The variable production of coda /r/ in New York City English (NYCE) was described 45 years ago as a change in progress from above (Labov 1966, 1972) with the expectation that NYCE was moving to join the rest of rhotic American English. A small but growing body of work (Fowler 1986, Becker 2009, Blake and Shousterman 2010, André-Mather 2011) has documented the change, which the Atlas of North American English (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006) notes has advanced at a slower pace than expected, at a rate of 1.5% a year. We present current data from a large and diverse sample of 64 speakers from the Lower East Side of Manhattan that demonstrate the advancement of this change in progress and discuss the influence of several social factors on it. We corroborate the slow rate of change, as variable /r/ production both remains in use and serves as a resource used to index local neighborhood affiliation (Becker 2009) and stances of authority and anti-gentrification. Yet the change continues to advance, such that some speakers (all under the age of 35) are fully rhotic.

The speakers analyzed are native English-speaking, born and raised New Yorkers, drawn from a corpus of interviews conducted on the Lower East Side from 2006-2009. The speakers represent a diversity of ethnic backgrounds and are stratified for age, gender, generation status, and socioeconomic background. Two analysts perceptually coded over 18,000 tokens of coda /r/, for an average of 295 tokens per speaker, with an agreement rate of 94%. A third analyst resolved any disagreements to arrive at the final dataset. The overall speaker sample shows a rate of coda /r/ production (or [r-l]) of 69% in interview speech. A mixed-effects logistic regression was run on the data (with speaker and word as random effects) and verifies the change in progress for /r/ in selecting age as a significant social predictor, so that younger speakers produce higher rates of [r-l] than older speakers. Internal factors such as stress, word class, and following context, and the social factors of ethnicity and generation status, are also selected as significant. The importance of a diverse speaker sample is evident in the significance of the interaction of age and ethnicity as a predictor of [r-l], with Asian and Latino speakers changing the most from non-rhotic to rhotic over time, white and Jewish speakers changing less dramatically, and African American speakers starting out fairly rhotic and remaining stable.

These findings provide important documentation of the current state of the change in progress for coda /r/ in NYCE. While the change advances. We also find qualitatively that non-rhoticity is a resource on the Lower East Side. We demonstrate here the complex set of factors that impact the use of coda /r/ in light of its slow rate of change since the 1960s.