

Policy Analysis: Banning Slaughterhouses in NYC

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Purpose

The purpose of this policy memo is to inform a decision-maker of the history, context, benefits, and detriments of the proposal to ban slaughterhouses in New York City.

The Issue of Industrial Agriculture in America

Ever since I read the book *Chew On This* by Charles Wilson and Eric Schlosser in fourth grade I have been very troubled by the industrial meat industry in America. Nearly every aspect of the industry is flawed. We have managed to create a system in which the processed food, which uses the most resources to produce, is less expensive than a vegetable which can grow in one's own backyard.¹ And on top of that we still have large swaths of people who cannot afford to feed their families.²

On a 100 year time scale, animal agriculture is responsible for 14.5% of all greenhouse gas emissions, and this percentage is much larger on a twenty year time scale.³ The meat industry is also a large contributor to land clearing and deforestation in places like Brazil. Meat production requires a tremendous amount of land and water. Let's look at the environmental impacts of beef production for example. Not only must land be cleared on which cattle may graze, but land must also be cleared to grow the corn which the cattle eat. Huge amounts of water are required mostly to water the corn. 1,847 gallons of water are required to produce 1 pound of beef.⁴ A single cow in a feedlot defecates 65 pounds per day.⁵ On January 1st, 2021, there were over 12 million cattle bound for slaughter in feedlots. That means that over 780 million pounds of manure were produced each day, and that not even including the manure produced by dairy cows, which produce an astounding 115 pounds of manure per day. So what happens to all the manure? Most of it is accumulated in anaerobic lagoons. These lagoons give off harmful gasses such as carbon dioxide, ammonia, methane, and hydrogen sulfide. In addition to contributing to harmful air pollution, if these lagoons are not properly maintained, they can runoff into nearby waterways, thus poisoning the water.

While in the meat industry, cows are subjected to horrendous conditions. They are often kept in dangerously close conditions in which they live in manure. As a result, cows can contract illnesses through fecal-borne bacteria, such as *E. Coli*, and these illnesses can be transmitted to the people who eat the meat. The cows, who are highly intelligent and capable of having

¹ <https://www.vox.com/videos/2018/3/22/17152460/healthy-eating-expensive>

² <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>

³ Schlottmann, C., & Sebo, J. (2019). *Food, animals, and the environment: An ethical approach*. Routledge.

⁴ <https://www.denverwater.org/tap/whats-the-beef-with-water#:~:text=It%20takes%20approximately%201%2C847%20gallons,the%20way%20to%20the%20top>

⁵ [https://fergusonfoundation.org/lessons/cow_in_out/cowmoreinfo.shtml#:~:text=Manure%20%2D%20A%20cow%20produces%2065,Fahrenheit%20\(38.6%20degrees%20Celsius\)](https://fergusonfoundation.org/lessons/cow_in_out/cowmoreinfo.shtml#:~:text=Manure%20%2D%20A%20cow%20produces%2065,Fahrenheit%20(38.6%20degrees%20Celsius))

complex emotions, are subjected to tremendous pain and stress in the slaughterhouses.⁶ In addition, fossil fuels are released through the transportation of the cattle from the feedlots to the slaughterhouses, as well as the shipping of the meat in refrigerated trucks, the supermarket refrigeration, and the plastic used to package the meat.

While the exact number is not known, a majority of workers in the industrial meat sector are undocumented immigrants. As a result of their immigration status, many of these workers are paid unlivable wages and are subjected to cruel treatment, because their employers know that if they report them to the authorities they risk deportation.

Many people believe that meat is a key element of a well-rounded diet and that meat consumption is the only way to obtain enough protein. This however is a myth, and it was strategically planted by the meat industry through a campaign similar to that of the cigarette industry. Meat is in no way a better source of nutrition than non-meat foods. In fact, meat consumption has been linked to many health issues such as heart disease, cancer, and stroke.⁷

The meat industry holds a tremendous amount of power in the United States, which they have obtained over time through lobbying. The power of the meat industry in the US government has in many ways come at the expense of the US citizens. Worker conditions as well as food safety in the meat industry have not been regulated nearly as much as they should be as a result of industry influence.

