

"Housing a Growing City"

Report documents modern mass homelessness in New York City—Part 2

Fred Mazelis

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The Coalition for the Homeless has issued a detailed report, "Housing a Growing City," dealing with housing conditions in New York City and trends that have developed over the past quarter-century. The study is based largely on data from the Housing and Vacancy Survey (HVS), which is conducted every three years by the US Census Bureau.

The Coalition for the Homeless is an advocacy organization that has been active on behalf of the homeless for several decades. Its latest report documents an enormous housing crisis in the financial and cultural center of the US, a crisis which is worsening even as the Wall Street boom continues. The study is appropriately subtitled "New York's Bust in Boom Times."

The first of two articles on this report, posted September 9, summarized much of the data contained in the report on the symptoms and the causes of the shortage of decent and affordable housing in New York. This second and concluding part will deal with the consequences of the crisis, particularly the phenomenon of modern mass homelessness. It will also examine some of the proposals advanced by the Coalition for the Homeless for dealing with this crisis.

The "affordable housing gap," discussed in detail by the report of New York City's Coalition for the Homeless, has had a significant impact on the lives of millions. Those who can't afford the current rents don't simply disappear. They are forced to make painful choices. Many have had no choices, and have faced homelessness as a result.

One consequence of the extreme shortage of low-cost apartments has been the growth of illegal conversions of existing units. While there are no comprehensive statistics on this phenomenon, there is plenty of evidence that apartments have been illegally divided up to house immigrant families and others in appalling conditions. The Coalition report cites an unpublished report dealing with illegal single-room occupancy (SRO) units, the most common form of illegal conversions, including basement rooms and rooms in one- or two-family houses, mostly in the outer boroughs of the city outside of Manhattan. There are also cubicles, distinguished from rooms in that they lack windows. Dormitories providing bed space and nothing more have also been set up in some sections of the city.

While illegal housing has become the only option for as many as 100,000 or more, there have also been more than 200,000 doubled-up households during the 1990s. Among renters, the Census Bureau survey reported 151,810 doubled-up households, 7.8 percent of all renters.

Then there are the hundreds of thousands of households which have to pay more than 50 percent of income for rent. 501,850 households were in this position as of 1999.

Where none of the above options have been available, homelessness has often resulted. Official city data show that, between 1987 and 1995, 333,482 different men, women and children used the city's municipal

shelter system.

This is a figure that should be carefully analyzed. It represents 4.6 percent of the city's 1990 population, nearly one out of twenty, who spent some time in a homeless shelter during this nine-year period. Fifty-seven percent of this total were members of families with children, and 35 percent were under 18 years old. And the total number does not include the many thousands more who slept in private shelters, abandoned buildings, outdoors, or in the subways and rail terminals, when they were not rousted by the police.

These statistics on what the report terms "modern mass homelessness" thoroughly demolish the reactionary stereotypes which depict the problem of homelessness as resulting only from the individual behavior of a small minority of outcasts. Of course drug addiction and mental illness are themselves social pathologies, and the homeless mentally ill and substance abusers also deserve a decent place to live. But the stereotype of the homeless consisting of none but the mentally ill or addicted has been used to dupe working people into thinking that they have nothing to do with this social problem and can afford to ignore it.

Homelessness in its present form in New York has profound social causes and touches the lives of far more people than is usually assumed. The homeless emerged in large numbers about 20 years ago. For decades the city had provided an average of about 1,000 vouchers daily to homeless men, many of whom used the former Municipal Shelter in Lower Manhattan. During the 1970s, however, following the collapse of the postwar boom, poverty and its social consequences began to be more and more visible on the streets.

The landmark Callahan v. Carey lawsuit, filed in 1979 and settled with a consent decree in 1981, obligated the city and state to guarantee emergency shelter to homeless men. This was later extended to women and children, and the numbers of homeless in the city's shelter system soared through that decade. This was a direct result of the loss of decent-paying unskilled jobs, alongside the demographic changes in the city and, of course, rising rental costs.

Mass homelessness became a permanent fact of New York City life during the 1980s. The average daily census of homeless single adults in the city's shelter system has fluctuated between 5,000 and 10,000 for most of the last two decades. After some improvement in the early 1990s as the result of the construction of several thousand housing units, including SROs and housing with on-site support services for the mentally ill, the average census in the shelters rose again in the latter part of the decade. It averaged 6,778 per night by 1999.

The number of homeless families in the shelter system grew even more rapidly than the number of single adults. It jumped from 2,137 families in 1983 to more than 5,000 in 1988. This was the first time that the problem of homeless families had emerged in the city in the twentieth century. The

average daily census of children and adults in families in city shelters has fluctuated around 15,000. It dropped during the mid-1990s, as the Giuliani administration took steps to discourage applicants for shelter. In the recent period it has risen again, from 13,900 in January 1998 to 16,050 in December 1999, an increase of 15.5 percent in less than two years. In June of this year the number of homeless people in shelters, single adults as well as families with children, exceeded 24,000 for the first time since 1996.

An analysis of the patterns of shelter utilization by homeless single adults shows that the great majority, more than 80 percent, fell into the category of “transitional” shelter users, as distinct from “episodic” users, who had frequent, although brief, stays; and “chronic” users, who had extremely long shelter stays. The transitional user had infrequent, usually one-time, stays. These were individuals who had the lowest percentage of mental health and addiction problems. They demonstrated, in their own way, that there is no sharp line between the homeless and those who have apartments for themselves or their families; it is a continuum. There were many others who, given a sudden change in their own job or family situation, could find themselves in the same position.

