



Nature's Call

An Assessment of NYC Park Restrooms

A REPORT FROM THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL'S
OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS DIVISION



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL SPEAKER
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Executive Summary

Public restrooms in New York City's parks are crucial amenities that promote public health and enhance the overall park experience. Clean, safe, and accessible restrooms encourage park usage, providing essential facilities for families and individuals. This investigation, led by the New York City Council's Oversight and Investigations Division (OID) in July 2024, assessed the condition of one men's restroom and one women's restroom in each of the city's 51 Council Districts. Parks were selected using a combination of Council Member District Office surveys and New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) Parks Inspection Program (PIP) data to determine parks in each district that have consistently received low ratings or complaints from constituents and would therefore warrant additional review.

OID's investigation revealed significant issues requiring urgent attention, including that fully two-thirds (66.6%) of all restrooms – 68 of 102 we inspected or attempted to inspect – were closed or had health and safety issues. Indeed, OID found that nearly 9% of the restrooms were closed during scheduled hours. Further, 11% of stalls inspected lacked functioning locks, raising privacy and accessibility concerns. Additionally, 10% of restrooms lacked soap and 13% of stalls lacked toilet paper, posing public health risks. Cleanliness was another major issue, with staff finding litter in nearly 40% of restrooms and unsanitary conditions in 23% of restrooms. Addressing these problems promptly is essential to guarantee that New York City's parks are welcoming and safe for all visitors.



Row of sinks in the Men's restroom at Rockaway Beach, Queens.

Background

DPR regularly inspects restrooms on parks properties as part of PIP, a comprehensive system established in 1984 to conduct frequent and detailed inspections of park amenities.¹ PIP inspectors assess park restrooms' overall condition and other features, including litter, structural issues, amenities, and graffiti. Data from inspections is publicly available on DPR's website as well as on NYC Open Data.



Playground equipment at Summers Playground.

Over the years, NYC parks have been the subject of numerous inspections and surveys by city oversight agencies and park advocates. In 2019, the NYC Comptroller's Office published "Discomfort Stations: The Conditions and Availability of NYC Parks Bathrooms", which used PIP data to assess the geographic distribution of restrooms and unacceptable restroom conditions throughout the city.² It also focused on the availability of changing stations and ADA accessibility. Separately, from 2003 to 2016, the non-profit organization New Yorkers for Parks published several "report cards" on parks,³ which included assessments of restrooms at a selection of parks throughout the city.⁴ Borough presidents have also conducted inspections of park restrooms.⁵ And in 2001, the Council's Office of Oversight and Investigation, now known as OIG, conducted a survey of public restrooms in the city.⁶

¹ PIP Ratings Determinations, NYC Parks, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/park-features/parks-inspection-program/parks-inspection-ratings-determinations> (last visited Jul. 16, 2024).

² Off. of the N.Y.C. Comptroller Scott M. Stringer, Discomfort Stations: The Conditions and Availability of NYC Parks Bathrooms (June 2019), https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Discomfort_Stations_The_Conditions_and_Availability_of_NYC_Parks_Bathrooms.pdf.

³ Report Card, New Yorkers for Parks, <https://www.ny4p.org/data-and-research/research-library/report-card> (last visited Jul. 16, 2024).

⁴ See, e.g., New Yorkers for Parks, The 2016 Report Card on Parks: Spotlight on the Community Parks Initiative, p. 11, https://www.ny4p.org/client-uploads/pdf/Report-Cards/NY4P_Report_Card-CPI2016.pdf.

⁵ See, e.g., Mary Frost, Survey of 270 Brooklyn Parks Yields Insights, Rankings by BP Adams, Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Mar. 27, 2018), <https://brooklyneagle.com/articles/2018/03/27/survey-of-270-brooklyn-parks-yields-insights-rankings-by-bp-adams/>.

⁶ N.Y.C. Council – Off. of Oversight and Investigation, Toilet Trauma: A Survey of Public Restrooms in New York City (2001).

Methodology

How We Selected Sites

OID selected the locations of the 102 restrooms in 51 Council Districts for inspections based on feedback from Council Member Offices and PIP inspection data.