As is evident, the current system of meat production in America is unsustainable and systemic reform must be implemented in order to create meaningful and long-term change. However, due to the scale and wealth of the meat industry, such change is tremendously difficult to pass and sometimes even seems impossible. I have decided to focus on the issue of slaughterhouses in New York City because I believe that it is a small and possible change that could draw significant attention to the failures of the meat industry. When people think of slaughterhouses they think of animals being killed, and the vast majority of people do not like the idea of killing animals. People are much more likely to care about innocent cows being killed than fossil fuel emissions from refrigerated trucks. So, this issue is much more likely to draw attention. While a ban on slaughterhouses in New York City may seem like an attack on the small business owners which are in most instances beneficial in an industry that is dominated by a few corporations, it is not. Instead, a ban on slaughterhouses is simply in response to the fact that New York City is not the right place for slaughterhouses and wet markets for a number of reasons. Such a change is highly feasible and has already been proposed by State Assemblymember Linda Rosenthal. Additionally, given New York City's fame, such a change would draw significant attention to the issue, and could spark the systemic change that is necessary.

⁶ <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/nature/curious-questions-are-cows-actually-super-intelligent-220098>

⁷ <https://mercyforanimals.org/blog/here-are-the-top-10-health-concerns-linked/>

Why this topic was chosen

As a citizen of New York City, I was surprised to discover that slaughterhouses are present within the five boroughs. As a New Yorker, I often think about the animal agriculture industry as a very distant thing, and I was very surprised to learn that it was happening in my very own backyard. I wondered who was behind these slaughterhouses and who purchased their meat from them. Could it really be sustainable and safe to have a commercial slaughterhouse in the biggest city in the US, especially in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which taught us a lot about the risks of wet markets in densely populated cities?

History and context

Slaughterhouses have been a part of society for countless years, and they have been a part of New York City for a very long time as well. In 1898 however, slaughterhouses were restricted to two neighborhoods: the Meatpacking District and an approximately 17 acre region spanning from 43rd Street to 49th Street and from First Avenue to the East River.⁸ By 1900, 250 slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants were present in the Meatpacking District; these plants were thriving businesses, producing the US's third-largest volume of dressed meats, with the support of the New York City government, which subsidized the industry in hopes of retaining plentiful fresh meat and jobs.⁹ The meatpacking industry became less common in the Meatpacking District beginning in the 1970s, as supermarkets became more prevalent and as entertainment venues became more numerous in the area.¹⁰ Additionally, the meat industry continued to become more consolidated and vertically integrated, as fewer companies held an increasingly large market share of the industry.¹¹

Presently, a permit must be obtained in order to operate a slaughterhouse in New York City, and over 80 slaughterhouses and wet markets still remain in New York City. These wet markets, which are no longer contained to specific neighborhoods, are often found in close proximity to residences, schools, and densely populated areas. Numerous citations have been filed against these operations, claiming, for example, that they have failed to maintain sanitary facilities.¹² If faced with a violation, state officials may penalize the operation with actions such as license revocations, suspensions, fines ranging from \$300 to \$2,000, and court injunctions.¹³

In 2004, Speaker of the New York City Council, Corey Johnson, proposed a bill which vested the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene with authority to inspect and enforce regulations governing the operations of slaughterhouses in New York City. This bill was

⁸ <http://www.tudorcityconfidential.com/2016/08/slaughter-on-first-avenue.html>

⁹ <https://www.meatpacking-district.com/history/>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meatpacking_District,_Manhattan

¹¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/blog/2021/09/08/addressing-concentration-in-the-meat-processing-industry-to-lower-food-prices-for-american-families/>

¹² <https://abc7ny.com/nyc-slaughterhouses-live-markets-coronavirus-update/6105833/>

¹³ <https://nypost.com/2002/03/19/city-slaughterhouses-so-unclean-theyre-beastly/>

filed.¹⁴ In 2008, a bill was passed banning licenses for new slaughterhouses within 1,500 feet of a residential building to be procured.¹⁵ Since then, this ban has been extended numerous times, most recently in 2020, when it was extended for another four years. Recently, city politicians, including Linda Rosenthal, have called for the prohibition of all slaughterhouses in New York City, citing an inability for these businesses to operate in a safe manner.¹⁶

Justification

Health Concerns

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have learned a lot about the risks of live animal markets as places that are responsible for starting the spread of zoonotic diseases, especially in densely populated areas. This risk stems from the fact that in these slaughterhouses, animals of many different species are kept in often unsanitary and close quarters. Such conditions encourage the spread of disease among animals and eventually to people. The presence of slaughterhouses in New York City results in an increased risk of the spread of such diseases.

