

Three homeless men die in abandoned house fire in New York City

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The critical shortage of affordable housing in New York City claimed the lives of three men last Thursday.

The still unidentified homeless men, all estimated to be between 35 and 40, died in a fire that ravaged an abandoned house in the Queens neighborhood of St. Albans. They had sought shelter in the house and had been living there for some time, according to neighbors. Neighborhood residents reported that the men were friendly and not considered a nuisance.

These fatalities were the latest in a recent series of deaths of homeless people in the city due to a variety of causes. In early October, four homeless men were savagely beaten to death and another seriously injured at three separate locations in Chinatown by a single attacker, also homeless. The suspect may be suffering from some form of mental illness. Later that month, a decomposing corpse, that of an apparently homeless man, was found in a manhole near Columbus Circle.

The thread that links all of these tragedies is that tens of thousands of New Yorkers, even ones who have jobs, cannot afford a place to live. The price of housing continues to rise while incomes for a large portion of the population are stagnant or declining. Average rents have risen 40 percent over the last 20 years.

The house in St. Albans, which had been abandoned in 2016 by its owner, who had never resided there, is among the many vacant housing units known as “zombie homes,” which are unoccupied and fall into disrepair. A previous owner had lost it to foreclosure. The phenomenon of zombie homes is an expression of the ongoing effects of the 2007–2008 financial crisis which drove many of the city’s working class homeowners into economic ruin, forcing them into foreclosure or abandonment of their homes.

While there is a boom in the construction of luxury residences, city officials estimate that there are

currently more than 3,000 zombie homes, reflecting the city’s widening income gap. While median rents have increased by 12 percent over the past eight years, as adjusted for inflation, incomes have risen only two percent. Many workers are already forced to pay substantially more than the recommended maximum of 30 percent of their income for rent. Recent data indicate that the average New Yorker is spending up to two-thirds of their income on rent.

Thus, housing for the lower income majority is considered an unprofitable investment, resulting in the deficit in construction, abandonment of existing housing stock, and rent gouging. The city has lost approximately 250,000 affordable housing units over the past several decades.

Despite promises by the city’s Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio to address the acute lack of affordable housing and consequent high rate of homelessness that was already a crisis when he took office in 2014, conditions have only gotten worse. His promise to “build or preserve” 200,000 units of affordable housing was itself woefully inadequate.

While the city’s elite amass ever greater amounts of wealth, the income gap with the majority of the population continues to widen. As of last year, New York was home to 103 billionaires. The top one percent of the population accounted for 40 percent of total income. Twenty percent of New Yorkers are officially considered poor, nearly twice the rate in 1970.

New York City has the largest homeless population in the United States. It has reached the highest level since the Great Depression of the 1930s. According to the latest figures, approximately 62,000 people, over twenty thousand of them children, spend each night in one of the city’s homeless shelters. The shelter population is now 59 percent higher than it was ten

years ago.

Nearly 150,000 school-age children in New York City have no permanent home, either living in shelters or “doubled up” with family or friends. And the annual census of those living outdoors “in the rough,” conducted last January, put the number at 3,588. This is undoubtedly a gross undercount.

Conditions in the city’s homeless shelters are horrendous. As a consequence, many of the homeless prefer to live on the streets or as squatters in abandoned homes or other buildings, despite the obvious dangers. Among these were the three men who died in St. Albans.

Many more live in cramped, divided basements, hallways, and other dangerous, makeshift spaces, mostly illegal. It is estimated that there are likely to be tens of thousands of such “residences” in the city, generally occupied by low income service workers, including many immigrants. Some are so small that occupants have to sleep in shifts.

Many others sleep in the subways. To deal with this “nuisance,” New York State’s governor, Andrew Cuomo, also a Democrat, plans to “police” the problem by adding an additional 500 officers to the thousands who already patrol the system.



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