

New York City homelessness continues to set new records

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In the latest of what might be termed his “Marie Antoinette” moments, New York’s billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg declared last week that “nobody’s sleeping on the streets” of the city.

Of course, everyone who has eyes to see, who has traveled on the city’s subways at night or even during the day, or who has walked through various areas of the city, knows that this is not the case.

In fact, even as Bloomberg vented his contempt for the poor, the city’s own figures show that there were 3,200 people sleeping on the streets in January of 2012, during the coldest month of the winter a year ago. The actual number was undoubtedly much larger and has grown since then.

The mayor’s dismissive comment came in response to a question about the city shelter system turning families away despite frigid winter temperatures. The *Daily News* reported on 23-year-old Junior Clarke and his family, including his wife and 4-year-old daughter. They were told on one cold night in January that there were no beds for them under a changed city policy in which all families applying for shelter for the first time are given a bed, but returning families are sometimes turned away with the claim that they have other options.

According to a report on *Salon.com*, a spokeswoman for the Bloomberg administration’s Department of Homeless Services said, “For reapplications, we take into account weather conditions, and we work to ensure that applicants who have alternate living situations do not take up beds that are needed by those who truly have no recourse.”

The Clarke family had last been in a shelter in 2008, when they were thrown out of Mr. Clarke’s mother-in-law’s home. Clarke lost his job as an emergency medical technician last December, and they were

evicted from a rented room after falling behind on the rent. They refused to leave the shelter when told to last month, and called the Legal Aid Society, which intervened and was able to convince the shelter employees to take them in for the night.

As of June 2012, the city’s municipal shelter system reported a total count of 48,700, including 20,400 children. For the last three years, according to the Coalition for the Homeless, 110,000 different men, women and children have used the shelters. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, perhaps 5 percent of the city’s population or even more, have passed through this system at one point or another since the financial collapse.

Bloomberg, now in the last year of three four-year terms, often boasts of his administration’s plan to build or preserve 165,000 affordable housing units by 2014. 124,000 of these allegedly affordable units were developed between fiscal year 2004 and 2011. Despite the mayor’s claims, however, homelessness sets new records every month. The number sleeping in municipal shelters each night is 57 percent higher than in January 2002, when Bloomberg first took office.

A report issued earlier this month by the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development (ANHD), a research and advocacy group, explained that even though the city touted these units as affordable housing, they were far from affordable for most of the workers and working poor in the very neighborhoods where they had been built or renovated. (Report available at www.anhd.org)

The report gives the example of the Highbridge neighborhood in the west Bronx, one of literally dozens of similar working class neighborhoods in all of the five boroughs of the city, and especially in the “outer boroughs,” beyond Manhattan and its high-priced real

estate. Even though the median income in Highbridge is \$26,140—barely above the ludicrous federal poverty threshold of \$23,550 for a family of four—a typical building in the area advertised for tenants earning between \$29,931 and \$53,800 for a studio apartment, and between \$37,680 and \$61,400 for a one-bedroom apartment. In other words, families earning below the lower limits would not be allowed to rent. The Highbridge example applies to at least half of the city's community districts.

An examination of the report and a comparison to the official claims about affordable housing shows that the claims are mostly fraudulent. The city provides subsidies based on federal income guidelines for prospective occupants, but these guidelines are based on a formula to determine the “Area Median Income” that includes income levels in wealthier suburban counties outside the city proper. The guidelines also base themselves on data that shows rents are higher in the New York area than elsewhere. This has absolutely nothing to do with the millions of New Yorkers in low-wage or minimum-wage jobs who have no way to pay the rents that are demanded in the “affordable” housing that Bloomberg trumpets as his great legacy.

Of course there are somewhat better-off sections of the population who can pay those rents. The pent-up demand for housing is so high that thousands of others fill these new or preserved apartments, but for the most part the poorest one-third or two-fifths of the population is given no option except to place their names on waiting lists for city housing projects that are back-logged at least 10 to 20 years, or remain in substandard or overpriced housing, or doubled up with families.

Even the so-called affordable units that have been completed in recent years, where rents do not reach the stratospheric levels dictated by the market, are expected to become “unaffordable” in the future because the government subsidies that have been provided mandate income restrictions that will eventually expire, after which rents will be allowed to rise to the market rate. The report projects the loss of at least 11,000 of these “affordable” units annually after 2017.

Meanwhile, in the “other” New York, the New York of the 1 percent and even of the one-hundredth of one percent, palatial apartments have been built and remain unoccupied for all but a few days or a few weeks

annually, as fabulously wealthy buyers put some of their money into expensive real estate. The *New York Times* reported two weeks ago on the well-known phenomenon of multimillion-dollar pieds-a-terre, condominiums that are bought as second, third, fourth or fifth residences by multimillionaires and billionaires.

The super-luxury building on 57th Street across from Carnegie Hall, for instance, where a crane accident during Hurricane Sandy closed the street to traffic for a week, has two apartments in contract for \$90 million and has attracted billionaire buyers from Britain, Canada, China and Nigeria. When this building opens, most of its apartments will not be occupied for most of the time. That is already the case at the Plaza Hotel at the southeast corner of Central Park, which converted many of its suites into condos several years ago, and at the twin towers of the Time Warner Center, at the southwest corner of the park.

While the billionaire mayor throws families out of the city's miserly shelter system, he welcomes his fellow billionaires to join in an orgy of conspicuous consumption unseen since the days preceding the French Revolution. The spiraling Manhattan real estate boom continues, the expression of intensifying social inequality and an irrational economic system.



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