

New York City's housing crisis deepens under "progressive" Mayor de Blasio

Fred Mazelis
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Despite the expansive promises made by New York City mayor Bill de Blasio when he took office more than two years ago that he would make a serious dent in the city's desperate housing crisis, the atrocious conditions and emergency situation facing many working class households and individuals has only worsened since then.

There are many expressions of the crisis, and barely a day goes by without the media or official government sources being forced to reveal how gentrification and skyrocketing rents, overcrowding and homelessness, as well as the ongoing decay and neglect of the city's public housing, is negatively affecting the quality of life of millions of New Yorkers.

As the *StreetEasy* real estate blog recently reported, severe overcrowding is a fact of life for growing numbers of families, especially in immigrant neighborhoods. Using the guidelines of the US Census Bureau—more than one person per room in an apartment is defined as crowded and more than 1.5 is "severely crowded"—*StreetEasy* finds that the number of crowded households in New York has now climbed to 8.9 percent of the total, compared to 3.3 percent for the US as a whole. While the Bronx has the highest percentage of crowded apartments, among individual neighborhoods the four highest percentages are found in Queens, the borough with the highest number of immigrants, especially from Latin America and Asia.

In the neighborhoods of Corona, East Elmhurst and Jackson Heights, more than 20 percent of families live in overcrowded conditions. In Corona the ratio is close to one in four families. Studies have confirmed the obvious conclusions: such an environment is conducive to the more rapid spread of contagious illness as well as the danger of fire. It also increases stress and has a particularly serious impact on the health and learning

abilities of young children. Immigrants in Elmhurst/Corona make up 64 percent of the population, and in Jackson Heights it is 62 percent.

An article in the *New York Times* included interviews with two immigrants living in severely crowded conditions, both of whom gave only their first name, for obvious reasons. Rafael, a Mexican immigrant, lives with his mother, brother and two other tenants in an apartment in Jackson Heights that is less than 500 square feet in area. The living room has been subdivided and Rafael's brother sleeps on a mat in the kitchen that is rolled up every morning.

"There are belongings occupying just about every square inch of space," the *Times* reports. "Clean dishes and cookware are piled on the countertop because there is nowhere else to store them. Clothes are jammed in bags along the kitchen wall. Shelves overflow with bills, magazines, pill bottles and dog food (for the resident Chihuahua). Bicycles are stacked on top of a cupboard."

Another immigrant, Leon, from Colombia, has even less space, if that is possible: six people in a 300-square-foot basement apartment in the Astoria neighborhood in Queens. The household includes Leon and his wife, their two daughters, a son-in-law and a granddaughter. They pay \$1,200 monthly.

"It's a bad situation," Leon told the *Times*. "We need dignity, man. We need privacy. We need a more feasible life, a life in which it's easier to be human."

These individuals and hundreds of thousands of others have come to the US in search of work and a path out of wretched poverty. Many have fled murderous repression. But the vast majority have found only low-paying jobs, along with conditions of deprivation such as those described in this article.

Overcrowding is a step on the road to homelessness,

now officially recorded as roughly 60,000 in the city's shelter system, but in fact significantly more when those living on the streets are included. The crowding is itself a product of gentrification and rapidly increasing rents in areas of the city that were previously considered affordable for the working class, at least among families where there were two or more incomes. Now the combination of soaring rents and low-wage jobs is leading to more overcrowding, as families double up in tiny apartments, including illegally sublet units, or seek other roommates. The number of "illegal" units in Queens is put at 48,000.

StreetEasy reports that households with a median income in 2016, about \$56,000 annually, would have to spend 65.4 percent of those earnings (up from 58.1 percent in only the past year) on the "median asking rate" for an apartment, which has now increased to more than \$3,000 monthly. Those who typically earn far less, in the \$20,000 to \$30,000 range, must find even more extreme solutions. In the above examples, for instance, for those living in inhuman conditions rent still consume one-third or even more of household income. Families endure such conditions only because they at least have a roof over their heads and are left with enough for food and other necessities, even if barely.

These conditions highlight the miserable record of the self-styled "progressive" mayor, whose election in November 2013 was hailed as the rebirth of liberalism in the largest city in the US. Underneath the rhetoric about a "tale of two cities," however, what the city has seen under de Blasio has been the continuation of business as usual.

Gentrification has persisted, centered in Manhattan areas such as the Hudson Yards on the Far West Side, past Penn Station, but also spreading to some neighborhoods in the other boroughs. Alongside the ultra-luxury high rise buildings, with their apartments selling for tens of millions of dollars, many other buildings have shot up, with market rate apartments for "only" \$3,000, \$4,000 or \$5,000 monthly. The "tale of two cities" slogan is coming back to haunt de Blasio as he begins the preparation for an expected reelection campaign next year.

De Blasio's rapid rise in the polls in the weeks before the Democratic Party primary in September 2013 resembles nothing so much as the current growth in

support for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders as he pursues the Democratic nomination for president. In both cases the poll results and actual vote totals reflect the growing disgust within the working class with politics as usual. But in both cases the Democratic primary contests are being used to raise hopes while keeping the working class tied to this corrupt party of big business. The fact is de Blasio is neither willing nor able to challenge the interests of the massive real estate developers and the Wall Street plutocrats that stand behind them.



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