

# Four homeless men murdered in New York City's Chinatown

Owen Mullan, Sandy English  
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On October 5, the lifeless bodies of four homeless men were found close together in the heavily populated residential neighborhood of Chinatown in lower Manhattan. A fifth man, also homeless, was taken to a hospital with severe head trauma.

Three victims were identified by police as 54-year-old Nazario A. Vazquez Villegas, 83-year-old Chuen Kwok, and 49-year-old Anthony L. Manson. The fourth victim has not been identified.

Police arrested a sixth homeless man, 24-year-old Rudy Rodriguez Santos, after they received reports of a man assaulting men sleeping on the street. Santos was allegedly found with a pipe from a nearby construction site.

The tragic incident, involving six of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the United States, is a product of the advanced state of the social decay of New York, the most unequal large American city.

Apartments in Manhattan rent on average for \$4,200 a month and it is difficult to purchase a home for as little as a million dollars, while 200,000 people are on the waiting list for a unit managed by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), a housing system serving twice that number of residents which is plagued with rats, mold and damp and is in need of \$31.8 billion worth of repairs.

The men involved in the incident all lived difficult lives. Villegas had lived in Staten Island and had reportedly worked as a handyman, but was sleeping in Chinatown because he had “fallen on hard times,” his daughter told local press.

Kwok, originally from Hong Kong, had lived in Chinatown for decades, where he used to have an apartment. Residents recounted that he had a daily routine of sitting in a Chinese restaurant and ordering the same single meal a day, for less than \$6.

Santos, the alleged killer, raised in the Bronx and homeless for three years since his family kicked him out

for aggressive behavior, was clearly mentally ill. His family and neighbors told the media that in the last several months he was easily distracted, erratic and often forgetful of what he was doing and who he spoke to. He was reported to have been kicked out of a homeless shelter in Brooklyn after starting a fight with another man.

The promise to address homelessness has been a talking point of the “progressive” Mayor Bill de Blasio, until recently a candidate for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination, since he was elected in 2013. De Blasio promised to build 200,000 new affordable units in 10 years and to open more homeless shelters to address what was even then a visibly rapid growth in homelessness across the city.

The majority of those “affordable housing” units are still too expensive for many New Yorkers, often simply being designated affordable by being “below market value.” This is in the context of a city that has an official poverty rate of 20 percent, and has “near poor” households—households with incomes up to 150 percent of the poverty threshold—that make up over 40 percent of the city’s residents, over 3 million people out of a total population of 8.5 million. In de Blasio’s New York City, an apartment rented at “below market value” can still cost over 50 percent of a family’s income.

In 2013, the non-profit Coalition for the Homeless counted 50,135 people in city shelters, including 20,000 children. Five years later, the Coalition counted 63,839 in shelters. This does not include the thousands more who do not enter the shelter system.

Federal authorities estimate that 91,897 people in the city experienced homelessness at some time in 2018. According to an estimate by the *New York Times*, in 2018 the number of children without permanent housing, that is, not only those living in city shelters, but also those staying with relatives and friends, was 114,659.

Since 2014, the capacity of the city’s public and non-

profit shelters has only increased from about 60,000 to over 63,000.

The response of the powers-that-be to the October 5 killings has been entirely predictable. De Blasio called for “outreach to the homeless” but also, and especially, for increased policing.

Others in the political establishment called for an even stronger law-and-order response. Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy at New York University and a campaign adviser to former mayor and multibillionaire Michael Bloomberg, regurgitated the complaints of former Mayor Rudolf Giuliani’s administration before it socially cleansed downtown Manhattan of the homeless in the 1990s: “The police are disempowered to remove the homeless—and New York has become less aggressive on quality-of-life issues. You used to be penalized for urinating on the street.”

Edward Skyler, a former aide in the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations, made a humanitarian appeal for increased policing: “As this awful crime shows, letting people live on the street is dangerous and inhumane and we shouldn’t allow people to do it. ... While the causes could be economic or mental health issues, you can’t address street homelessness purely from a social services standpoint. The police have to be part of the solution. ... No one wants to ask police officers to be social workers, but there are points when they are the only ones equipped to handle situations.”

One law enforcement official quoted by the Murdoch-owned *New York Post* gave the opinion of the most fascist-minded elements in the state apparatus: “After the video of [Eric Garner’s police murder in 2015] was viewed on social media a million times—cops were told to back off. [De Blasio] didn’t want any confrontation, and the police were told not to enforce quality-of-life crimes—so these crimes are ignored and have multiplied.”

A campaign against the homeless has already taken form in the subway system. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), the state agency that manages the subways and buses in the city, will be hiring 500 additional police officers to remove the approximately 3,000 homeless people who find shelter in the subway system.

Posters have gone up all around the transit systems warning would-be fare-beaters, mostly working-class youth and the homeless, of the consequences of failing to pay for a ticket, and police can be seen crowded near turnstiles watching who pays and who doesn’t.

The social crisis is compounded by the failures of city

programs to address widespread and debilitating mental health problems. In 2015, the mayor’s office announced the \$850 million ThriveNYC program, headed by de Blasio’s wife, Charlene McCray. The program was announced to address suicide, depression and substance abuse.

After reviewing two budget reports from the program from 2018, Politico reported that the program has little to show. In an interview, McCray confessed that she did not have statistics to show progress over the last four years, and the main reason was that the campaign was primarily meant to aid existing city programs and not actually open new ones.

At Rikers Island, the US’s largest prison complex, where Santos is now confined without bail, the connection between mental health and the poorest sections of society is most directly expressed.

The prison houses over 10,000 inmates every day, and since 2014, the number of regular inmates who are diagnosed with mental health and severe mental health issues has risen to 40 percent and 10 percent respectively. The arrest of homeless people who are caught committing crimes of want or addiction no doubt contributes to this figure.

More importantly, many of these inmates are released without having been treated or put in specialized housing set aside for inmates with mental health issues. The number of units designated for these needs only provides housing or treatment to one quarter of all inmates who are known to have such health problems.

The murder of four homeless men and the wounding of another is a social tragedy. It was done in sight of luxury apartments owned by ultra-high-net-worth individuals, whose assets could abolish homelessness in the city and treat those with severe mental health issues.

While the residents of Chinatown and advocates for the homeless held a remembrance service and set up a memorial for the dead, the political establishment is incapable and unwilling to address these conditions. The eruptions of violence that they produce only become excuses for the authorities to vilify the homeless and increase policing.



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