

New York City homeless population reaches Great Depression levels

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The number of people sleeping in New York City's municipal shelter system has passed the 50,000 mark for the first time, according to a new report, *State of the Homeless 2013*, issued by the Coalition for the Homeless this week.

The homeless count, which includes only those in the shelter system and not the thousands of others sleeping in the streets and the subways, under bridges and elsewhere, is based on an average for the month of January. It reports a total nightly average number of 50,135, which represents an increase of 19 percent in the past year. Of this 50,000 total, 21,034 are children, a jump of 22 percent compared to a year ago. The figure for children represents about 1 percent of the total population of children in the city.

Homeless families account for 78 percent of the total in the shelters, and these families are now staying in the system for an average of 375 days, 10 percent longer than a year ago. For families without children, the stays are even longer, an average of 16 months or 484 days.

This homeless count also does not include the thousands of people made homeless by Hurricane Sandy four months ago. Most of these remain temporarily housed in hotels, YMCAs and other facilities, and many can be expected to join the ranks of the homeless if present trends continue.

Homelessness remains a nationwide crisis in the US, but its epicenter is the financial center of New York City. The latest figures estimate that eight percent of the homeless in the US, which is estimated at about 630,000 living in shelters on any given night, lives in New York. This percentage jumps to 16 when considering families. 26 percent of homeless children nationally are from New York State, and most of these are from New York City.

The 50,000 figure also does not include

approximately 5,000 others who reside on any given night in separate systems, including shelters for homeless youth and victims of domestic violence.

Behind the explosion of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing. The Coalition for the Homeless reports that median rents in New York increased 25 percent between 2005 and 2011. Median income lags far behind, even for those who remain employed. The share of "low-income" tenants paying more than half of their income for housing increased during this same period from 41 percent to an even more shocking 49 percent. For poor tenants who were not receiving housing assistance, the number spending more than half of their income for rent increased from 66 to 80 percent.

Unemployment, along with the proliferation of low-wage jobs, continues to play a major role in the growth of homelessness. As the Coalition report documents, the official jobless rate in New York City increased from 5.3 percent in 2008, just before the financial collapse, to 8.8 percent today, higher than the national average. For Brooklyn the comparable numbers are currently 5.6 percent and 9.5 percent, and for the Bronx, the poorest of the city's five boroughs, unemployment now stands at 11.9 percent, an increase of nearly 4 percent over the 7.1 percent figure of 2008.

The latest report triggered a war of words between the administration of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the Coalition for the Homeless. The billionaire mayor, according to latest figures the 13th richest individual in the entire world, said the homeless advocacy group "is not a reputable organization." In its mission statement, the Coalition, founded 32 years ago, says it is "dedicated to the principle that affordable housing, sufficient food, and the chance to work for a living wage are fundamental rights in a civilized

society.”

Only two weeks ago Bloomberg made headlines with his arrogant and ludicrous claim that “nobody’s sleeping on the streets” in New York (See “New York City homelessness continues to set new records,” 26 February 2013).

Coalition president Mary Brosnahan said the city’s housing crisis was “the worst since the Great Depression.” The report stated that the city was now spending the sum of \$955 million annually to provide emergency shelter for the tens of thousands of homeless, and compared the Bloomberg administration unfavorably with previous Democratic and Republican city governments under Ed Koch, David Dinkins and Rudolph Giuliani.

Seth Diamond, Bloomberg’s commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services, countered that federal housing assistance known as Section 8 had been cut by Washington and not by the mayor. “You can’t have a homeless housing program that is based on something that doesn’t exist.”

Despite the angry finger pointing, the attacks on affordable housing are bipartisan and homelessness is the product of the profit system and not merely one or another of its political representatives. The mega-wealthy Bloomberg symbolizes is a system that rests on both parties.

The crisis of homelessness is particularly explosive today because everyone can see, even more dramatically than in the Depression days of the 1930s, the unbridgeable gulf between the struggles facing the vast majority of working people and the obscene displays of wealth by the super-rich.

The mayor, who cannot run for a fourth term, is running into criticism in the media while his would-be successors, including local Democrats like City Council President Christine Quinn and Public Advocate Bill DeBlasio, pretend that they would follow different policies. In fact, the devastating housing conditions facing a growing number of working class and middle class families are the product of the “free market” represented by every single one of these politicians.

The Coalition’s report points to this fact when it declares that the current homeless numbers mark a record “since modern homelessness emerged three decades ago.” This phenomenon of “modern homelessness,” growing numbers with no place to live

reflected a definite stage in the decline of American capitalism, characterized by the destruction of decent-paying jobs, the financialization of the economy, and the real estate boom and the destruction of housing for the working class. All of this has been accompanied by the growth of inequality to levels surpassing even those of the Gilded Age of a century earlier.



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