

Hear This!

Chinatown Tenants' Campaign for Language Access



Tenant Complaint Hotline Survey **KEY FINDINGS**

*An Initiative of the
CAA AV's Chinatown Justice Project
and the Urban Justice Center*



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Executive Summary

In the summer of 2003, youth organizers from CAAAV's Chinatown Justice Project created the Tenant Complaint Hotline Survey to document the housing conditions in Chinatown and to evaluate the language services provided by the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to Chinese-speaking tenants in New York City. The following briefly outlines key findings and recommendations based on the survey results:

- Seventy-three percent (73%) of residents surveyed experienced housing problems in the last 12 months.
- Of those experiencing housing problems, only 7% reported problems to the HPD.
- Of those that had housing problems, but did not report it to the HPD, the following are the main reasons given for not calling the HPD:
 - Thirty-nine percent (39%) said the landlord fixed the problem;
 - Thirty-five percent (35%) did not know HPD is the agency responsible for handling these complaints;
 - Nineteen percent (19%) fixed the problem themselves; and
 - Eighteen percent (18%) did not speak English well enough or comfortably enough to call.

In addition, language access played an important role in accessing HPD services:

- Of survey participants, 46% said Foochow was their primary language, 36% said Mandarin or Cantonese was their primary language and 12% said Toishanese or Hakka. Only 3% said English was their primary language.
- Seventy-three percent (73%) of the survey respondents did not feel comfortable speaking or reading in English.
- ***Ninety percent (90%) of all those interviewed reported that they would be more willing to report to HPD about housing problems if hotline services and inspections were provided in Chinese.***

Based on these key findings, the report makes the following recommendations:

1. Provide Chinese Language Access for HPD Services

- HPD should work with the NYC Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications to hire bilingual Housing Specialists, fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Fujianese, to receive and process housing-related complaints from Chinese immigrant tenants on the 3-1-1 hotline.
- HPD should hire bilingual housing inspectors, fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Fujianese.
- HPD should translate all tenants' rights information on its current website into Chinese and make it widely available through its website as well as in booklet form.

2. Create a Special Chinatown Task Force to oversee and process all housing-related complaints until the above measures are fully implemented.

Section 1: Introduction and Overview of the Campaign

Chinatown is one of the oldest ethnic communities in New York City. It is not only a dynamic cultural enclave and commercial center, but also a vital entry point for Chinese immigrants. The community, with over 25 percent of its households living under the federal poverty level, has often struggled for representation in City politics. Two of the most severe problems facing Chinatown right now are a shortage of affordable housing and deteriorating housing conditions. Chinese immigrants, forced to live in substandard rental apartments, have little access to legal or financial resources to address poor conditions or to protect themselves from abusive landlords, unresponsive municipal agencies, and unfair evictions. Moreover, the housing crisis is tied to citywide trends of gentrification—the slow erosion of immigrant and low-income communities under the pressures of rent destabilization and real estate development catering to higher-income groups.

CAA AV Organizing Asian Communities (CAA AV) created the Chinatown Justice Project to improve the living conditions in Chinatown and to counter the rapid and haphazard “up-zoning” of the area at the expense of the local immigrant community. “Hear This!” *Chinatown Tenants Campaign for Language Access* is a joint initiative of the Chinatown Justice Project of CAA AV and the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center (UJC). The campaign aims to advocate for better language access for the tenants of Chinatown, as well as the broader Chinese immigrant community in New York City – most of who have limited English ability.

CAA AV-UJC Tenant Complaint Hotline Survey

In the summer of 2003, a group of CAA AV youth organizers partnered with staff from the Community Development Project of UJC to integrate outreach and community-based research. They created the Tenant Complaint Hotline Survey to document housing issues in Chinatown and evaluate language services provided by the HPD to Chinese-speaking tenants in New York City.

The survey questions would tackle the following issues:

- Housing conditions;
- Accessibility of the HPD hotline services;
- Accessibility of the HPD inspection services;
- Willingness of Chinatown residents to use HPD services to address housing problems;
- Other methods by which tenants were resolving housing problems; and
- Basic demographic information of Chinatown tenants such as language ability and length of time living in the United States.

