

# New York's mayor calls for police crackdown on the homeless

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In his weekly radio program last Friday, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani declared that homeless people do not have the right to sleep on the sidewalks. This statement was prompted by an incident three days earlier in which a man attacked an office worker with a brick in midtown Manhattan.

The *Daily News* printed a front-page editorial the same day, entitled, "Get The Violent Crazies Off Our Streets," pointing to this incident. The man who attacked the office worker has not been caught and his identity remains unknown, making it impossible to determine whether or not he was homeless or mentally unstable. But the *Daily News* seized on the incident to whip up a campaign against the homeless.

The recently concluded trial of Andrew Goldstein has also contributed to the anti-homeless crusade. Goldstein was on trial for pushing a woman onto subway tracks in front of an oncoming train, resulting in her decapitation. Although not homeless, this was a man who was diagnosed as a schizophrenic with a past history of violence, who repeatedly and unsuccessfully sought to be placed permanently in psychiatric hospitals. Due to budget cuts, hospital personnel repeatedly turned him out after only short stays. Goldstein pleaded not guilty due to insanity.

The trial ended in a hung jury because two of the twelve jurors accepted the arguments of the defense. Following the trial, the press conducted a witch-hunt against one of the jurors who voted not guilty.

In his radio address Giuliani expressed his agreement with the line of the *Daily News* editorial, saying it was necessary to get the homeless and mentally disturbed off the streets. He said, "Streets do not exist in civilized societies for the purpose of people sleeping there. Bedrooms are for sleeping." He added, "You do not have the right to sleep on the streets. The founding

fathers never put that in the Constitution".

Only three weeks ago, in a policy statement on homeless shelters, Giuliani stated that those seeking refuge in the shelters would have to work to earn their right to a bed. If they refused to do so, he said they should be thrown out of the facilities. While most homeless people would like nothing better than sleeping in their own bedrooms, this policy can only serve to increase the number of homeless forced to live on the streets.

As one advocate for the homeless, Ms. Brosnahan, stated, "Where's the logic here? We're going to round them up and bring them to a shelter, and if they refuse work, they're going to be thrown back on the streets?" She added that the number of homeless in the streets has increased in the last 18 months as a result of more restrictive shelter policies, prompted by a lack on funding. "It's not that these people have a right to freeze to death on the streets. It's that they don't have enough housing," she said.

There is a logic behind the mayor's seemingly irrational declarations—an effort to demonize the homeless as dangerous and less than human, who must be dealt with accordingly. Police conducted a roundup of the homeless over the weekend. After sweeping through 850 locations across the city, the police arrested 23 homeless people, all for disorderly conduct, and referred 127 others to shelters. Prior to this action, the police had arrested 100 homeless people for the entire year.

A homeless veteran, Augustine Betancourt, 33, has mounted a federal class-action lawsuit against the Giuliani administration, contending that he and 25 others were falsely arrested following a police sweep of the homeless on February 27, 1997. Betancourt maintains that the sanitation ordinance used as the basis

for their arrest was only a pretext for cracking down on the homeless. The Federal District Court in Manhattan could rule on the case early next year.

The Urban Justice Center, whose lawyers donate their time to defend the homeless, have argued in court that the Giuliani administration has essentially sought to make homelessness a crime. During a previous police sweep of the homeless, many of those picked up were jailed at Rikers Island. The cost of incarcerating an inmate at Rikers is \$91,000 a year, compared to \$20,000 a year for a shelter bed or \$12,000 a year for supervised apartment housing. While supervised housing is considered best by homeless advocates, such facilities are in extremely short supply.



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