

# New York City homelessness at highest level in more than a decade

Fred Mazelis  
22 February 2001

The current census of homeless families and single adults in New York City's shelter system has reached the highest level since the late 1980s. The number of families applying for emergency shelter has risen 10 percent in the last year alone, a number which says a great deal about the nature of the economic boom of the last five years and what it has meant for the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

On a typical night in January, the city provided beds for 10,177 children and their 8,024 adult family members, plus another 7,492 single adults. This adds up to 25,693 individuals in the shelter system, and does not include tens of thousands of homeless who live on the streets or in other makeshift arrangements.

The jump in shelter occupancy is no surprise to anyone who has observed social and economic trends in recent years. Less than a year ago the Coalition for the Homeless issued a detailed report that documented the growth of an "affordable housing gap" in the city. (*See links below.*)

There are at least a million people in New York for whom there is no available housing that they can afford. Even families with incomes well above the poverty level must spend up to 50 percent of their earnings on housing costs. For those below the poverty line it is worse, and thousands are pushed over the edge into homelessness. In the 1987-95 period 4.6 percent of the city's population—333,482 men, women and children—spent some time in the city's municipal shelter system.

The surge in homelessness in the midst of the Wall Street boom is a paradox that has a relatively simple explanation. There has never been such polarization between the city's rich and poor, at least not for the past century. The number of wealthy has grown, and a significant upper middle class layer has accumulated

wealth and seeks to spend it while living in New York.

There are younger people with substantial disposable income who are prepared to spend \$1,500 or more per month for a studio apartment, or \$2,000 or more for a one-bedroom. This has led to a near-doubling of market rents in previously affordable working class neighborhoods such as Astoria in Queens or Greenpoint in Brooklyn.

But the poor have not disappeared. Families who have been unable to find apartments at rents they can afford have been forced to try to pay more. One result is an increase in the number of warrants obtained by landlords for evictions for nonpayment of rent over the past year, from 114,000 to 122,000. The actual number of evictions carried out by marshals has not changed, because families receiving an eviction notice often leave before they are dumped onto the street with their furniture.

The length of stay by families in the shelter system has also grown, as they are unable to find apartments they can afford. Federal housing vouchers, a subsidy cut drastically in the past decade, are not accepted by many landlords.

State Supreme Court Justice Helen Freedman ruled last month that the city was violating a longstanding agreement to provide emergency shelter for families. More than 700 people are housed each day in appalling conditions at the Emergency Assistance Unit in the Bronx, including children missing school because they have beds on only a one-night basis. Up to 32 families sleep on the floor or on benches on any given night. The court also found that the lack of a cleaning staff "makes it an extremely unhealthy place for a particularly vulnerable population."

City officials, seeking to explain the present situation, tried to claim that it was "a temporary crisis." "That's

not to say that I may not be proven wrong, and that this is instead a major shift in family homelessness,” added Martin Oesterreich, New York's commissioner of homeless services.

Oesterreich noted sharply rising housing costs and declines in subsidized housing. He also said that the situation in New York was part of a national trend, pointing to a recent 25-city survey by the United States Conference of Mayors that reported a 17 percent rise in families applying for emergency shelter assistance in recent months.

The latest round of huge rent increases is only the most recent development in a process that has been taking place over several decades. Dennis Culhane, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who has analyzed shelter system data, explained to the *New York Times* that, because of the economic changes over the last 20 to 25 years, “homelessness went from a problem afflicting a few thousand skid row denizens to a commonplace way station for millions of America's poor.”

The immediate future of this crisis cannot be predicted with absolute certainty, but the graph of the number of homeless people in the city's shelter system shows a sharp rise in 1990-91, at the very beginning of the last economic slump. Now, by all accounts, another slump is arriving, but the number of homeless has already risen sharply in the last two years, before the effects of the slowdown could be felt. Moreover, 70,000 current welfare recipients are scheduled to lose their benefits in the coming year, as part of the five-year limit on public assistance enacted in the 1996 welfare “reform” legislation.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**