Number of New York City street homeless grew by nearly 40 percent in one year

Philip Guelpa
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The number of homeless people living on the streets in New York City increased dramatically over the past year, according to figures supplied by the Department of Homeless Services. The annual count conducted by the agency on a single night in February 2017 showed 3,892 unsheltered people living "in the rough," up nearly 40 percent from the 2,794 counted the previous February.

The latest number is the second highest since the city began counting its unsheltered population back in 2005, when the total was 4,395. This is in addition to the tens of thousands living in homeless shelters.

In an apparent attempt to obscure the bad news, the administration of "progressive" mayor Democrat Bill de Blasio waited until the Fourth of July holiday to release the new data, roughly five months after it was collected, in the hope that no one would notice. But the new data dramatically illustrates the effects of the twin crises of growing poverty and acute lack of affordable housing in New York City.

The new numbers of street homeless are likely to under-represent the true situation. They are based on an annual one-night survey by canvassers who attempt to locate as many people sleeping "in the rough" as they can find. This method has inherent weaknesses and is subject to year-to-year fluctuations due to uncontrolled variables, such as weather, which affect the numbers of homeless who are identifiable. Nevertheless, the marked upward spike is significant.

Furthermore, since many homeless people have a well-grounded fear of contact with any government representatives, due to mental illness, substance abuse, or general mistreatment, particularly by the police, as well as the appalling conditions in the city's homeless shelters, the true numbers are likely to be much higher.

The sharp increase came despite the reported "success" of an enhanced outreach effort by the city, resulting in 748 individuals being moved off the streets and into shelters since March 2016. In other words, subtracting that number from the February 2016 total, there was a net increase of close to 2,000 individuals forced onto the street over the past year.

To this population must be added the historic high of roughly 60,000 people, including 23,000 children, spending their nights in the city's squalid and dangerous homeless shelters, a 74 percent increase over the last ten years. Homelessness in New York has not been this high since the Great Depression. According to the Coalition for the Homeless, research shows that the primary cause of homelessness, particularly for families, is lack of affordable housing.

The growing number of homeless people in New York City, both in and out of shelters, is symptomatic of the all-around worsening of living conditions for the city's working and middle classes. Over the same 10-year period, median household incomes rose only 4.8 percent, while median rents increased by 18.3 percent. This is compounded by a steady decline in the numbers of affordable housing units over several decades. Between 1994 and 2012, the city suffered a net loss of over 150,000 rent-stabilized apartments. Growing numbers of people simply cannot find a place to live.

A second, substantial contributor to the ballooning numbers of homeless, both in New York and nationally, is the process of "deinstitutionalization" of persons with mental health issues. This process of expulsion of large numbers of people from care facilities, many with no place else to go, began in the 1960s and accelerated following the 2008 economic crisis. Added to this is the rapid growth of substance abuse, including the surging opioid epidemic, caused

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by deteriorating economic conditions and a lack of adequate treatment and support facilities, which has resulted in many more people winding up on the streets.

The growth in homelessness represents the compounding effects of decades of policies by both Democrats and Republicans, at the national and local levels, to claw back all of the hard won gains made by the working class in struggles during the 20th century, not only in housing, but in the full range of health and social programs as well as wages. More immediately, it demonstrates in the sharpest terms the failure of the city's self-styled "progressive" mayor, Democrat Bill de Blasio, to have any real effect on the housing and homelessness crisis in New York.

De Blasio, who first won office in 2013 based on a campaign promising to fight against the city's stark economic and social inequality, the so-called Tale of Two Cities, is seeking re-election in the fall. His policies have been predicated on the need to maintain and enhance the wealth of the city's elite, especially the real estate interests. The mayor's pledge to "build or preserve" 200,000 units of affordable housing over ten years, or similar promises to expand the capacity of homeless shelters, even if achieved, would not begin to address the needs of millions of New Yorkers who live on the brink of homelessness.

More recently, the mayor, facing growing criticism for the homeless crisis, announced yet another new program, Home-Stat, the Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement Street Action Teams. The stated aim is to collect more extensive and accurate data on the city's homeless population, in effect to identify and track each homeless person—a de facto registry to facilitate control of these troublesome individuals. In a recent radio interview, the "progressive" mayor expressed the wish that panhandling (begging) on the street should be made illegal, effectively criminalizing the homeless.

Such schemes are, at best, mere palliatives, intended to divert attention from the fundamental cause of homelessness—the lack of decent-paying jobs and adequately funded social services. Instead, in one of the wealthiest cities in the world, while the rich have only gotten richer, as the soaring prices of New York luxury properties attest, living conditions for the vast majority of the population continue to deteriorate, creating a politically explosive situation.

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