At the heart of the crisis of homelessness is the social polarization which has taken place. From the late 1970s to the late 1990s the top 20 percent income group saw its income rise by 21 percent, while the lowest fifth in terms of income saw a real drop of 33 percent.

The obvious relationship between poverty and homelessness is also reflected in the figures for the racial breakdown of the homeless. Here the legacy of racism, continuing discrimination, housing segregation and poverty all come together to devastate black and Hispanic families. These sections of the working class are not simply disproportionately affected by homelessness; the homeless are overwhelmingly African-American and Hispanic.

In the 1988-92 period, for example, 60.9 percent of the children who passed through the homeless shelters were black, and another 31.4 percent were Hispanic, for a total of 92.3 percent for these sections of the population.

From 1988-92, nearly 8 percent of the black population experienced homelessness, compared to less than 0.5 percent for whites. For the population as a whole the average was 3.3 percent (a similar rate to the study cited above for the nine-year period from 1987 to 1995, which found 4.6 percent experiencing homelessness at some point during these years).

The single biggest factor in the racial disparity is poverty. The income for African-American as well as for Hispanic families is one-third lower than the average income for white families. The racial minorities are far more heavily working class in social composition, and far more likely to be poor—17.3 percent of the poor experienced homelessness during the 1988-92 period.

After documenting these conditions, the Coalition for the Homeless report ends with proposals for action. It calls for a federal and city commitment, including an annual capital spending target of \$750 million, to close the affordable housing gap of more than 400,000 units. Among the reforms and measures it calls for are the reversal of the decline in the welfare housing allowance, substantial increases in Section 8 vouchers, the repeal of provisions of the 1997 rent regulation legislation which have allowed rents to soar, and supportive housing for the homeless mentally ill.

These are minimally necessary measures, and they are very modest. Even the \$750 million capital spending goal would do little to arrest the trend of rising rents which affects millions. It is safe to assume that close to half of the population would still be spending 40, if not 50 percent, on the cost of housing.

The report is an attempt to publicize what growing numbers of people realize is a scandalous fact of life in New York City in the twenty-first

century. Millions can see that there is something fraudulent about the claims of prosperity and plenty in New York, alongside the reality of substandard or high-rent housing and homelessness.

Despite the creditable work of the Coalition of the Homeless in exposing these conditions, it fails to show how they can actually be changed. The Coalition seeks to pressure the ruling elite and its political parties. Implicit in its proposals is an appeal to the conscience of big business and Wall Street. It suggests that the most we can hope for is to bring New York in line with the rest of the country, where the housing situation is sometimes difficult but not such a complete disaster.

The big business media use this to try to approach the housing crisis as some kind of anomaly, a peculiar problem in an otherwise flourishing city, a problem perhaps caused by the fact that people have become so rich so fast. A recent article in the *New York Times* proclaimed, along these lines, “More than ever, it seems, this thriving city is a great place to live—if only you could live here.”

New York is not unique, although the problem of homelessness is more severe in this city than elsewhere. The rapid pace of the polarization and the city's attraction for the upper middle class has led to millions being pushed out of the housing market. Similar problems, however, are evident elsewhere. Just as homelessness itself is part of a continuum related to growing poverty, so across the country New York City is part of a continuum, the most extreme example of the growing social polarization and its consequences, and not a “special case.”

As another recent report documented, the median worker in the US (earning more than half of the workforce and less than the other half) earned significantly less in 1998 than 25 years earlier. For the male worker in the 25-34 age group, the earnings were 13 percent less. For the worker in the 35-44 age group, the drop was 9 percent. By comparison, during the 1950s and 60s real earnings rose between 50 and 100 percent!

An image of wealth is projected by upscale shopping, pervasive advertising, continuous media portrayal of the top 10 percent of the population and its lifestyle. In addition, there are consumer goods available at very affordable prices—items such as VCRs, microwave ovens, Walkmans and portable CD players, personal computers. Tens of millions of workers participate in this “consumer revolution,” often by piling up thousands of dollars in debt. At the same time, however, and most significantly, the most important daily needs of working class families—housing, education, medical care and public transit—have all risen sharply in cost while individual earnings have fallen and family income has stagnated.

The housing crisis in New York City is one of the most extreme expressions of this trend of declining living standards that has taken place in the last 25 years. This cannot be reversed by appealing to the conscience of the ruling elite, or by harking back to a period of social reform which the ruling class has discarded.

There is no section of big business which favors the reforms called for by the Coalition for the Homeless, and the current presidential campaign is the best proof of that. And in the preparations for the mayoral election in New York in 2001, to choose a successor to Rudolph Giuliani, none of the Democratic liberals are speaking of these issues or presenting a program to deal with them.

No family should have to pay more than 25 percent of its income for shelter. Millions of new apartments must be built to meet existing and future needs. But this will not be possible without finding the constituency which will politically fight for decent and affordable housing, for housing as a basic right. The working class must be unified, based on the understanding that homelessness is an attack on every section of working people, and that all workers have been targeted by the policies which have created homelessness for a small but significant minority.

Any struggle for decent housing must immediately raise a challenge to the system that is geared to profits and not to human needs. It will raise

the need for a socialist program, and a democratically controlled and planned economy based on public ownership.



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