A survey was sent to all 51 Council Member Offices asking them to “list any specific issues you or your constituents have noticed at park bathrooms or playgrounds in your district.”⁷ Using PIP data,⁸ OID found the total number of inspections performed at each park restroom since January 2018, the number of times the restroom was closed during scheduled open hours, and the number of times the overall condition, amenities, graffiti, litter, and structure were each rated unacceptable. After adding a weight for restrooms identified in the survey of Council Member Offices and removing park restrooms that were out of service⁹ or maintained by an outside group, such as a park conservancy, OID selected for inspection the park restroom in each Council District that had the highest rate of unacceptable conditions or closures.¹⁰



Doors to Girls' and Boys' restrooms at Washington Market Park, Manhattan.

⁷ OID received responses from Council Member Offices for 31 park restrooms in 12 council districts.

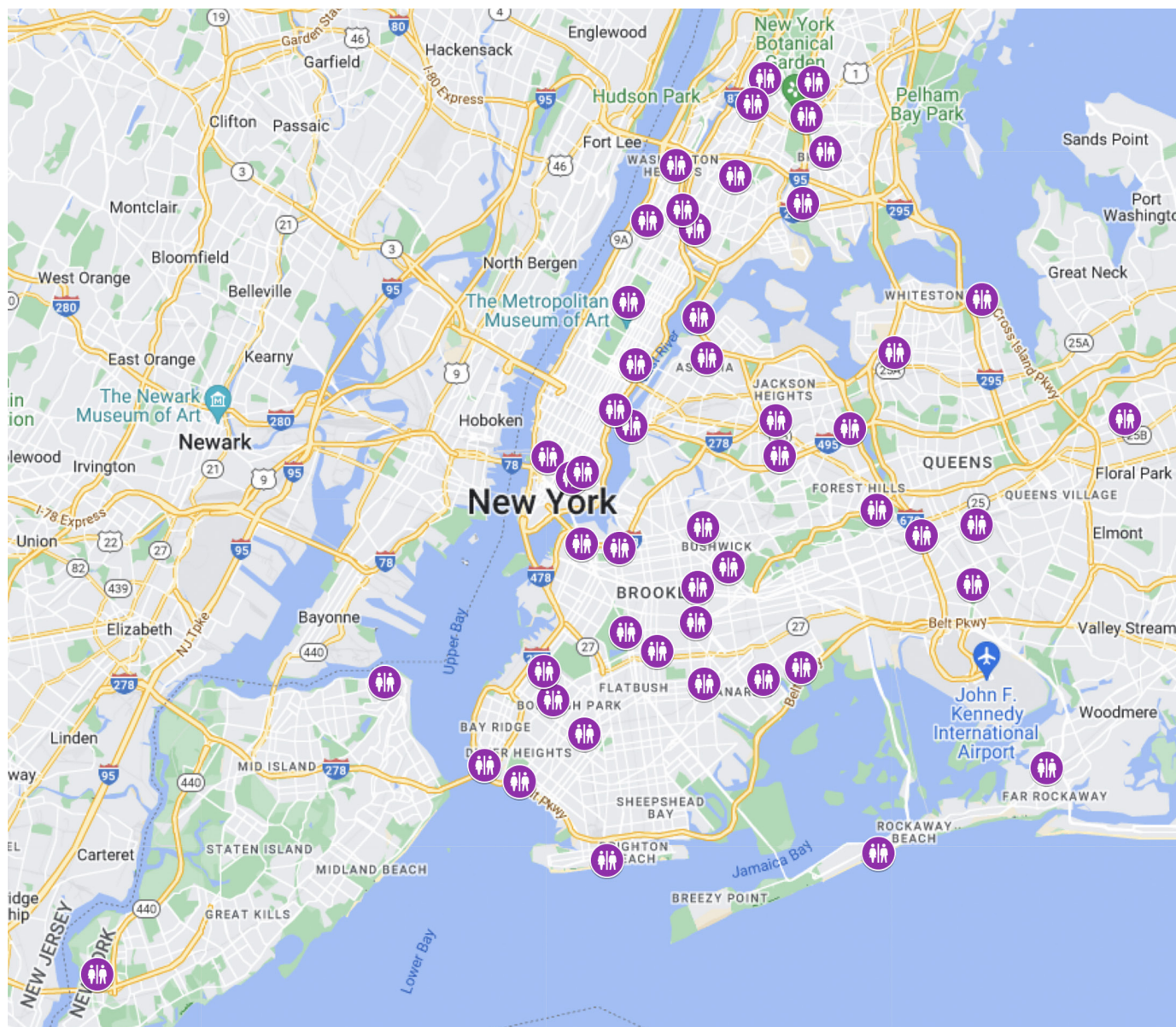
⁸ OID merged four datasets from NYC Open Data: (1) *Parks Inspection Program – All Sites (MAPPED)*, NYC OPENDATA, https://data.cityofnewyork.us/City-Government/Parks-Inspection-Program-All-Sites-MAPPED-/buk3-3qpr/about_data (last visited Jul. 16, 2024); (2) *Parks Inspection Program – Public Restroom Individual Room Inspections*, NYC OPENDATA, https://data.cityofnewyork.us/City-Government/Parks-Inspection-Program-Public-Restroom-Individual-Room-Inspections-/yp6n-7jdy/about_data (last visited Jul. 16, 2024); (3) *Parks Inspection Program – Inspections*, NYC OPENDATA, https://data.cityofnewyork.us/dataset/Parks-Inspection-Program-Inspections-/yg3y-7juh/about_data (last visited Jul. 16, 2024); and (4) *Parks Inspection Program – Public Restroom Feature Ratings*, NYC OPENDATA, https://data.cityofnewyork.us/City-Government/Parks-Inspection-Program-Public-Restroom-Feature-Ratings-/xmiz-qy72/about_data (last visited Jul. 16, 2024).

