

New York City housing crisis reflects record inequality

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New York City continues to report record figures for its homeless shelter population. In late September the number was 46,084, including 19,486 children. This figure does not of course include the many thousands more who are sleeping on the streets, not to mention the tens if not hundreds of thousands who double and triple up in substandard apartments.

The homeless shelter population reached a peak of about 38,000 ten years ago, before falling briefly in the years immediately preceding the 2008 financial collapse. Since then the numbers have steadily grown, jumping by 29 percent in the period since the city's rent subsidy program known as the Advantage was eliminated in 2011 after state budget cuts.

The Bloomberg administration's policy of attempting to force homeless single adults out of the shelter system has done nothing to stop the crisis from worsening. After opening 10 new homeless shelters in May of this year, the city was forced to announce plans for five additional shelters, three for families and two for single adults, that are expected to open by the end of this year.

The Bloomberg administration has touted its plans for "microunits," apartments of between 275 and 300 square feet, including a kitchen and bathroom. In July the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) announced a request for proposals from designers and developers for such apartments. The contest drew 33 submissions, and the winning proposal, to be announced next year, will be used in the building of a mixed-income rental building in the Kips Bay neighborhood of Manhattan.

The microunit proposal is being advanced as a key element in Bloomberg's plan to build or preserve 165,000 affordable apartments by 2014. In fact, it is just one more illustration of the naked class bias of the billionaire mayor and the big business politicians of

both parties who are presiding over the deepening housing crisis facing millions of New Yorkers.

The super-small apartments are justified by pointing to the 1.8 million households in the city that are made up of one or two people. This may very well be true, but it is also the case that a disproportionate number of these households, especially in Manhattan, consist of relatively better off young college graduates. The Kips Bay location, just below Midtown Manhattan on the East Side, is an indication of Bloomberg's orientation.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, only 11 percent of New York's 3.1 million households have five or more members. The HPD points to this number to claim that large families are a small minority. This analysis completely ignores the fact that a much higher percentage of the city's poor households, undoubtedly 20-30 percent if not higher, consist of these larger families.

The *Times* article illustrates the crisis facing large families by focusing on Mahamadou Tounkara, who immigrated from the west African country of Mali in 1996, and who lives with his wife and six children in one room of a three-bedroom apartment in the South Bronx that they share with two other families. With a monthly income of about \$1,700, the Tounkaras cannot afford any other option, even if they were able to find a scarce three- or four-bedroom apartment. Their entire living space is the size of two parking spaces, and two of their children sleep on the floor.

Although the city claims to have completed 124,000 out of 165,000 affordable housing units, 65 percent of these were preservations of existing units, not new construction. These efforts have not kept pace with the need, especially in light of the job losses in recent years.

The city's Housing Authority controls nearly 179,000

apartments, as the *Times* reports. Only 4 percent of these apartments in city housing projects are four-bedroom or larger, and the three- or four-bedroom apartments in public housing are occupied for an average of about 23-25 years, translating into very long waiting lists.

The Bloomberg administration aims to satisfy the demands of more privileged sections of the middle class, while the poorer majority, including the many immigrants employed in low-wage jobs and especially affected by the housing shortage, are given short shrift.

The housing crisis is a reflection of the unprecedented social polarization that continues to deepen, four years into the financial crisis. *Crain's New York Business* reported recently that the top 20 percent of households by income in Manhattan had annual earnings that were 40 times the average of the bottom 20 percent. This figure has risen from 38 times in the preceding year.

If the figure for the top 1 percent were taken for comparison, the gulf would be even more enormous. Bloomberg himself is now “worth” \$25 billion, a number that has risen 32 percent in the past year and that makes him the tenth richest American.

The growing gulf between the top 20 percent and the rest of the population explains the current class divide and the relentless promotion of this privileged upper middle class.

The more and more open class hatred of this privileged layer toward the working class majority is reflected in a comment given to the *Times* by Nicole Gelinas, affiliated with the right-wing Manhattan Institute think tank. “It’s not the city’s job to give open-ended subsidies and reward people for having more members in the family,” Gelinas said. “It is responsible behavior not to have children until you can reasonably support them.”



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