

Nearly half of New York City's homeless are children

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New York City began the New Year with the largest numbers of men, women and especially children crowding into its shelters since the city began keeping records 20 years ago. According to the city's Department of Homeless Services, the night of January 2 saw 38,222 homeless people forced to turn to the city's municipal shelter system. Another 1,500 or so beds were filled in churches and other private facilities.

Out of this total, at least 16,600 were children, 18 and under. They constitute 43 percent of municipal shelter residents and are by far the largest and fastest-growing segment. This is an increase from 2000, when about 38.5 percent of those living in shelters were children.

Adults in families account for the second largest percentage of shelter residents, at 35 percent. Single adults comprise the remaining 22 percent.

The average stay for families and their children in the shelters has nearly doubled from 6 months in 1992 to 11 months today.

The numbers have increased only gradually in the last 12 months, but the plateau they have reached is almost twice the number compared to six years ago. In January 1998, there were over 21,000 people living in the city shelters, of whom 8,816 were children. By mid-1998 the number of New York families seeking emergency shelter started increasing rapidly, reaching a rate of 22 percent in 2001 followed by 35 percent in 2002.

New records of homelessness were set in mid-2001, with a continuous rise since then. The numbers are expected to climb even more steeply later this month, as frigid January weather hits the Northeast.

These figures do not include all those people who do not stay in shelters, but sleep on the streets, in the subways and in vacant buildings. Although there is no way to accurately measure the number of people who try to survive outside the city's shelter system, the Coalition for the Homeless reports the numbers served at soup kitchens and by outreach teams have also risen steadily since the end of the 1990s.

Families applying for shelter face seemingly endless obstacles in their quest to put a roof over their heads. In this sprawling city of over 8,000,000 people, there is only one "intake center" where families can apply, located in the Bronx, hours by bus and subway from many parts of the city. Once there, applicants must present extensive documentation, such as birth certificates, eviction notices, names, phone numbers and Social Security numbers of relatives and ex-spouses.

Often as late as 1:00 a.m. they may be sent with their children across the city to a temporary space, which may change from one night to the next, while the shelter officials decide whether the applicants are eligible for a longer-term placement. Minor discrepancies may lead to being declared ineligible, forcing the families to return to the intake shelter and begin the process all over again.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to shelter applicants at the family intake center at the end of December. Not one of the families we interviewed was applying for the first time. All but one had been declared ineligible at least once, some many times.

Sheila Polite was there with her husband Rafael and their three children. Sheila explained, "My whole family was living with my mother, but she needs to move into a smaller apartment. Only when she moves out will we become eligible for our own apartment. In the meantime, we have been forced to stay in this shelter for the past six months. My husband lost his job as a hotel worker cleaning floors. He is in the union, but that doesn't pay the rent. My husband has been looking for a job, but he can't find anything.

"I hate being here. It is especially bad for the kids. In addition to my one-year-old baby boy, I have two girls, aged seven and nine. My children don't like this place at all. They frequently have to sleep on the benches. Sometimes they make it to school and sometimes they don't. It all depends where the shelter sends you day by day. We really don't have a family life. My son has asthma, and none of my kids eats right.

"We have to have passes to walk out of the shelter. I have a four-hour pass, which is why I am able to stand out here and talk to you. I had to struggle with the security guard to let me out. Sometimes a guard will challenge me and demand to see my pass. We have no rights. If you don't have a pass, they don't let you back in.

"They are supposed to be helping us, but they are not. All they have to do is give us an apartment, but they don't do that. It is cold in there, especially at night when you are trying to sleep; it is very cold.

"Frequently, they keep us here until 6 p.m., and then they put us into a hotel. Some of them are decent and some of them are not. Living like this is like living in a prison."

Rafael added, "They treat us like children, always telling us what to do. We spend a considerable amount of time standing on line for different things. If you are on welfare, they just take your check.

This is terrible for my kids.” He reported that lack of ventilation had aggravated his son’s asthma, and that as a result of the poor quality of the food, the boy had lost five pounds. “This is all very bad for his health,” he said.

