

New York City homeless population at an all-time high

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According to a report released last month by the New York City advocacy group Coalition for the Homeless, there are currently almost 37,000 people in the city shelter system. This includes approximately 10,000 homeless families with 16,500 children.

The number of homeless housed by the city marks an 11 percent increase over last year and is the highest number of people seeking shelter on record. These figures are all the more significant because they reflect the state of the homeless population before the cold weather has started.

The report notes, “The growing homeless family shelter population has been driven by historically high numbers of newly homeless families entering the municipal shelter system.” In August, over 1,900 families sought shelter in the city’s system. For the last fiscal year (FY), over 120,000 homeless people used the city’s shelters.

The emergence of mass unemployment in the city has been the leading cause of the increase in homelessness. The official figure now stands at 10.3 percent, with a loss of 111,000 jobs since last year. Among Blacks and Hispanics, the figure is over 20 percent. If part-time workers who want full-time jobs and those who have stopped looking for work are counted, the overall unemployment rate rises to 15.8 percent.

Antonietta Bertucci, Director of Part of the Solution (POTS) Justice Center, a nonprofit agency that supplies services to the poor in the Bronx, told the WSW: “We’ve seen people that would never have imagined they would be seeking our services. One woman who came to us is sleeping her car. She was evicted because she lost her job.”

The city’s capacity to shelter the homeless is being severely strained. Mary Brosnahan, executive director of the Coalition for the Homeless, wrote in the *Daily*

News, “New York City is in the midst of a homeless emergency. ... As of Sept. 30, there were only two empty beds left in the entire New York City shelter system for homeless men and only eight empty beds for homeless women—10 available beds in a system of more than 7,000 for homeless single adults.”

The city spent over \$856 million providing these services in FY 2009.

On November 7, the Department of Homeless Services announced that it would close the city’s largest drop-in shelter to make way for the construction of a new subway line. The Open Door on 41st St. near the Port Authority Bus Terminal serves meals to homeless men and women. According the *Daily News*, although the shelter does not have beds, an average of 94 people slept there each night in September.

Robert Hess, the chairman of the Department of Homeless Services, the city will not replace the center, but seek to add beds to churches and synagogues that house the homeless. But Patrick Markee, a policy analyst for the Coalition for the Homeless, told the *News*: “With all-time record homelessness, this is no time for the Bloomberg administration to close the city’s largest drop-in center for homeless people”.

Bloomberg’s policies, like those of his predecessor, Rudolph Giuliani, are more concerned with hiding the homeless from view than with addressing the needs of people in distress.

One of these schemes involves providing homeless individuals and families with one-way bus or plane tickets to wherever they have contacts that could give them a place to stay. The *New York Times* reported that at least 550 families have been relocated in this fashion. City Hall would much rather ship families off rather than spend the funds necessary to house them. People have been relocated to many states and to a number of

countries around the world.

According to the *Times*, many of these families are often long-time residents of the city, while others are newcomers. Hector Correa, an immigrant from Puerto Rico, told the *Times*, “I didn’t expect the city to be the way it is. I was expecting something different, something better.”

Ruby Davis told WCBS TV that she felt the city was trying to give her the boot when she was offered a one-way ticket to North Carolina, where her estranged mother lived. She said, “I didn’t take it because when I was living in North Carolina, I was sleeping on a broken pull-out couch, and I wasn’t getting along with my mom at the time.” Domestic violence and domestic disputes often lead to homelessness—a fact the one-way ticket program obviously does not consider.

Arnold S. Cohen, president of the Partnership for the Homeless, criticized the policy for failing to address the underlying causes of homelessness. He said, “What we’re doing is passing the problem of homelessness to another city. We’re taking people from a shelter bed here to the living room couch of another family. Essentially, this family is still homeless.”

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In a grotesque scheme, the city’s Department of Homeless services began charging rent (see “New York City demands rent from the homeless”) to some families living in shelters in May. After a public outcry, the city backed off. Based on WSWs interviews with families seeking shelter from the city, it is clearly difficult for families to obtain services to begin with.

In addition to mass unemployment, the irrationality of the housing market and the very high cost of housing in New York City aggravate homelessness. Millions of working-class and middle-class people sacrifice huge portions of their income to pay rent or mortgages. When someone in a family loses a job or has a medical emergency, it can become impossible to pay rent or make payments on a house.

In New York City, however, blocks of units remain unfinished or unoccupied because big landlords cannot make a profit by completing or renting them. Often wealthy property owners chose to hold back empty apartments from the market, hoping to make a return on them later. Three years ago, the group Picture the Homeless estimated that 24,000 units in Manhattan

alone are empty and available.

The *New York Times* noted recently that, despite city financing for the creation of affordable housing, over 200,000 apartments for lower-income working-class families have been eliminated since 2002. According to data supplied by New York University’s Furman Center, the city now has only 991,591 units that it considers affordable for families that make less than 80 percent of the city’s median income, \$37,000 a year. This is a loss of 17 percent since 2002.

Antonietta Bertucci of POTS told the WSWs that over the last year, a number of landlords have taken advantage of a program sponsored by the Department of Homeless Services. The DHS will pay up to \$3,000 to rent an apartment as a shelter for the homeless. This has prompted mass evictions from some buildings, especially in the Bronx, because landlords see it as a way to make more money. “They take their tenants to housing court and accuse them of violating their leases,” Bertucci said. “The tenants are obligated to prove that they did not”.

She added, “Everybody is suffering because of the recession, including the landlords. They can’t afford their mortgages and pass the cost on to their tenants. Many apartments are in awful condition. It is quite widespread in the Bronx for tenants not to have hot water”.

The housing crisis in New York City and nationwide is so egregious that the United Nations Human Rights Council recently appointed a special rapporteur on the right to affordable housing in the US. The rapporteur, a professor of city planning from the University of São Paulo in Brazil named Raquel Rolnik, was denied entry into the US by the Bush administration. Admitted to the US after the election of Barack Obama, she found that little had changed in US government attitudes to the homeless: “One of the first meetings I had at the State Department, they clearly told me: here, adequate housing is not a human right.”



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