The next part of this section will describe the research methodology and survey participants’ demographic information. Section 2 explores the housing problems of residents. Section 3 and 4 survey tenants’ experience with HPD hotline services and inspectors. Section 5 summarizes the need for language access and the report ends with key recommendations that will help tenants access housing services.

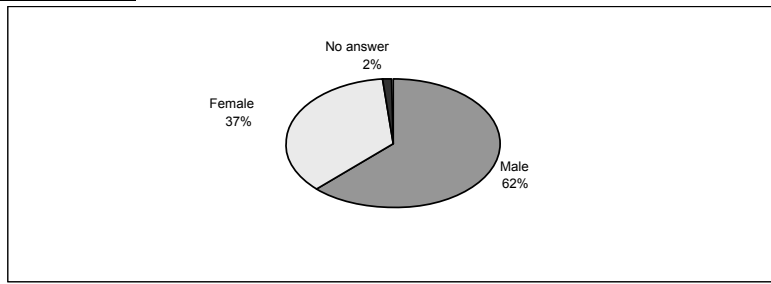
Research Methodology

The survey was conducted from July through September of 2003 with a total of 383 tenants, most of whom live in Chinatown, but many of whom also reside elsewhere in the City. All outreach was led and conducted by Chinatown Justice Project members. Outreach strategies included going directly to apartments and talking to tenants about the campaign, approaching tenants in public spaces, and making presentations at local community centers. Surveys were conducted primarily in Chinese. Analysis of results was conducted by the Community Development Project at UJC. The report was compiled jointly by CAAAV and UJC.

Demographics of Survey Participants

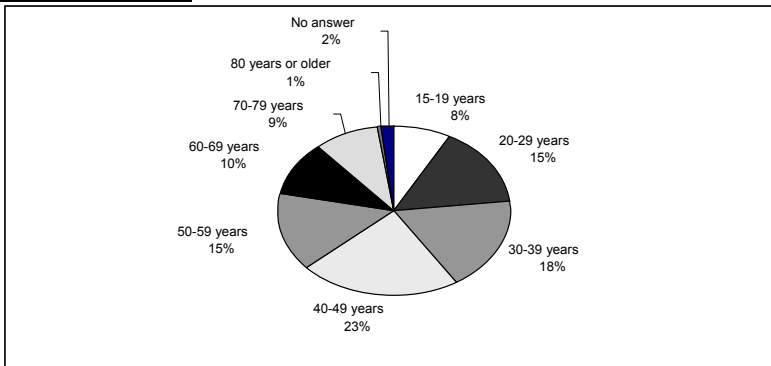
The following outlines the demographic layout of survey participants.

GENDER



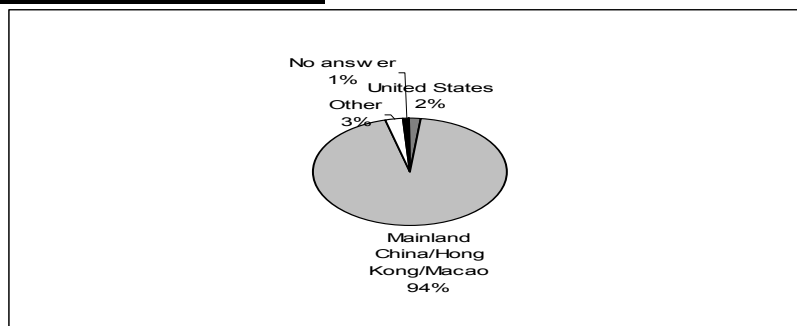
62% of survey participants were male and 37% were female.

AGE RANGE



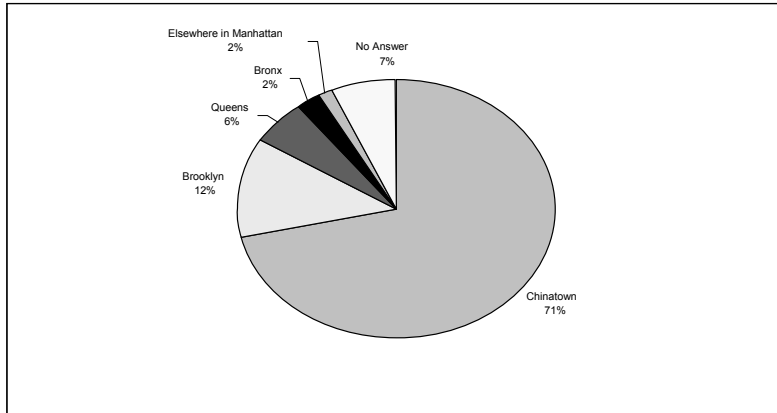
23% of survey participants were under 30 years of age. The majority, 41%, were between the ages of 30 and 50. 35% were over 50 years old.