⁹ These park restrooms were listed as “not operational” in the data set. See *Public Restrooms*, NYC OpenData, https://data.cityofnewyork.us/City-Government/Public-Restrooms-/i7jb-7jku/about_data (last visited Jul. 16, 2024).

¹⁰ OID calculated the number of times each feature (amenities, graffiti, litter, structure, or overall condition) was unacceptable and the number of times a restroom was closed. These figures were divided by the total number of inspections to get the proportion of times each feature/closure was unacceptable. The sum of these proportions created the overall score, which was doubled for each park restroom mentioned in the survey of Council Member Offices. Then, OID selected the park with the overall highest score in each Council District for inspection. Park restrooms were eliminated if they were listed as “not operational” on the Public Restroom dataset or if their maintenance is managed by an outside group, like a conservancy.

Inspected Sites

The below map shows the 51 park restroom locations (102 men's and women's restrooms total) inspected as part of this report.



How We Conducted the Inspections

Staff from OID, the Council's Community Engagement Division, and Council Member Shekar Krishnan's Office (Chair of the Committee on Parks and Recreation) participated in the inspections, which took place from July 9–11, 2024, between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. A team of two Council staff members, one inspecting the women's restroom and the other the men's restroom, visited each selected site. Each staff member completed a survey regarding the condition of the restrooms they inspected.¹¹

Council staff assessed the restrooms based on the following criteria:

- **Status and Closures:** Identification of restrooms that were open, closed, locked, or where entry was restricted.
- **Functionality and Amenities:** Availability and functionality of baby changing stations, toilet paper, hand dryers, toilets, soap dispensers, and garbage cans.
- **Cleanliness:** Presence of graffiti or trash, and a cleanliness rating.
- **Accessibility:** Availability of accessible signage, grab bars, wheelchair-accessible stalls, and lowered amenities.
- **Safety:** Identification of hazards such as sharp objects, mold, poor lighting, tripping hazards, or pests.

¹¹ See Appendix A for full survey completed for each site.

