New York City officials accused of undercounting and mismanagement after dozens of homeless COVID-19 deaths reported

Sam Dalton
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According to a report by Coalition for the Homeless released earlier this month, as of May 31, there were 926 confirmed COVID-19 cases amongst New York City's homeless in 179 shelter locations with at least 86 deaths. In the month of April alone 58 homeless people died of COVID-19. When adjusted for population, sheltered homeless adults have died at a rate of 321 per 100,000 compared to 200 for the city's population as a whole.

The WSWS recently spoke to a social worker for the not-for-profit Housing Works in New York City about the coronavirus crisis among the homeless. Using a pseudonym, Jacob said, "The number of infections and deaths must be very high, the city of New York is very good at keeping the reported number of homeless infected low. The numbers they are citing—37 homeless dead—are just ridiculous. There is no way that they are true." With cases and deaths being systematically underreported across the US, the true extent of the disease amongst New York's homeless both in and outside of shelters will perhaps never be known.

In the center of global finance, which 105 billionaires call home, there have been nearly 18,000 deaths from COVID-19. The homicidal approach of the ruling class to the pandemic has left the homeless abandoned to face the virus on their own. The premature reopening of the city's economy, which began in earnest this week, will disproportionately affect the city's poorest layers.

As of April 2020, there were 60,422 homeless people in shelters in New York City, 61 percent higher than 10 years ago. Of this number, 20,494 are children. The majority of the Coalition study's data comes from within shelters. Information is scarce, however. The report acknowledges, "The mortality rate for those living in shelters may well be even higher because it was calculated without the inclusion of probable deaths due to the lack of complete public reporting." One homeless shelter employee told The City website that New York's Department of Homeless Services (DHS) enforced a culture of "don't ask, don't tell" amongst its employees.

There are also thousands of unsheltered individuals who sleep on New York's streets each night. The true number is unknown; however, it is clear that in the midst of the pandemic and the intensifying economic crisis numbers have been sharply increasing. The Coalition's website reported that one site with a pre-pandemic nightly average of people seeking a hot meal of 180 had soared to 400 by late May. According to an update from June 23, this has soared to 1,000.

The Coalition report also documents a number of incidents that expose the mismanagement of the DHS and which undoubtedly abetted the spread of the virus in this layer. These included:

- Individuals being forced to remain in a dormitory with a positive individual.
- Individuals being advised to return to a dormitory or practice social distancing on the streets while waiting for positive test results to be returned.
- New arrivals being ineligible for isolation in a shelter because they had not received DHS services in the past 12 months.
- Doctors reporting multiple instances of the premature admittance of homeless individuals to hospital beds due to the lack of isolation alternatives.
- At least one patient being denied an isolation bed due to their need to receive medication while isolated.
- Emergency rooms being unable to contact a DHS official by phone for hours.
- DHS advising hospitals to return individuals with COVID-19 symptoms to congregate shelters rather than isolation shelters.

In fact, the city authorities' only meaningful action has

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been to brutalize this vulnerable layer. In mid-April a campaign to “cleanse” the city’s subways of the homeless began. From May 6 onwards the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) shut down the subway system overnight with the ostensible aim of removing homeless individuals. Ever since the shutdown, officers from the New York Police Department (NYPD) have entered the subways at closing time to flush out homeless individuals using the system for warmth and shelter.

This action was partially justified by a promise from city authorities to house all of those expelled from the system. However, as of May 28 only 281 people removed from subways had gone into shelters. The Coalition’s report states that many of those thrown out were forced to congregate and bed down in large groups for shelter, particularly in the second week of May when temperatures were unseasonably cold.

Social workers who provide essential services for the homeless have been under immense pressure during the pandemic. Jacob told the WSWS, “In recent weeks, every day other individuals were being let go. From what I’ve seen, they’re not furloughing anyone but they’re permanently laying off people, targeting people who have tried to unionize, are taking their paid time off and women who are pregnant or have just had children. One woman who was about to go on maternity leave was terminated.”

While thousands are left on the streets and staff are laid off, the leadership of the New York-based non-profit Housing Works is taking home hundreds of thousands of dollars. Charles King, the company’s CEO, had a reported salary of $0 in 2018. However, he took home $374,378 in “compensation from a related organization.” The second in command, Matthew Bernando, earned $289,640 in the same income category that year.

Jacob explained, “Housing Works just made a big name for themselves with the ‘Hotels for the Homeless.’ Some hotels were turned into shelters when there was a lot of advocacy about the thousands of empty hotel rooms in the city to use them for the homeless. But they [Housing Works] are making a ton of money off of this because of state contracts. Charles King is a king when it comes to propaganda and flipping this.”

In line with its wider criminality, the response of the American ruling class to the pandemic’s effects on the homeless has had brutal consequences. A March report by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) called for an additional $11.5 billion in federal funding to provide appropriate housing for the nation’s nearly 600,000 strong homeless population.

This is spare change by the standards of the inaptly named CARES Act, which injected trillions into Wall Street at the drop of a hat. The act provided a paltry $4 billion for the homeless. Furthermore, the allocation of these funds is at the discretion of local and state authorities. So far, it is unclear how and where the money has been spent. A good portion of it may well have ended up in the back pocket of figures like King.

A fresh round of budget cuts in New York City led by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio will leave workers and the homeless furthered exposed to the virus. This follows years of hollow initiatives by the de Blasio administration, while homelessness has rapidly risen since the beginning of his tenure in 2014.

In the midst of a deadly pandemic, the question of housing is a deadly one for hundreds of thousands of Americans and millions around the world. Leilani Farha, former UN special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, stated, “housing has become the front-line defense against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation.” In New York City alone there are 250,000 vacant properties. According to the US Census Bureau, there were 17,019,726 vacant homes throughout the country.

As the Socialist Equality Party stated in its demands at the onset of the pandemic on March 17, the working class must demand the “taking over [of] office buildings and similar structures, many of which are now empty, and rapidly converting them into hospitals and clinics. These structures can also be used to provide emergency housing for the homeless.”

The deprivation of adequate housing for 600,000 homeless Americans, and millions more who live in temporary or unsafe accommodation, is not something unfortunate but unavoidable. It is, rather, a product of class rule. Responding to this reality, Jacob remarked on the point of view of the ruling elites, “The majority [of the homeless] could certainly be put up properly, but where’s the money in that?”

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