COUNTRY OF BIRTH



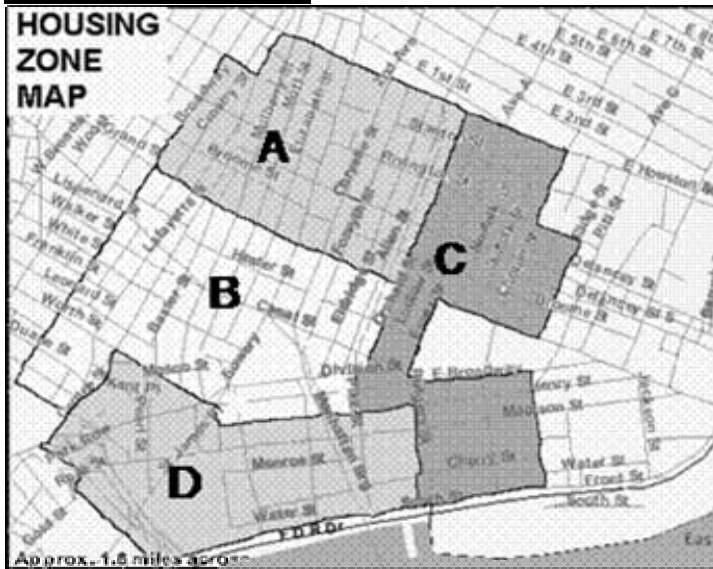
94% of survey participants were born in Mainland China, Hong Kong or Macao.

RESIDENCE



71% of survey participants lived in Chinatown. 12% lived in Brooklyn and 6% lived in Queens.

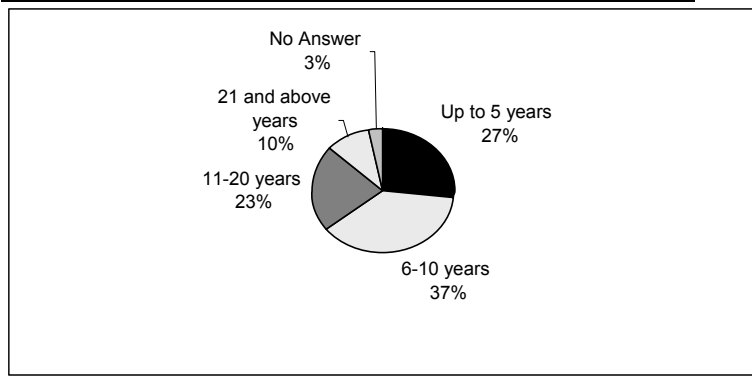
CHINATOWN ZONE



Of those that lived in Chinatown:

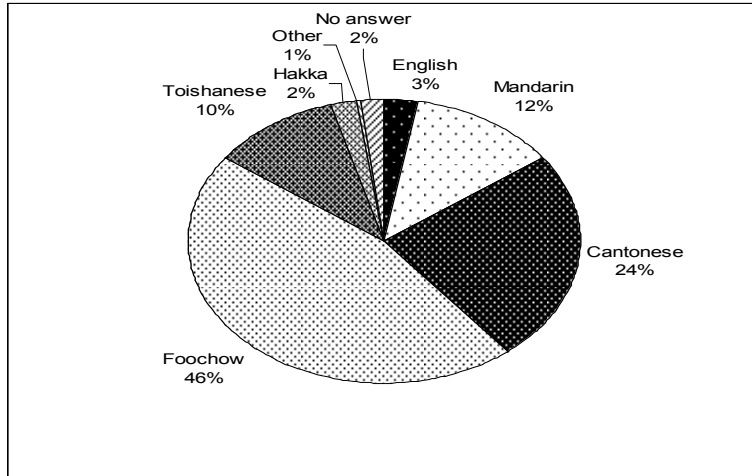
**20% lived in Zone A
14% lived in Zone B
47% lived in Zone C
9% lived in Zone D
9% No answer**

NUMBER OF YEARS IN THE UNITED STATES



Of those that were born outside of the United States, 27% have lived in the US for five years or less, 37% have been in the US between 6 and 10 years, and 33% have been in the US for over 10 years.