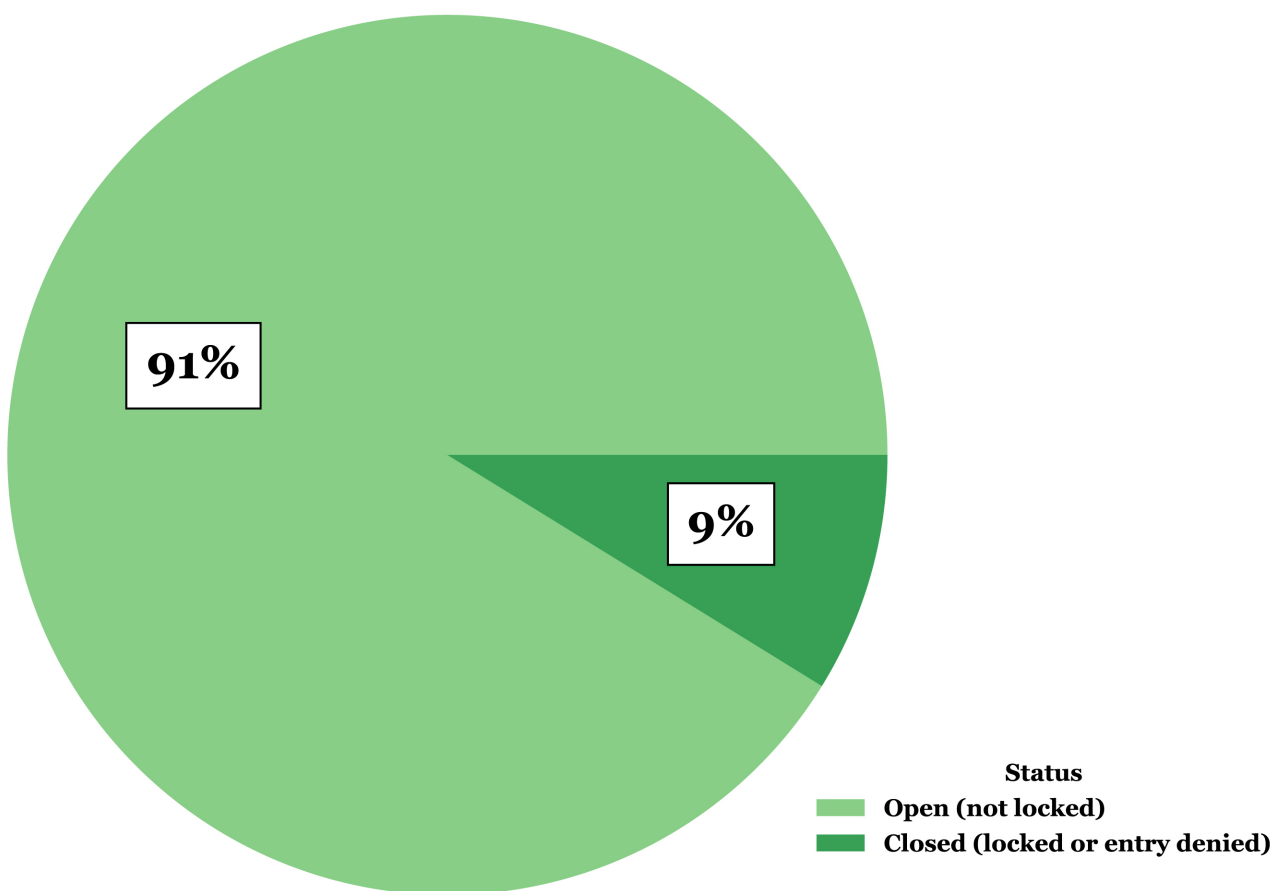
Findings

OID compiled the results of the 102 park restroom inspections and found the following:

