

COVID-19 in New York City claims the lives of at least 27 homeless people

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As New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio seek to prepare the population to get “back to work” under unsafe conditions, New York City is still the “epicenter of the epicenter” of the coronavirus pandemic. At time of writing, New York state has 252,094 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and New York City alone has over 136,806. At least 18,929 people have died in New York, the vast majority of them in New York City. While testing remains incredibly difficult to access, especially for the working class, test results in the city are coming back positive at a shocking rate of 48 percent.

As the ruling class watches their stock values skyrocket from the comfort of their second homes, the working class, many of whom are deemed “essential workers” and cannot work from home, is risking infection and death in order to keep food on the table. In addition to these “essential workers,” New York City’s large homeless population is at particular risk.

As of this writing, 460 confirmed infections had been recorded in the city’s shelters, and 27 people have died. Due to underreporting and lack of testing, the real numbers of infected and those who have died from COVID-19 is likely much higher.

Concerning the total number of infected or dead homeless people throughout the city, a shelter social worker told the WSWs, “I don’t think DHS [Department of Homeless Services] has surveyed that and if they did [they] haven’t let us know.” This lack of information has put both shelter residents and workers at great risk.

While no official numbers for shelter workers who have contracted the virus have been released, the social worker reported that two of her colleagues had fallen sick with COVID-19. Like other healthcare workers, social workers face an incredible lack of personal

protective equipment (PPE) and have faced heavy consequences and firings for talking to the press concerning the lack of equipment.

There are, on any given day, as many as 80,000 people experiencing homelessness in New York City. The number of homeless adults in the city has increased by 139 percent over the last 10 years. According to Thursday’s *All Shelter Census*, the city’s Department of Homeless Services (DHS) reported 57,000 people as having received accommodation in the city’s shelter system that day. A staggering 20,023 of them were children.

Hygiene supplies and adequate space to isolate are hard to come by within the shelter system, which is a patchwork of 450 different shelters with varying policies and resources.

Shelters have seen an increase in residents amid the pandemic, including from recently released inmates from Rikers Island, where COVID-19 has ravaged the prison population. This increase, in addition to higher retention rates, has left the already densely packed facilities struggling to isolate residents who have tested positive for the virus. The completely overwhelmed city hospitals are sending homeless people who have the virus back to the shelters if their symptoms are not grave enough to require admittance to an intensive care unit (ICU).

Social distancing especially in the women’s and men’s shelters where multiple people have to share rooms is all but impossible. “If this is a worldwide epidemic, we should have a fair chance to protect ourselves,” Roberto Mangual told the *New York Times*, who stays at the Clarke Thomas shelter on Wards Island. “We don’t really have that chance in a men’s shelter, to be honest.” A 69-year old homeless man living in a shelter told the *Times* that he believed he had

contracted the virus, saying: “I was around a lot of people coughing, throwing up, sneezing.”

The situation is perhaps just as dire for homeless people who are not able to gain admission to a shelter. In New York City, one must be registered in the city’s homeless database, which requires a referral to the DHS. The “absolute exclusion criteria,” which sets the terms for who may be rejected from the DHS, bars some of those most vulnerable in the homeless population--especially those suffering from serious mental health issues, and even those unable to “independently manage chronic illnesses.” These chronic health conditions, which can result in a person being left out on the street, disproportionately affect homeless people and put them at even higher risk of dying from the virus.

Under these conditions, many homeless people have increasingly taken shelter in the subway system as well as on the streets. A video recently posted by a Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) worker shows train car after train car on the 2 Line occupied by homeless people seeking shelter, and the minimal protection it affords from the virus. These desperate measures put the health of those taking them at risk, as well as both the MTA workers who are working with limited, if any, protective equipment, and the many thousands of “essential workers” who still commute.

Homeless people who are unable to find accommodation in the DHS also face particular risk with respect to hygiene amid this crisis. “People without a home lost access to all of their bathrooms,” when coffee shops and public buildings were closed to stop the spread of the virus, James Winans, head of the Bowery Mission, told CNBC. “Their bathroom was at a Starbucks, at a library, at a recreation center.”

The city has taken entirely inadequate measures to secure housing for the homeless. As of April 11, city officials reported that 6,000 homeless people would be moved to hotels around the city in order to self-isolate. However, the Department of Social Services (DSS) has only secured around 1,000 hotel units for this effort, setting a six-person to unit average. Such conditions will only contribute to the spread of the virus.

The desperate conditions facing the homeless are the product of years of austerity and attacks on the working class undertaken by the Democratic Party in New York’s city and state governments. Years of capitalist

bonanzas on the real estate markets have driven up rents in the city beyond the reach of the working class and have left even workers with relatively well-paying jobs living paycheck to paycheck. Now, as the crisis sparked by the pandemic is ravaging the working class population and most vulnerable layers of society, the state and city are planning further devastating cuts to social welfare programs, including Medicaid, and to public education.

The resources exist to provide both emergency and regular housing to all New Yorkers. At least 250,000 New York City apartments are empty, leaving three apartments for every homeless person, whether in need of isolation or not. As the Socialist Equality Party demands in its March 17 program of action for the working class, “To the extent that private property gets in the way of emergency measures, it must be swept aside. office buildings and similar structures, many of which are now empty,” must be converted “into hospitals and clinics” and “used to provide emergency housing for the homeless and for students who are being forced to leave college dormitories.”



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