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# Most of the apartments where New Yorkers drowned were illegal residences.

**By Matthew Haag and Jonah E. Bromwich**

Sept. 3, 2021

New York City's Department of Buildings said Friday that five of the six houses in which New Yorkers were killed by Wednesday's flood were illegally converted cellar or basement apartments.

Of the 13 people found dead in the city from the storm, at least 11 were in basement units, which have long made up a significant part of New York City's vast housing stock, a network of rentals that often lack basic safety features like more than one way to get in or out.

The department said that four of the five basement apartments where people were killed in Queens were illegal conversions, as was one on Ridgewood Avenue in Brooklyn, where another person died. Another basement apartment, on Grand Central Parkway in Queens, was a legal dwelling, the department said.

It is illegal to alter an existing building to create additional apartment units without obtaining official approval, and such apartments are often considered unsafe by authorities, given their shoddy construction, poorly installed gas and electrical systems and light and ventilation issues. Still, the apartments remain in demand, in part because they are often far cheaper than most rentals.

The buildings department has received reports of over 1,100 properties across the city that were damaged by the storm, and its inspectors are conducting safety checks at each location.

"Our team is tirelessly conducting inspections at over a thousand properties across the five boroughs in the aftermath of Wednesday's storm," said the department's commissioner, Melanie E. La Rocca. "We'll continue doing everything we can to keep New Yorkers safe in their residences."

Climate change has made low-lying homes increasingly treacherous, because of the likelihood of deadly flooding as a wall of water blocks what is often the only means of escape.

Last year, the department received 11,781 complaints related to units believed to be illegal conversions, down from 16,776 in 2019. So far this year it has received 8,072 such complaints.

In about half of the cases since 2011, inspectors closed the complaints because they could not gain access to the dwelling, a New York Times analysis of buildings department data shows.

Mihir Zaveri, Adam Playford and Nate Schweber contributed reporting.

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