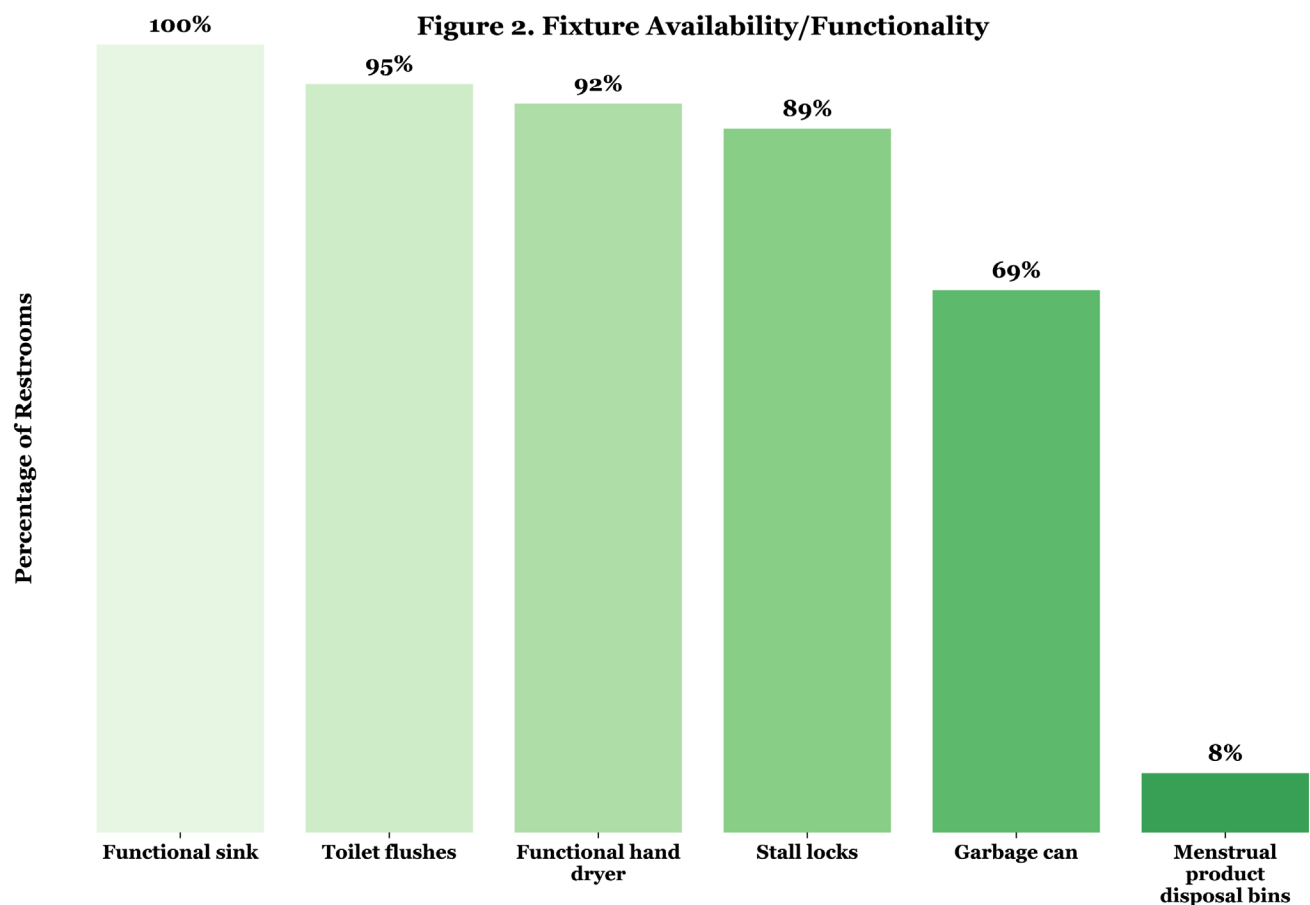
- 1. Although most restrooms were open and easy to locate, some were closed during scheduled open hours.**

Almost 9% of restrooms surveyed by Council staff were closed when they should have been open and available for use. Staff observed lines at only one restroom and found two restrooms difficult to locate.

