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Clinton bid for solidarity backfires on Harlem blacks



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NEW YORK - Bill Clinton's decision to site his office in the largely black Manhattan neighbourhood of Harlem, as a gesture of solidarity with African-Americans, appears to have backfired.

Dozens of angry blacks demonstrated last week outside the building that houses the former president's staff, claiming that his move had led to the gentrification of the area and increased the price of homes beyond their reach.

Clinton's empathy with black Americans is well known.

But his move to Harlem, known as the Black Capital of America, has had unintended consequences.

The booming economy and the enormous demand for Manhattan property have seen rents nearly double in Harlem since 2000, when Clinton left the White House to support his wife, Hillary, and her career as the junior senator for New York. A one-bedroom flat which used to rent six years ago for US\$800 (\$1280) a month now costs US\$1400.

The *Washington Post* records that the top price for a brownstone terrace house in Harlem in 2001 was US\$400,000. Now a fully renovated townhouse costs as much as US\$4m. Even this is a relative bargain: 30 blocks south, similar houses which need considerable renovation start at US\$5m.

Harlem is home to young black professionals who can afford the inflated prices and are undeterred by the noise and late-night roistering of Harlem street life. As prices rise sharply, the area is fast becoming more staid and crime is falling.

The gentrification of Harlem is the latest twist in the neighbourhood's varied history. After a period of exclusion, by the 1920s, Harlem was the epicentre of black entertainment, reaching its heyday after Prohibition in 1926. A long period of low rents and high poverty overtook Harlem from the end of World War II until the early 1990s. Now there is intense pressure on poorer, older tenants in low-rent properties to pay more, hence the march to Clinton's office.