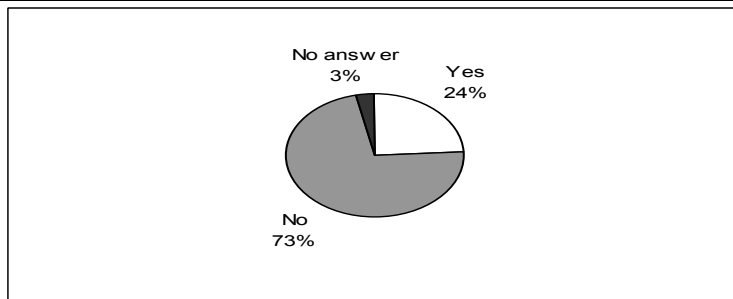
PRIMARY LANGUAGE



Of survey participants, 46% said Foochow was their primary

36% said Mandarin or Cantonese, 12% said Toishanese or Hakka and 3% said English was their primary language.

COMFORTABLE SPEAKING/READING ENGLISH?

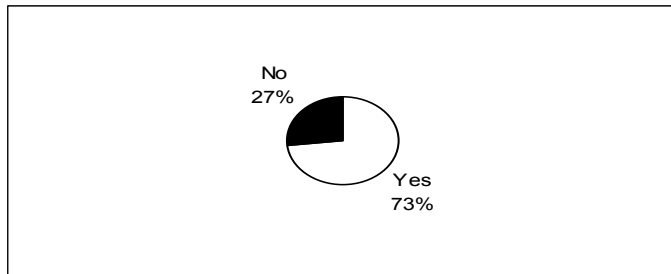


73% of the survey respondents did not feel comfortable speaking or reading in English.

Section 2: SURVEY RESULTS REGARDING HOUSING

The next section explores the housing problems tenants have been experiencing and tenants' willingness to use HPD services to respond to these problems.

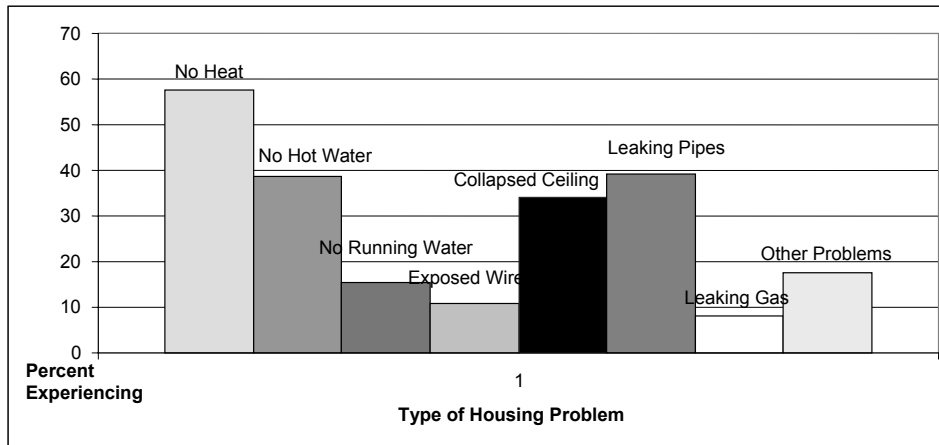
EXPERIENCING ANY HOUSING PROBLEMS:



73% of respondents reported having at least one housing problem.