Figure 1. Restroom Status



2. Several restrooms lacked stall locks and garbage cans.



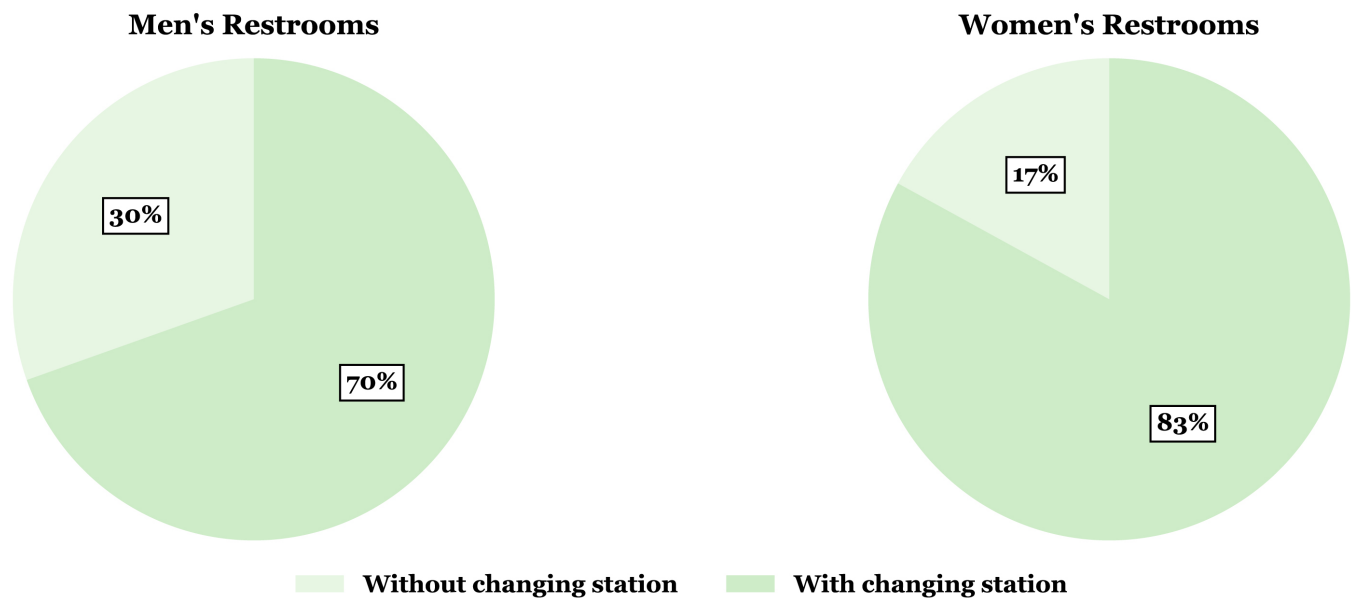
Approximately one in every nine stalls inspected by Council staff lacked functioning locks¹² and 30% of restrooms did not have a garbage can. Only 8% of restrooms had menstrual product disposal bins. Moreover, 27% of restrooms, including 23% of women’s restrooms, had no place to throw away menstrual products – lacking both trash cans and disposal bins.

12 See Photo 1 in Appendix B.

3. There is a significant disparity in the availability of baby changing stations between men’s and women’s restrooms.

Notably, 24% of restrooms inspected lacked baby changing stations.¹³ In fact, there was a distinct gender gap regarding the availability of these stations: 30% of men’s restrooms lacked baby changing stations compared to 17% of women’s restrooms. Despite these observations made by Council staff in the restrooms selected for this report, DPR asserts that 90% of park restrooms currently have baby changing stations.¹⁴

Figure 3. Baby Changing Stations in Men's vs Women's Restrooms



¹³ See Appendix B, Photo 2.

¹⁴ Press Release, NYC Parks, Changing for the Better: NYC Parks Announces Successful Completion of Efforts to Install Baby Changing Tables in Over 1,200 Restrooms (May 9, 2024), <https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/press-releases?id=22149>.