Necessity

New York City takes up only 302.6 square miles of the 54,556 square miles of the State of New York. Not only is there not a necessity for slaughterhouses in metropolitan New York City, but land is much more abundant in upstate New York, where real estate prices are also vastly lower. Moving to upstate New York would allow the owners of slaughterhouses to access lower real estate prices and have more room to house their animals, thus lessening the risk of the spread of zoonotic diseases.

Environmental Impacts

Animals housed in urban slaughterhouses defecate and urinate just like all other animals, and in a city as densely populated as New York it is very easy for urine and feces to pollute waterways and the general environment. This is extremely harmful because such substances may contain bacteria such as *E. Coli* and *Salmonella* which, if ingested, can be fatal to humans.¹⁷¹⁸ Additionally, the presence of feces in New York City streets as a result of improper sanitation protocols is potentially harmful to the public as well. Additionally, written citations have cited the presence of deceased animals and animal blood on the streets surrounding slaughterhouses. Exposure to animal carcasses and blood is harmful to humans as the specimens may contain

¹⁴<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=443403&GUID=7D008A6F-15BE-4F87-8670-21BD1A1C520E&Search=&Options=>

¹⁵ <https://assembly.state.ny.us/mem/Linda-B-Rosenthal/story/92274>

¹⁶ <https://assembly.state.ny.us/mem/Linda-B-Rosenthal/story/92274>

¹⁷<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8930709/#:~:text=Slaughterhouse%20sludge%20was%20heavily%20contaminated,sludge%20from%20all%20slaughterhouses%20examined.>

¹⁸<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5541329/#:~:text=Animal%20feces%20were%20associated%20with,and%20not%20associated%20with%20E.>

bacteria.¹⁹ Additionally, humans may contract many diseases through contact with animal carcasses.²⁰

Animal Welfare

At slaughterhouses, animals are confined to very small quarters and eventually killed. Such a set-up, in which animals are kept in small cages or pens, never to see the light of day, is obviously inhumane as it nearly antithesizes their natural habitat and behaviours. The animals are also subjected to cruel treatment through the slaughter itself. Because of the scale of such operations, the probability of error during the slaughter itself is much higher. Although kosher and halal slaughter practices are thought to be humane as it involves a slice across the throat which should kill the animal instantly, if the cut is not done properly, the animal can suffer tremendously and have an extended and painful death. Additionally, in such a small space, it is probable that animals are surrounded by the constant sight and sounds of their fellow animals being slaughtered. While one may argue that banning NYC slaughterhouses would not limit the number of animals slaughtered, as people would just switch to purchasing store bought meat, there are individual animals currently contained in slaughterhouses, and their lives would be saved.

Real Estate

If slaughterhouses were to be sold, the property owners could make a profit off of the sale of the property as New York City real estate prices have been on a steady rise. Additionally, the land on which the property is situated could be developed and turned into more expensive real estate, which could help the NYC economy by increasing the property and income tax revenue and taxes obtained from the developer.

Violations

New York City slaughterhouses have a history of violations. In November, 2020, images were obtained by the animal rights group NYCLASS depicting a slaughterhouse in Queens piling up trash bags filled with severed chicken parts, some of which were spilling out of the trash bags and visible to passersby. Additionally, blood was seen spilling from the bags and spilling onto the street and sidewalk.²¹ Slaughterhouses in NYC have received violations for including storing equipment in a manner that inhibits proper cleaning, allowing the buildup of dried meat on meat grinders, storing perishable items at the wrong temperature, allowing grime to accumulate on food contact surfaces, and lacking a knife sterilization system.²²

¹⁹ <https://www.healthline.com/health/drinking-blood#is-it-legal>

²⁰ <https://palmettowildlifeextractors.com/diseases-you-can-contract-through-dead-animals/>

²¹ <https://www.tzm.com/2020/11/16/nyc-wet-market-dumpster-leaking-blood-chicken-parts-coronavirus-covid-vaccine/>

²² <https://abc7ny.com/nyc-slaughterhouses-live-markets-coronavirus-update/6105833/>

Scale

There are roughly 80 licensed slaughterhouses in New York, so shutting them all down is highly feasible and not very impactful on local economies or joblessness.