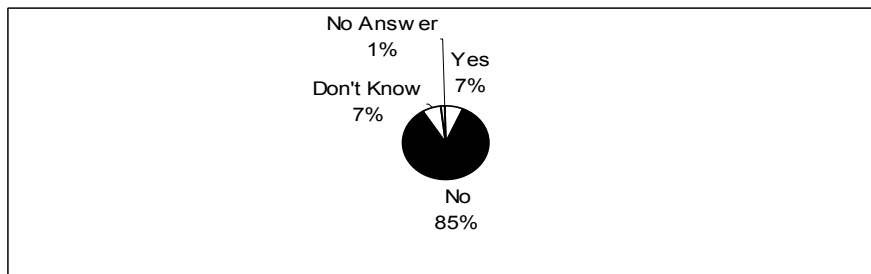
Of those that were experiencing housing problems, the follow graph illustrates the type of housing problems they had:

TYPE OF HOUSING PROBLEM



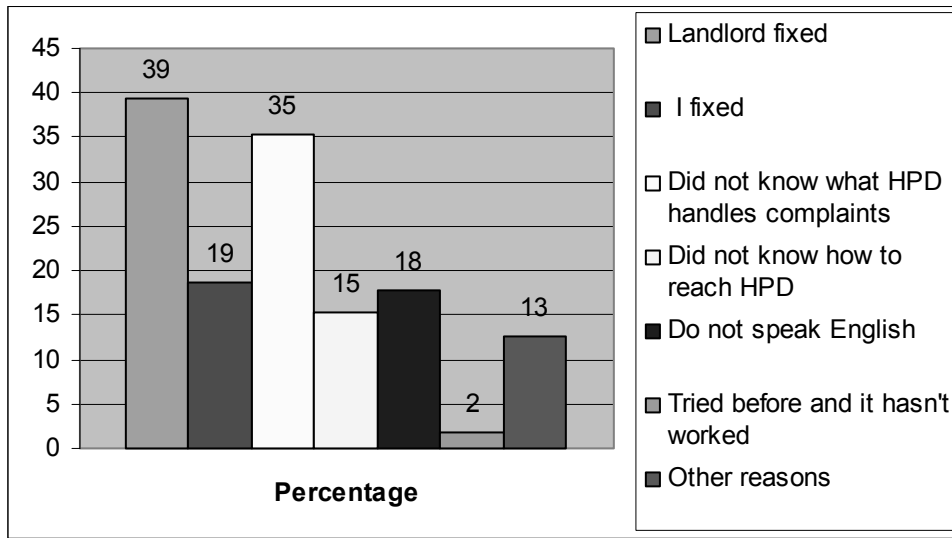
- Little/no heat 58%
- Little/no hot water 39%
- Little/no running water 15%
- Exposed wires 11%
- Collapsing ceiling 34%
- Leaking pipes 39%
- Leaking gas 8%
- Other problems 18%

IF EXPERIENCING HOUSING PROBLEM, DID YOU CALL HPD?



Of those experiencing housing problems, only 7% called HPD to file a complaint.

IF EXPERIENCING HOUSING PROBLEMS, BUT DID NOT FILE COMPLAINT WITH HPD, REASONS GIVEN FOR NOT FILING:

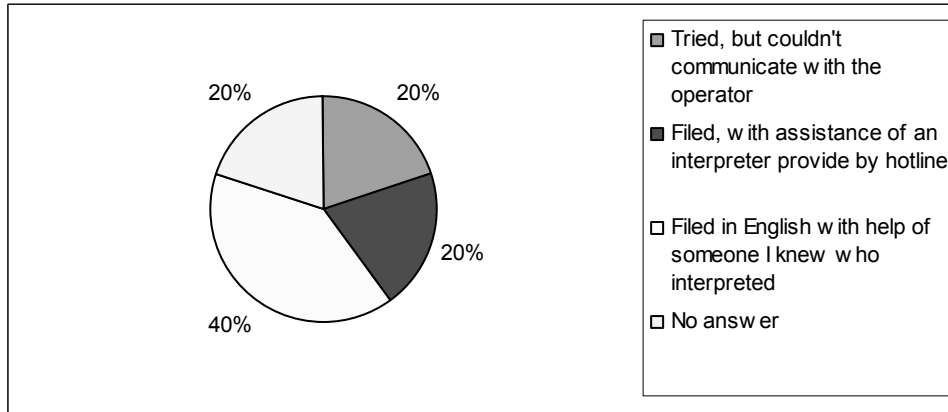


- Landlord fixed the problem 39%
- Fixed problem his/her self 19%
- Did not know HPD was the agency to handle housing complaints 35%
- Did not know how to reach HPD 15%
- Did not speak English well enough and did not feel comfortable asking for an interpreter 18%
- Tried before and it has not worked 2%
- Other reasons 13%