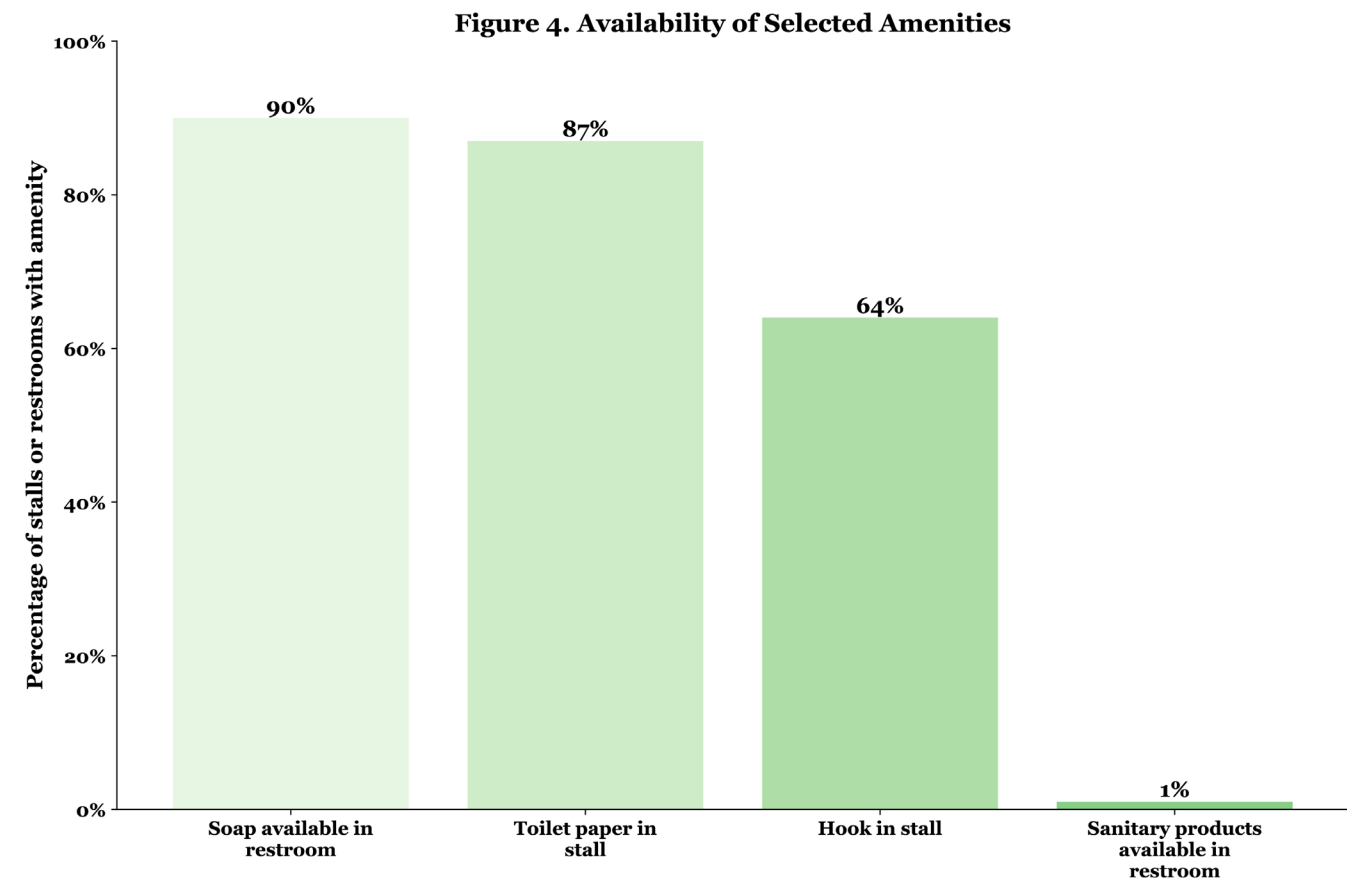
4. Some restrooms lacked basic amenities, including soap and toilet paper.

Ten percent of restrooms inspected lacked soap, and 13% of stalls lacked toilet paper, which raises significant public health concerns. Moreover, only one park restroom inspected by Council staff had menstrual products available.

5. Restroom cleanliness varied widely¹⁵ and litter, unsanitary conditions, and graffiti were commonly observed.

The mean cleanliness rating for all park restrooms inspected by Council staff was 3.25 on a 5-point scale (from 1 being extremely dirty to 5 being extremely clean), with 23% of restrooms scoring below 3. Only four restrooms were rated extremely dirty, while 14 were rated extremely clean.

Council staff identified litter as a major issue. In fact, litter was observed in nearly 40% of all restrooms.¹⁶ Additionally, 23% of restrooms had unsanitary conditions, such as bodily fluids on surfaces. Finally, 19% of all restrooms had graffiti on walls and other surfaces.



