

# Record number of homeless deaths in New York City last year

Sam Dalton  
24 January 2020

A new report by New York City's Department of Social Services (DSS) revealed that 404 people registered as homeless died between July 2018 and June 2019 in the city. This is the highest number since records of homeless deaths began in 2006 and is a rise of 39 percent compared to the previous 12-month period. The increase is the largest year-over-year in over a decade.

The top five causes of deaths were drugs, heart disease, alcoholism, accidents and cancer. There were also 10 homicides, 4 of which occurred during a single night in Chinatown in October 2019. Fifteen of the deaths were suicides, more than double the number in 2016.

By most counts, over 70,000 people are homeless in New York, comprising 14 percent of the "official" homeless population of the US. These are individuals that either sleep rough or live in the city's homeless shelters. This is the highest level since the Great Depression in the 1930s.

The number of homeless living in the city's vast subway system has increased so much that the city was forced to establish a special program to house them. Advocates for the homeless have criticized the response by the New York Police Department (NYPD) to the homeless living in the transit system. On Tuesday night, one homeless man was discovered dead on a subway, covered in bedbugs.

The group with the highest mortality rate within the homeless population are middle-aged men. Deaths are becoming increasingly prevalent, however, among other homeless subgroups. The number of women who died in the period covered in the report was 91, up from 59 the previous year, while seven homeless children also died in this period, some from flu, birth defects or sudden infant death syndrome. Some were undoubtedly

preventable.

In the period covered by the report, 103 homeless people died of drug overdoses. This is an expression of the ongoing opioid crisis gripping the United States. Dr. Mitchell Katz, CEO of NYC Health + Hospitals, the city's public hospital system, attributed the high rates of drug addiction and overdoses to the availability of fentanyl on the streets of New York. "You can now buy for \$5 fentanyl more powerful than \$50 worth of heroin would have been when I began my training more than 30 years ago," he said.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid painkiller that is commercially available and has been a huge factor in the continuing opioid crisis. It is described by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as up to 100 times stronger than morphine. It is often synthetically produced by unregulated street-dealers and cut with other drugs such as heroin and cocaine. In 2017, according to the CDC, 28,400 people in the US died from synthetic opioids. Fentanyl often leads to overdose because it is indiscernible from heroin but much stronger.

According to NYC Health + Hospitals, "The presence of fentanyl in the NYC drug supply has dramatically increased the number of overdose deaths, and fentanyl is now the most common drug involved in overdose deaths. In 2017, 800 New Yorkers died from overdoses involving fentanyl."

There is widespread outrage by advocates for the homeless, as this report comes on the back of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio's announcement in December 2019 of his third, wholly inadequate, homelessness initiative in four years. The new plan is only another example of the Democratic Party administration's attempt to alleviate public pressure over homelessness while doing as little as possible to

help the city's homeless population.

The plan aims to add another 1,000 beds, but one city official admitted that only 350 were in the works at the time of the plan's announcement. This will not provide enough space for what city officials describe as the 1,800 "chronic homeless" across the city's five boroughs. City Hall—run entirely by the Democratic Party—says it will find 1,000 apartments to provide permanent housing for homeless families; city officials admitted they have yet to locate units for the initiative. The new initiative pledges only an extra \$100 million.

The rising death toll is the clearest indictment of the Democratic mayor's first two phony attempts to take on homelessness. In 2017, he made a pledge to open 90 new shelters and create affordable housing to alleviate the current crisis; so far, only 30 have opened and no buildings have been identified to convert to affordable living spaces.

De Blasio argues that taking some people off the streets, even though the overall number of homeless continues to swell, indicates the success of his severely limited program. This goes together with fictitious claims that there is simply not enough money to help the homeless in a city that nearly 90 billionaires call home.

The city is clear about the priorities that are dictated by the ruling elite. According to a recent report, in 2020 the city forecasts that it will spend more than \$5.85 billion on the NYPD, an increase of \$250 million from 2019.

The blight of homelessness and homeless deaths is not limited to NYC. In 2018, 918 homeless people died in Los Angeles County, an increase of 76 percent from 2013. According to a CDC report to Congress in the summer of 2018, in January of that year there were 552,830 homeless individuals in the US.

More families are being forced onto the streets or into inadequate and temporary housing as rents across the city continue to rise. The average rent for an apartment has risen more than \$1,000 in less than a decade, from \$1,938 in January 2011 to \$2,964 in October 2019. Even in East New York, one of the cheapest neighborhoods in the city, rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$1,236, nearly half of the monthly take-home pay for a full-time minimum wage worker.

The DSS report on homeless deaths was released in the same week that the *Atlantic Monthly* reported that

almost half of the luxury condos that have come onto the New York property market in the last five years remain unsold and are unoccupied. According to a 2018 *New York Times* report, for every homeless individual in NYC, there are three vacant apartments.

That men, women and children are dying on the streets in poverty and want while thousands of apartments are vacant is an indictment of the politics of the "progressive" wing of the Democracy Party, represented by De Blasio, who won election in 2013 with promises of ending the stark inequality and guarding New Yorkers "from the enormous power of moneyed interests."



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**