Section 3: Survey Results Regarding the HPD Hotline

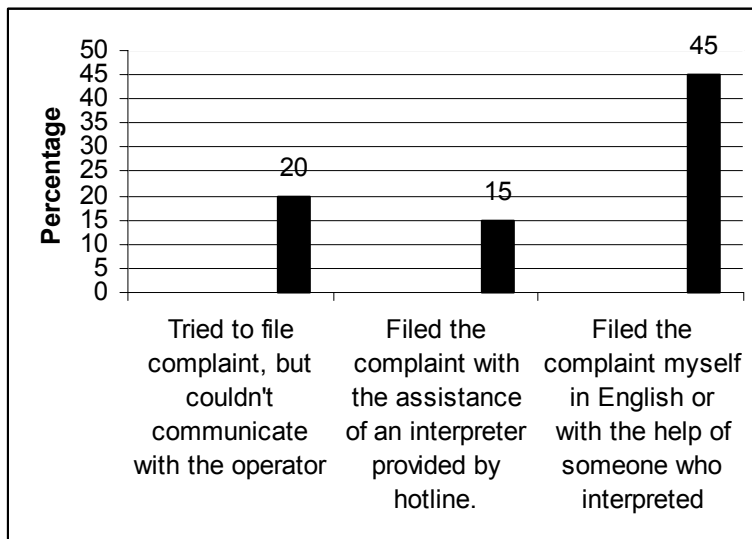
The next section explores the issues surrounding filing complaints with HPD hotline services.

IF TRIED TO FILE COMPLAINT WITH HPD HOTLINE SERVICES *THE LAST TIME*, WHAT HAPPENED?



Forty percent (40%) of those that experienced housing problems and called HPD filed in English with the help of someone they knew. Twenty percent (20%) tried to file but could not communicate with an operator and 20% filed with the assistance of an interpreter provided by the hotline.

IF TRIED TO FILE COMPLAINT WITH HPD HOTLINE SERVICES *EVER*, WHAT HAPPENED?

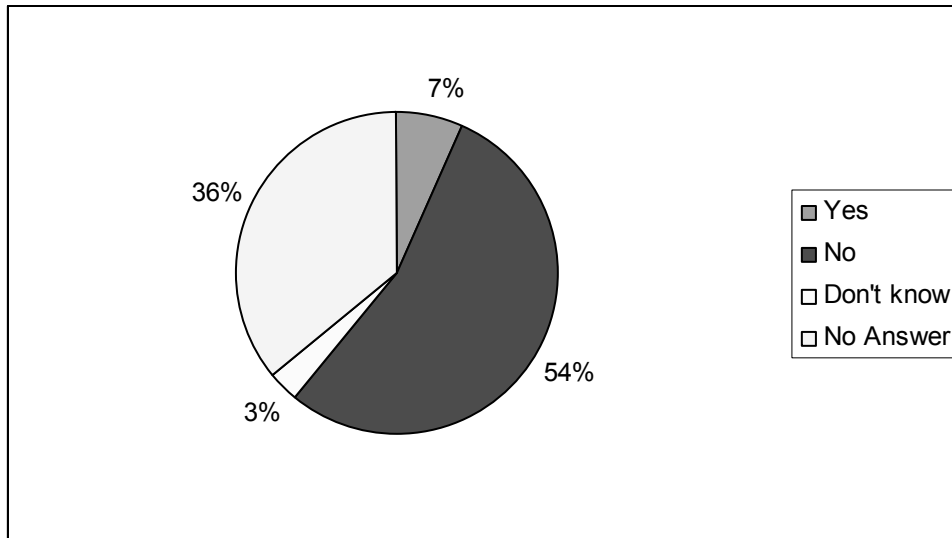


Forty-five percent (45%) of those that reported a housing issue to HPD had to report the complaint in English or with the use of an English-speaking interpreter. Twenty percent (20%) could not communicate with the operator and 15% filed with the help of an interpreter provided by the hotline.