¹⁵ See Appendix B, Photos 3 and 4 for examples of differing restroom cleanliness ratings.

¹⁶ See Appendix B, Photo 5.

Conclusion

The Council's inspections of park restrooms across the city's 51 Council Districts reveals the need for consistent maintenance and improvements to park restrooms in order to ensure that these critical facilities meet if not exceed the public's expectations. While many restrooms are accessible and functional, significant issues with cleanliness, availability, functionality, and amenities persist. Addressing these challenges is essential to enhance NYC park experiences for families and individuals, and to promote public health.

Adequate funding for DPR to continue their efforts to improve park restroom conditions will not only benefit park users but also reflect the city's commitment to providing high-quality public spaces. By prioritizing the maintenance and enhancement of park restrooms, New York City may ensure that its parks remain welcoming and enjoyable for all residents and visitors, fostering a healthier and more vibrant city.



Entrance to the Women's restroom at Maria Hernandez Park, Brooklyn.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Appendix A: Sample Inspection Survey¹⁷

SITE INFO

1. Your Name

2. Date

Please input date (M/D/YYYY)

3. Park Name

Select your answer

4. Type of bathroom

- ☐ Women's
- ☐ Men's
- ☐ Gender neutral

5. Is the bathroom easily identifiable?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

6. Bathroom Status

- ☐ Open (not locked)
- ☐ Closed (locked or entry denied)

FUNCTIONALITY AND AMENITIES

7. Are there multiple entrances/exits to the restroom?

8. Are the restroom lights on? Is the restroom well-lit?

9. Is there a baby changing station present?

10. How many stalls are in the bathroom?

11. How many stalls have functioning locks?

12. How many stalls have hooks? (for bags, jackets, etc.)

13. How many stalls have toilet paper?

14. How many stalls have sanitary product disposal bins?

The value must be a number

15. How many toilets are operable (will flush)?

16. Are there urinals in the bathroom?

CLEANLINESS

17. Is there litter or garbage present on the floor or other surfaces?

☐ Yes

☐ No

18. Is graffiti present on the walls or other surfaces?

☐ Yes

☐ No

19. Are conditions unsanitary (eg bodily fluids on floors or surfaces)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other

20. Rate cleanliness

Extremely dirty



Extremely clean

21. Explain your rating.

ACCESSIBILITY

22. Is the bathroom accessible?

☐ Yes

☐ No

23. Select which, if any, are present:

☐ Signage indicating that the bathroom is accessible

☐ Grab bars

☐ Wheelchair accessible stall(s)

☐ Lowered amenities (sinks, soap dispensers, paper towel dispensers, etc.)

SAFETY

24. Select the hazards that are present, if any:

☐ Sharp objects (glass, syringes, etc.)

☐ Slipping or tripping hazards (slippery floors, obstructions, etc.)

☐ Structural problems (exposed wires, damaged ceiling, uneven floor, etc.)

☐ Pests (bugs, rodents, etc.)

☐ Insufficient lighting

☐ Mold

☐ Peeling paint

☐ Other

NOTES AND COMMENTS

25. Any notes or additional comments?

23. Please upload photos of the outside of the restroom, the cleaning sign off schedule (if posted), and anything of note inside if appropriate/unoccupied.

(Non-anonymous question)

 **Upload files**

File number limit: 10 | Single file size limit: 1GB | Allowed file types: Word, Excel, PPT, PDF, Image, Video, Audio

Appendix B: Photos (all photos included in this report were taken by Council staff)



A BROKEN LOCK HELD WITH TAPE IN A WOMEN'S RESTROOM STALL IN HARRIS PARK PLAYGROUND.



BROKEN BABY CHANGING STATION IN THE WOMEN'S RESTROOM AT COLDEN PLAYGROUND.



SINKS IN THE WOMEN'S RESTROOM AT FAIRVIEW PARK.



URINALS IN THE MEN'S RESTROOM AT SHORE ROAD PARK ZONE 4.



TOILET PAPER ON THE FLOOR IN THE WOMEN'S RESTROOM AT THE SUNSET PARK PLAYGROUND.