Worker Safety

Employment in a slaughterhouse has been directly linked to PTSD, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence, as well as many other health concerns.²³ The presence of slaughterhouses in NYC contributes to the populations of those who suffer from these conditions. Such conditions not only affect an individual, but also those with whom they surround themselves. Because of the means by which animals are slaughtered in NYC slaughterhouses and the lack of mechanization, producing a certain amount of meat at an NYC slaughterhouse requires more workers than at an industrial slaughterhouse. Thus, by shutting down NYC slaughterhouses and reallocating that demand for meat to industrial slaughterhouses or larger slaughterhouses, less people would be at risk for such disorders.

Counterarguments

While a ban on slaughterhouses in New York City may initially seem like a perfect solution to a problem which many New Yorkers were unaware of, there are many drawbacks to the legislation.

Culture and Religion

Wet markets and local slaughterhouses cater mostly to Kosher, Halal, and immigrant communities.²⁴ Banning these slaughterhouses could be viewed as unfairly targeting these communities, especially as they are often run by immigrants and people of historically marginalized communities, and they would no longer have a job.

The reliance of certain ethnic and religious communities on NYC slaughterhouses is often cited as a reason why such slaughterhouses cannot be abolished, and furthermore why doing so would be targeting said communities. However, cities such as San Francisco do not have slaughterhouses, yet communities reliant on Kosher and Halal diets are still able to thrive. Given the small number of slaughterhouses in New York City, it is impossible that all of the Kosher and Halal communities are reliant on slaughterhouses in NYC, and Kosher and Halal meat is available at most supermarkets.

²³<https://metro.co.uk/2017/12/31/how-killing-animals-everyday-leaves-slaughterhouse-workers-traumatise-d-7175087/>

²⁴ <https://slaughterfreenyc.com/map>

Effectiveness

Slaughterhouses in New York City generally cater to specific ethnic groups and religious diets by providing specific products. Said slaughterhouses are family-owned and are not owned by the large corporations which dominate much of the industrial meat industry. Shutting down the 80 slaughterhouses in New York City would not have a very large impact on the meat industry as a whole because there are so few of them.

Transparency

The industrial meat industry is very secretive and distant, especially to those living in big cities such as New York City, as we are not able to witness the industry first-hand. The presence of slaughterhouses in New York City allows residents of the city to be more aware of the practices of the meat industry and consequently enables them to make more informed decisions about their meat consumption. Some might argue that removing slaughterhouses in New York City might even increase meat consumption as people would be less exposed and feel less involved in the process of harvesting meat.

Real Estate and Joblessness

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven down New York City real estate prices tremendously. Banning slaughterhouses would create more vacancies and thus lower the value of each property on the market, because price rises as supply lessens.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic put large numbers of people out of work, and banning slaughterhouses would not only eliminate job opportunities, but it would also put people out of work and force them into a hostile job market.

Animal Welfare

While the mechanization of animal harvesting in industrial slaughterhouses may be viewed as beneficial and more exact, the means by which animals are slaughtered in these large facilities are often less humane than the kosher and halal methods which are practiced in many NYC slaughterhouses. The methods of Kosher and Halal slaughter are in place because they are asserted to be the most humane methods. Additionally, such legislation would be a symbolic moral statement against the slaughter of animals and the inhumane treatment of animals that comes with it. Such a statement would open the doors to a public conversation about animal agriculture that could increase people's understanding of the industry and decrease the distance that people feel from it.

Funding and Implementation

Implementation of this bill could be entrusted with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).²⁵ DOHMH “protects and promotes the health and mental well being of all New Yorkers,” and the presence of slaughterhouses in NYC involves these topics.

Additionally, for those who would be losing their business it would be beneficial for a compensation clause to be established. Such a clause could state that the developers who purchase the slaughterhouses will contribute a certain amount of money in order to help pay for the slaughterhouse owners’ compensation.

Feasibility and Impact

The small number of slaughterhouses in New York City would allow for the process of banning such institutions to be fairly easy. Given the small number of slaughterhouses in New York City, some may view the impact of banning them as limited in comparison to the meat industry as a whole. Some may argue that given that New York City is such a prominent city, taking such steps would set a precedent for other cities to do the same and raise awareness about slaughterhouses in cities.

