de-prioritized, making better use of the resources already devoted to responding to complaints.⁵⁴
40. **Make buses faster and more frequent, not free.** City buses average just 9.3 miles per hour, among the slowest in the nation, and more than half of lines run below their borough-wide average. Rather than forgo fare revenue, work with MTA to add service on crowded routes, enforce against fare evasion, and speed up trips.⁵⁵
41. **Build predictive models for nightlife-related disorder.** The city's Office of Technology and Innovation should combine data on liquor licenses, 311 noise complaints, sanitation reports, NYPD incidents, EMS calls, and late-night transit usage to identify which streets are most likely to see spikes in crime, noise, and disorder, and then proactively adjust agency responses before conditions deteriorate.⁵⁶
42. **Create an AI-driven homeless-encampment prediction model.** The city should use data on transit hubs, vacant storefronts, lighting, shelter proximity, and prior enforcement history to identify which public spaces are most vulnerable to becoming chronic disorder zones, and deploy preventive outreach, enforcement, sanitation, or physical redesign accordingly.⁵⁷
43. **Make city performance data timely and usable.** Automate routine updates and present service information in accessible formats. Residents and managers should be able to see where problems persist and whether the city's response is improving.⁵⁸
44. **Put public employee-benefit costs on a sustainable footing.** Reform health and retirement benefits to preserve the ability to fund services over time.⁵⁹

Accountable City Government

45. **Close budget gaps through a modest Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) and a temporary nonuniformed hiring freeze, not new taxes.** The city is facing a budget gap in FY28 of \$6.4–\$8.8 billion. It can avoid these pressures by trimming spending modestly—especially in DOE—rather than reaching for new revenue sources.⁶⁰
46. **End the automatic six-month FOIL time frame.** Require the mayor's office to give request-specific response times under FOIL, not a blanket six-month wait. Departments should triage easy requests, adopt rolling productions, and staff up rather than assigning practically every FOIL request a roughly six-month date regardless of its actual scope.⁶¹
47. **Support primary reform for citywide elections.** More than 1 million registered voters in NYC cannot participate in any primary. Fully open primaries would force candidates to appeal to the broader electorate rather than just their party's base.⁶²



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48. **Explore proportional representation for city council races.** Proportional representation in the city council would make general elections competitive and better match the council's makeup to the electorate.⁶³
49. **Reform emergency contracting.** The mayor and city council should impose limits on the practice of treating a chronic, foreseeable problem as a permanent "emergency" that bypasses competitive bidding.⁶⁴
50. **Pay nonprofit contractors on time.** The Mayor's Office of Contract Services should urge legislation to change the procurement process so that nonprofit vendors can be paid on time.⁶⁵



Endnotes

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