

# Manhattan's Corner Stores Struggle

By TATIANA SCHLOSSBERG

José Alvarrado saved for more than a decade to buy 3 Brothers Mini Market. But only eight months after he opened shop, shelves that had held bags of rice and beans were empty. Jugs of milk lay sideways in a refrigerated case, offered at half-price.

Mr. Alvarrado is closing his store, saying that even with a five-year lease, rising rent and other conditions make it impossible to stay. His situation is similar to one faced by many bodega owners throughout Upper Manhattan: Despite their profitability, stores are being squeezed out of the neighborhoods they call home. Once lonely grocery outposts in a dangerous city, their colorful awnings part of the streetscape, they are now losing customers to chain stores.

Bodegas — there are around 12,000 in New York City — cannot be strictly defined. You know one when you see it. They dot the city's landscape, collecting everything a New Yorker might need: fruit, hair products, beer, cigarettes, lottery tickets, string cheese. The cramped stores have cats, take in neighbors' packages and even provide shoppers with a spiritual fix, selling Our Lady of Guadalupe candles and incense.

About 75 have closed this year, mostly in Upper Manhattan according to Ramon Murphy, president of the Bodega Association of the United States. Rent is the biggest expense for bodega owners, and in Manhattan, where limited commercial space creates fierce competition, the commercial rent ceiling keeps getting higher. According to the Real Estate Board of New York, the average commercial rent in Manhattan rose 34 percent from 2004 to 2014.

The issue is compounded by the growing number of national chain stores. In 2014, the city experienced the largest increase in chain stores in four years, and the sixth straight year of growth in chains, bringing the tally to 7,473 throughout the city, according to the Center for an Urban Future. "I see more Duane Reades and Rite Aids coming up everywhere, and the only difference between them and us is that they have a pharmacy," Mr. Murphy said of two chain drug stores.

For the last 15 years, William Marte has owned the KSY Mini Market Deli. "The neighborhood has changed; what people want has changed," he said. "Lots of the people who used to live here couldn't afford it anymore."

Hector Hernandez said he had been coming to Mr. Marte's bodega for years, and if the store were to close it would be a huge loss for the neighborhood. "If I come here, and I don't have money, he'll let me come back with it another time," he said, a thought echoed by other customers at the store.

Randol Lara, whose family has owned Lara's Deli and Grocery for 15 years, said that even though his family thinks it is a risk, he hopes to renovate the bodega.

"Now that being healthy is a thing," Mr. Lara said, "we're going to have to renovate — have more of a salad bar, fresh juices, that kind of thing."