Section 4: Survey results regarding HPD Inspector

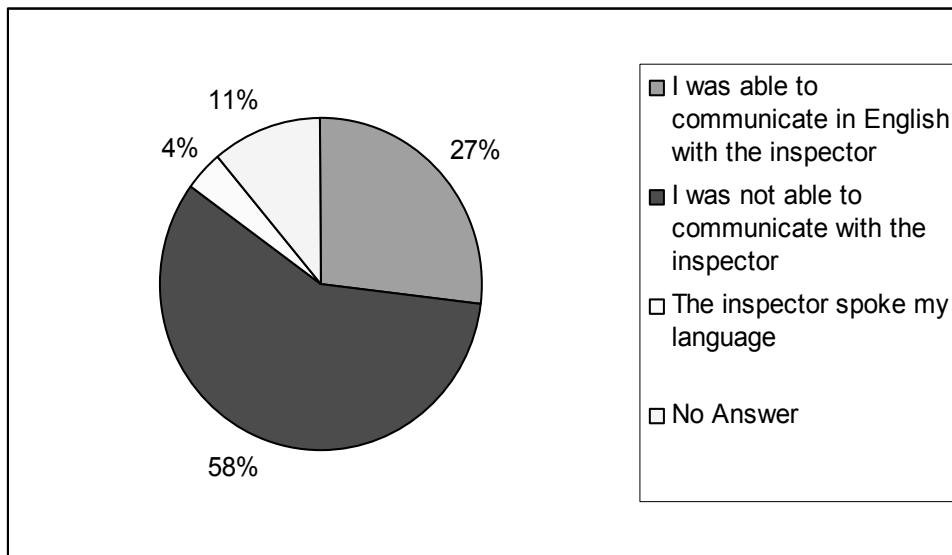
The following section outlines issues and problems that arise in the availability of and contact with an inspector and the communication between inspector and tenant.

HAVE YOU *EVER* HAD AN INSPECTOR COME TO YOUR APARTMENT TO LOOK AT CONDITIONS OR PROBLEMS?



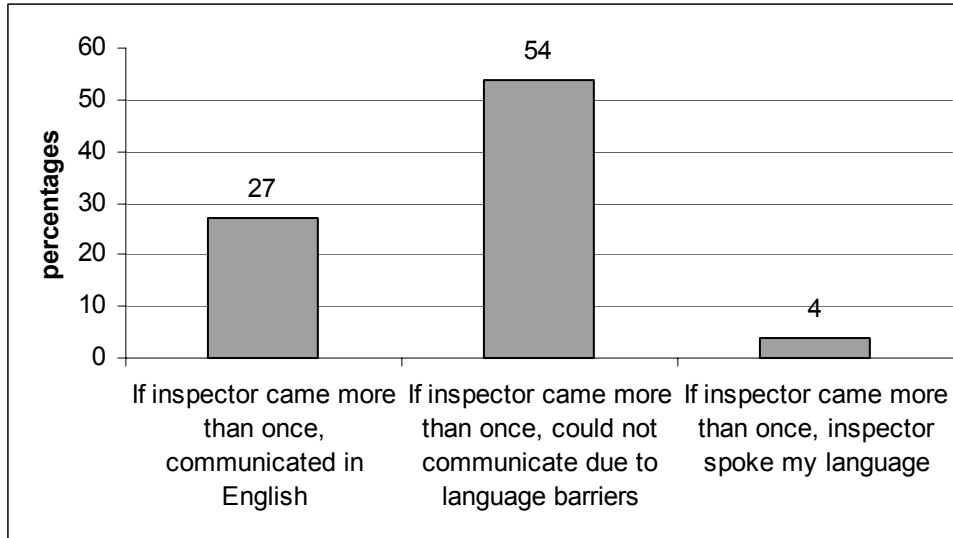
Only 7% of those responding to this question have had an inspector visit them at their home.

IF YES, WHAT HAPPENED THE LAST TIME AN INSPECTOR CAME?