There are a number of national studies documenting the damage homelessness inflicts upon children. A 1999 study conducted by the Better Homes Fund concluded that homeless children have twice the health problems of those in homes, including higher rates of asthma, ear infections, stomach problems, speech problems and mental health problems.

The WWSWS also spoke with a young father, Raul Ayala, 18. He said that he had been coming to the intake center with his girlfriend and 14-month-old daughter since September, repeatedly being declared ineligible and forced to reapply.

“Conditions here are terrible,” Raul said. “They treat people like garbage. You see pregnant women lying down in the hallway. They don’t care about the people in there. They don’t let anyone in there with a camera because they know they are doing wrong. It’s like a jail. I can take it, but my daughter is in here too.

“I have a notarized letter from my sister and brother-in-law saying we can’t live with them because there is no room. The shelter still says that we are ineligible because we should go back and live with them.

“When they rule you ineligible, you have to get what they call a ‘fair hearing.’ When I went to the hearing they said that they lost my records and I would have to come back. I have another hearing scheduled for January 5.

“I used to work in construction. I’m trying to get a job now, but they only give you passes to go out for one hour, four hours, or eight hours. You can’t keep a steady job while you are in here.”

Another applicant, Armand, who is 33 and has four children, explained that he lost his house in a fire. He had been working for five months at Manhattan Studio helping set up shows until he was laid off. His wife is disabled and cannot work. He had come to apply for a reassignment, since the Brooklyn apartment where he had been placed was two hours away from school for his children and from his family doctor. His nine-year-old son Louis requires special care since having heart surgery a year ago.

Dena, 31, complained that her daughter has not been in the Bronx public school in two weeks because the shelter system sends them all over the city, including as far away as Staten Island.

There are definite economic trends underlying the rise in homelessness. New York City has lost more than 200,000 private-sector jobs since January 2001. Although recent reports indicate a small increase in the number of jobs, most are in the lowest paying service sectors, such as restaurants and hotels.

Another factor is the sharp decline in affordable housing. US census figures document a drop in the number of New York City apartments renting for under \$500 a month from over one million in 1990 to 491,000 in 2000. Other statistics reveal a plummeting rate of new housing units completed in New York City, from an annual average of nearly 370,000 in the decade of the 1960s to just over 82,000 in the 1990s. A large portion of the units built in the last decades are far beyond the reach of the average worker.

In addition, city and state authorities have been undermining the rent control laws, further pushing rents up. Workers employed in

one of the low-wage industries are increasingly forced to choose between paying the rent and feeding their families.

A recent report issued by the US Conference of Mayors [*see* “Hunger and homelessness in the US continues to rise in 2003”] surveying 25 cities demonstrates that the increase of homelessness and homeless families in New York City is typical of what is taking place throughout the country. New York City was not included in the report because Mayor Michael Bloomberg refused to participate. As a result, the NYC Coalition Against Hunger conducted its own survey comparing New York with the 25 other cities in the Conference of Mayors report. The Coalition reached its conclusion by surveying 1,000 food pantries and soup kitchens in the city.

It found that there was a 26 percent increase in requests for food from 2002 to 2003 in New York compared with a 17 percent increase in the 25 other major cities. In New York, about 50 percent of the feeding agencies had to turn people away, compared to 14 percent surveyed in the mayors’ report. While in New York, 51 percent of those requesting emergency food were families with children, the number of families requesting food was almost 60 percent in the other cities studied. According to the conference report, 40 percent of the adults who were requesting food were working. However, while in the 25 cities surveyed, 40 percent of those requesting shelter are families with children, the number for New York is almost 80 percent.

The mayors’ report concluded that the major causes for this increase of hunger and homelessness were an increase in unemployment, low wages and the high cost of housing. It predicted that these problems will only worsen in 2004. This crisis can be best described as a national epidemic of homelessness that is destroying the family life and health of the poor, and affecting the most vulnerable section of the population—children.



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