

New report counts 100,000 homeless students in New York City public schools

Fred Mazelis
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A new report gives a revealing snapshot, through statistics on the largest school system in the US, of the growing poverty and inequality in New York City.

The study, issued last week by the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness (ICPH) and following up on earlier reports, starkly illustrates how, four years after current New York mayor Bill de Blasio ran on the campaign slogan “a tale of two cities,” that term applies to the US financial and cultural capital more than ever before.

The total of homeless students, defined by the report as those living in shelters or doubled up with friends and family, but also including some living in motels and even a few in family cars, is approximately 100,000, more than 9 percent of the total in the city’s public schools for the 2015-2016 school year. When the numbers who are not currently homeless but have experienced homelessness in the past six years are included, the total rises to 140,000. The report points out that this is equal to the population of Syracuse, the fourth-largest city in New York State.

One of the most significant numbers in the study is that for the increase in student homelessness since 2011—33 percent. This period overlaps almost exactly with the years of the most recent stock market boom, after the financial crash of 2008. During this same period, the construction of luxury and ultra-luxury high rises in Manhattan has continued without pause.

The typical homeless student, according to the report, transfers schools at least twice during the school year; misses 88 days of school, or almost half of the school year; has twice the risk of suspension or being left back a grade; and has half the proficiency scores on 5th grade tests of math and English as his or her fellow students.

The 9.3 percent homelessness rate in the public schools compares to 6.6 percent in charters, the privately run but publicly funded schools that are not legally obliged to take in all students. In addition, amidst continuing luxury

construction and gentrification, a growing number of students attend exclusive private schools.

The percentage of students who were homeless ranged from a low of 2.5 percent in Bayside, in eastern Queens, to a high of 20 percent in the Highbridge-Concourse school district, in the west Bronx. Other school districts with high rates of homelessness included Central Harlem; East Tremont, in the Bronx; and Brownsville, in Brooklyn.

A further index of the ongoing and deepening economic crisis is the fact that the percentage of students who were homeless increased in every single school district in the city, including the wealthier ones. In Flushing, Queens, as well as the outer borough of Staten Island, the jump was greatest, more than 39 percent over the period studied.

The results of homelessness were predictable. Twenty-two percent of homeless students transferred schools in the middle of the school year, twice the rate for other students. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 20 days of school or more, was seen in 34 percent of homeless students, compared to 20 percent for other students. For elementary school students, the most vulnerable to instability in school, the comparison was 31 percent to 14 percent in the 2015-2016 school year.

The impact of homelessness on dropout and graduation rates was also noted. Even though the city has made strenuous efforts and had some success in reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates in recent years, homeless students dropped out of school at more than twice the rate of students who were not homeless (17 percent vs. 8 percent). Homeless students graduated at a 46 percent rate, compared to 74 percent for other students.

There are some effects of homelessness that cannot be quantified, but emerge in the form of emotional problems and later in more serious depression and other social ills. Families are forced to choose between having their children make two-hour trips to school or having them

make the often-difficult and disorienting switch to new schools, where they have no friends and know no teachers. The report quotes one former school principal:

“Every six months, it’s like you’re in a new family. It’s so destabilizing. One of the biggest problems is that the next housing assignment is not in the same community ... if you’re going from Rockaway to Staten Island to the Bronx, any kid would really lose it. We would lose it if our home moved every six months and the people we know and trust weren’t available to us. ... It takes several months to gain the trust of a student and to figure out what kind of learning support they need, to put a program in place. By January you’re feeling the flow and have figured out what triggers a tantrum or causes the child to run away. Just as you start to figure it all out, the kids are gone.”

A social worker explained: “One middle school student [age 13] said that traveling from the Bronx to school in Brooklyn caused him to go from an A average in English to a 67 percent due to being late. His younger brother [age 8] really struggled to get up in time to get on the train for school, and he would often fall asleep in class. Last year, his teacher became concerned that he might have a sleep disorder because he was constantly nodding off. He missed out on a lot of valuable classroom instruction and he was moved to a special education classroom.”

Another social worker reports, “We have a really high population of students that are in temporary housing. I think a lot of students in temporary housing get lost in the cracks, because they are not always seen as homeless—but they are. They are doubled up or constantly moving around from home to home. They might not have adequate furniture or a desk where they are living. Or if Mom gets in a fight with her cousin, they could be out. It’s a lot of anxiety and stress for the kids. That comes out in all sorts of ways, behaviorally and academically.”

The city’s unemployment rate for July was reported as 4.7 percent. The rate has dropped in half since the year or two following the 2008 crash. The persistence and even growth of student homelessness over this same period reflects the deepening impact of the crisis on the working poor and on families with growing children in particular. The jobless rate reflects in part a growing number of workers who have stopped looking for minimum-wage jobs.

There are many families who are simply unable to find apartments at rents they can afford while working at such jobs, which have proliferated in recent years. Even the recently enacted state legislation that would increase the

minimum wage to \$15 an hour over the next several years will make hardly any dent in the crisis, under conditions where affordable apartments, which should take no more than one-third of a worker’s wage, continue to disappear.

De Blasio’s promise of 200,000 affordable apartments to be created over the next decade, even if it were carried out, is a cruel joke for the hundreds of thousands, including 100,000 students in the public schools, who live either in shelters or doubled up under intolerable conditions today.

Reformist advocates, including the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, have absolutely no reforms to offer or even to meekly propose. The ICPH report closes with some “policy considerations” for schools and city authorities, including such pathetic suggestions as “learning from collaborations between schools and shelters” and “understanding the specific challenges of students in shelter who may be traveling long distances to attend school.”

This amounts to managing homelessness, which is taken as permanent and inevitable, rather than eliminating or even reducing it. This is where de Blasio’s worthless promises have led. He and all other Democratic Party politicians represent a system that has nothing to offer, except gentrification and the ever-widening chasm between the super-rich and their upper middle class backers on the one hand and the vast working class majority on the other. Only the independent political struggle of the working class, armed with a socialist program, can tackle the desperate social crisis reflected in student homelessness.



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