A foie gras ban was recently implemented in NYC.²⁶ While the sentiment of such a ban is commendable (the practice of producing foie gras is extremely cruel), its direct impact on animals is smaller than a ban on a more common practice would be. Few farms produce foie gras, and only wealthy consumers have access to it. The foie gras ban is an example of governments doing their best to make the world a more humane place for animals. However, because large meat companies have so much power, it is nearly impossible for the government to target them, so they are forced to target smaller companies. Much of this legislation targets small corporations and depicts how the US government is structured to protect large corporations. Additionally, San Francisco recently became the third city to pass a fur ban, which bans the sale or purchase of fur in the city.²⁷ Like the foie gras ban but to a lesser extent, the fur ban only affects the wealthy people who are able to afford expensive fur products. While the fur ban will accomplish its purpose of limiting the cruel treatment present in the fur industry, the bill only affects a small industry, and will not affect the millions of animals who suffer at the hands of the meat and fashion industry. Once again, governments are passing legislation targeting smaller and more vulnerable industries in order to appear compassionate. These policies however come at the expense of small businesses and fail to address the true instances of animal abuse in America, which is performed by major untouchable and powerful corporations. Such a bill additionally works to rank the suffering of animals, why is the slaughter of geese, fox, or rabbits any worse than that of cows, chickens, and pigs?

²⁵ <https://www1.nyc.gov/nyc-resources/agencies.page>

²⁶ <https://www.eater.com/2019/10/2/20893463/new-york-city-foie-gras-ban-bill-foie-gras-farms-us>

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/14/style/fur-ban-california.html>

Related considerations and next steps

Audience

Those involved with slaughterhouses in New York City, including consumers and the business owners are presumably the ones who would object to such legislation. The patrons of NYC slaughterhouses are often religious or immigrant communities from the areas surrounding the operation and to whom the operation caters. I believe that local government community members should be responsible for communicating this issue to their community, so as not to seem as though a person or group who is completely unaffiliated with the community is forcing them to change their ways. I also believe that it is important to communicate to community members that Kosher and Halal options are often available at farmers markets, which would allow them to create a similar bond with the organization from which they are purchasing their meat.

Strategic Considerations

In order to retain traction, social movements must appear to be making progress. Thus, even though a ban on NYC slaughterhouses would not be the most significant, it would be a statement of moral principle, bringing attention to a flawed system. Such action could be seen as a stepping stone towards larger movement and could even be part of a larger portfolio of change so that it was not a merely performative action. Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) has recently reintroduced the Farm System Reform Act of 2021, which seeks to “place a moratorium on large concentrated animal feeding operations, to strengthen the Packers and Stockyards Act, 1921, to require country of origin labeling on beef, pork, and dairy products, and for other purposes”²⁸. A ban on slaughterhouses in NYC and the Farm System Reform Act are in effect doing opposite things: the point of the Farm System Reform Act is to deindustrialize the meat industry, while a ban on slaughterhouses in NYC would be shutting down small meat operations and in effect supporting large meat corporations. Thus, while a ban on slaughterhouses in NYC would presumably draw attention to such a bill, it could harm the chances of the legislation by further complicating the debate.

Strategic Drawbacks

None of the slaughterhouses in New York City are owned by the large corporations which dominate much of the US meat industry. In fact, most of the NYC slaughterhouses are owned by families and individuals. A ban on these slaughterhouses would be targeting these small businesses for whom it is already difficult to survive. Many small businesses and families have faced tremendous fiscal struggles as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and shutting these

²⁸<https://www.booker.senate.gov/news/press/booker-reintroduces-bill-to-reform-farm-system-with-expanded-support-from-farm-labor-environment-public-health-faith-based-and-animal-welfare-groups>

businesses down could be detrimental to owners' livelihoods. The government should be targeting the large meat corporations which routinely poison consumers and mistreat workers and animals, and which are far too monopolistic and powerful. Shutting down small meat producers would make these large corporations even more powerful as they would have a larger market-share. Targeting small businesses would show to the large corporations that they truly are untouchable in the eyes of the US government.

Next Steps

While a bill surrounding meat production in New York City may not directly target large scale meat producers, such producers could be affected in the future if certain steps are taken in the wake of such a policy. The implementation of such a policy in New York City would draw a great deal of attention to the issues surrounding the meat industry. The more attention there is for an issue at the city and state level, the more likely it is that politicians at the federal level will support these issues. Changes at the federal level are much more likely to affect large corporations. Additionally, more opportunities for people to become educated on issues surrounding the meat industry are likely to appear, whether run by the government or organizations. Organizations targeting the meat industry are likely to receive increased fiscal and general support, which could allow them to be much more impactful. All in all, while this legislation may seem targeted to small producers, it has the potential to lead to much larger scale change.