New York: Homeless man crushed to death by sanitation vehicle

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A homeless man was crushed to death in the early morning hours of November 21 when a New York City Sanitation Department machine picked him up as it was scooping up debris under the overpass of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. The man was sleeping under blankets and near garbage bags in cold late autumn temperatures.

The expressway in the area straddling the Greenpoint and Williamsburg neighborhoods of Brooklyn, just across the East River from Lower Manhattan, has long been used by the homeless because it provides shelter from wind and rain. The section of the highway where the man was killed is also just a short distance from an all-night diner, a church where food is sometimes distributed to the homeless, and a day labor agency.

Residents of the neighborhood said there were fewer people sleeping under the overpass in the recent period, following numerous police sweeps of the area that sometimes led to arrests or to confiscation of the belongings of the homeless. The numbers of homeless continue to grow, however, and with cold weather approaching some continue to try to sleep under the highway.

On the morning in question, a large sanitation dump truck came to the area along with a front-end loader, a machine with a bucket on the front that scoops up trash and materials such as old tires and mattresses. At about 2:45 a.m. the dump truck driver noticed movement in the bucket of the front-end loader. The body of the homeless man was then discovered, and he was pronounced dead an hour later at the local city hospital.

This death was one of a series linked to homelessness and poverty that were reported in the local press over a three-day period. Six people lost their lives in three separate incidents between November 18 and 21, in each case the direct consequence of the search for shelter and warmth as winter approaches.

On the same day the gruesome death of the homeless man took place, three members of another family lost their lives about 15 miles away, in the west Bronx. In this case the victims were not homeless—at least not yet. However, they had just had their electricity shut off by Consolidated Edison. The apparent victims of carbon monoxide fumes from a gas generator, they included Erna Dennis, 54; Patrick Williams, 26; and Patricia Williams, 2 months old, the daughter of Patrick. The 19-year-old mother of the baby was taken to the hospital in serious condition.

A spokesman for the utility company said that the family of Jamaican immigrants was “deeply in arrears” in payments. The company claimed it had tried unsuccessfully to contact the family, and that Con Ed policy is not to shut off service if there is a child under the age of two living in the home.

The onset of cold weather in mid- to late autumn is regularly accompanied by deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning, as families who lack other means of heating their homes use generators that have not been properly serviced. In the space of one month last year, nine people in the New York City region died in similar incidents.

In the third related tragedy, a homeless couple that had been squatting in a vacant city-owned building in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn died in an electrical fire on November 18. The couple, who were not identified, collected bottles and old clothes to redeem for cash. One neighbor said that the man was known as Little Mike, because he was only 5 feet 4 inches tall. “He was a nice guy, a very nice person,” the neighbor said. About 43 years old, he had grown up in the neighborhood, had children and used to work for the city.

Ironically, on the same day as the deaths of the homeless man under the Brooklyn highway and the Bronx family killed by carbon monoxide, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced that his administration was setting up a task force to end chronic homelessness in the next 10 years.

“We find ourselves at a painful impasse,” the mayor declared. “We keep focusing on crisis management, on how to deal with who shows up that night. It is time to look at causes and see if we can’t prevent people from showing up at all.”

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One local reporter noted that Bloomberg's announcement "was long on philosophy and short on details." In fact the "plan" was very short in both departments. The latest announcement is a pathetic response to the record number of homeless now in the city's shelter system. The figure has reached 40,000, and includes a record number of families and children. The homeless crisis festered through the boom years of the 1990s, with about 25,000 in the shelter system on any given night. In the last two years, however, the crisis has deepened drastically. The budget for the homeless services agency, now about $580 million a year, has jumped by $244 million since 1999.

According the city's homeless services commissioner, "We need to look at those considerable resources and see how we could spend them more wisely, toward supporting housing, rental assistance and permanent community."

Advocacy groups such as the Coalition for the Homeless called Bloomberg's response woefully inadequate. "The time for study is long past," said Mary Brosnahan Sullivan, executive director of this group. "We have a proven track record of what works. We desperately need more capital dollars for bricks and mortar, and we need more resources, beginning with the federal government."

Growing long-term unemployment and the continuous onslaught on social welfare spending are certainly major contributing factors to the crisis of homelessness in New York. There is another major element of the crisis as well. While the poverty rate has remained stubbornly high (even by official standards) and tens of thousands of workers have lost their jobs in the last several years, the city and state authorities have continued to dismantle what remains of the system of rent regulation that was first established decades ago.

The old system of rent control, which covered more than one million apartments, has given way for the most part to "rent-stabilization," in which an official board votes periodically on allowable rent increases, a process that has led to huge increases in housing costs in recent years. The campaign to do away with all forms of rent regulation continues, however. The New York State Legislature began this process about ten years ago, and about 105,000 of the city's one million rent-controlled or rent-stabilized apartments have been removed from the rolls.

A recent study showed that at least 32,000 housing units, about 3 percent of the total of stabilized apartments, had been lost between 1999 and 2002. This figure is widely considered to be understated, but nevertheless represents a major escalation of the pace of rent deregulation—only 6,000 units were removed from regulation in the prior three-year period, from 1996 to 1999.

The process of deregulation takes place through a variety of means. When apartment rents reach $2,000 monthly, they are automatically excluded from regulation and can have their levels set by the market. Another category of rent regulation covers the 140,000 apartments built under the state's Mitchell-Lama program, which subsidized the construction of middle-income apartments and cooperative units in the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Mitchell-Lama contained provisions allowing landlords to buy their way out of the program and charge market rents after 20 years. 17,000 of these apartments have done so, and thousands of others may follow in the near future.

In many areas of Manhattan, there are plenty of those who are willing and able to pay monthly rents of $2,000 and much more. Market-rate rents in Manhattan now average from $2,250 for one-bedroom apartments to $3,400 for three or more bedrooms, compared to about $1,000 for rent-stabilized units. In the outer boroughs of the city, there is also a difference between market-rate and rent-stabilized rents, but it is much smaller. In Brooklyn, for instance, two-bedroom rent-stabilized apartments average $700, while market rates for two bedrooms average $800.

The significance of these numbers is obvious. Just when the crisis of affordable housing is sharper than ever and calls for emergency measures to provide shelter for workers and the poor, government policy is moving in the opposite direction. Even if Bloomberg's empty phrases and new task force lead to some new spending on rental assistance, more homeless are being created every day, as a result of long-term joblessness and the destruction of tens of thousands of units of affordable housing in order to cater to the needs of the wealthy.

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