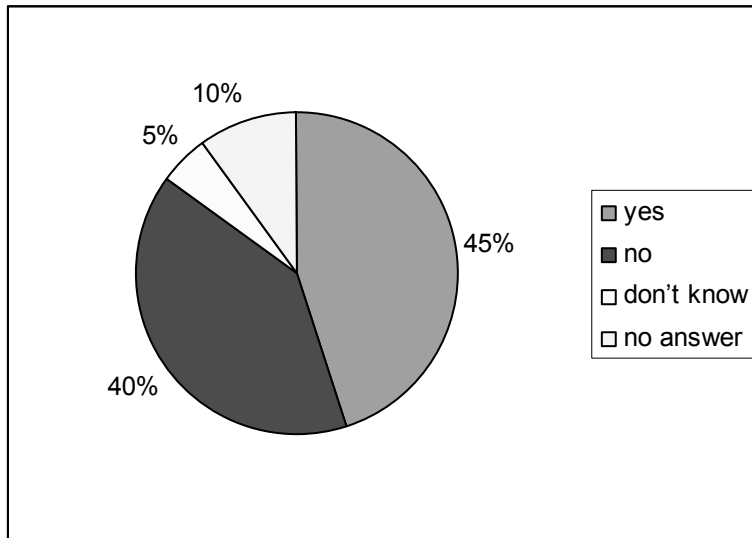
Of those visited by an HPD inspector 58% were unable to communicate to the inspector about their housing issue. 27% were able to communicate with an inspector in English. Only 4% said the inspector spoke their language.

IF AN INSPECTOR HAD COME MORE THAN ONCE HAS ANY OF THE FOLLOWING HAPPENED?



If an inspector came more than once, 54% of tenants could not communicate due to a language barrier. Twenty-seven percent (27%) communicated with the inspector in English. Only 4% reported that the inspector spoke their language.

WHEN YOU FILED YOUR LAST COMPLAINT, DID THE HPD SEND AN INSPECTOR TO YOUR APARTMENT TO INSPECT THE PROBLEM?

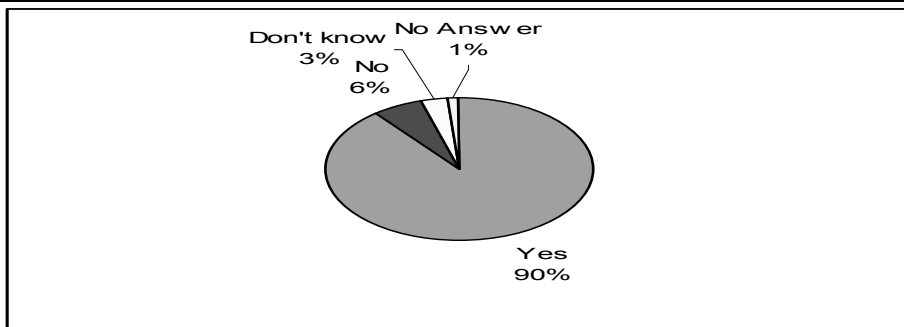


Of those tenants who filed a complaint, 40% were never visited by an HPD inspector.

Section 5: Survey Results Regarding the Need for Language Access

As mentioned in the demographics, the majority of those surveyed, the majority of respondents reported that English was not their primary language and they did not feel comfortable speaking or reading in English. Forty-six percent (46%) said Foochow was their primary language, 36% said Mandarin or Cantonese was their primary language and 12% said Toishanese or Hakka. Only 3% said English was their primary language. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the survey respondents did not feel comfortable speaking or reading in English. The below chart shows how, if HPD services were offered in Chinese, tenants were more likely to access HPD services.

IF HPD OFFERED INSPECTION OR HOTLINE SERVICES IN CHINESE, WOULD S/HE BE MORE WILLING TO COMPLAIN ABOUT HOUSING PROBLEMS:



90% of survey participants would be more willing to complain about housing problems if HPD offered inspection or hotline services in Chinese.

SECTION 6: RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE HEAR THIS! CAMPAIGN

As an initial step toward the long-term goal of justice for Chinatown tenants, the *Hear This!* Campaign recommends that the City government enhance its services to the Chinese immigrant community through the following initiatives:

1. Provide Chinese Language Access for HPD Services

- The Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) should work with the NYC Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications to hire bilingual Housing Specialists, fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Fujianese, to receive and process housing-related complaints from Chinese immigrant tenants on the 3-1-1 hotline.
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