

Homelessness and Despair in New York City

Survey: 23 % rise in street homelessness in NYC

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Global Research, May 16, 2012

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 16 May 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

The number of homeless people living on the streets of New York City increased by 23 percent in one year according to an annual survey conducted by the city's Department of Homeless Services.

On January 30, volunteers for the organization counted an estimated 3,262 people living on the streets— a 23 percent increase from the 2,648 counted in 2011. The 2,925 volunteers walked approximately 15,000 miles while surveying the city. The largest numbers of homeless people living on the streets were found in Manhattan and Brooklyn. About half of the total number of people accounted for in the survey were living inside the city's subway system.

When the results of the survey were released late last month, Homeless Services Commissioner Seth Diamond said in a statement that the greatest challenge facing the agency was finding more housing options for people without homes.

In a cynical attempt to limit press coverage of the survey, the agency released the data late on a Friday afternoon. This was in stark contrast to a year earlier, when the city's survey had shown a 30 percent decrease in the street homeless population since 2008. The results for that survey were announced with great fanfare, complete with an elaborate news conference attended by volunteers, formerly homeless people and Linda Gibbs, the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human services.

While the latest survey shows a significant increase in street homelessness, advocates for the homeless believe the actual number of people sleeping rough in the city is much higher and have criticized the survey for failing to count large numbers of homeless individuals, especially those sleeping in non-visible areas like abandoned buildings or alleyways. The Department of Homeless Services itself acknowledges that it only surveys a portion of the city's surface area (about 20 percent) and only a portion of subway stations.

While many homeless individuals sleep on subway trains, particularly in the winter months, the agency does not survey the subway trains themselves. In 2007, a study by researchers at Columbia University and New York University showed that 32 percent of unsheltered homeless people in Manhattan slept in non-visible places, and nearly half (49 percent) of unsheltered individuals in the other boroughs slept in non-visible places. The Department of Homeless Services has also been criticized for refusing to reveal how many homeless people are actually counted and for failing to adjust for survey error.

The New York-based advocacy group Coalition for the Homeless, which has frequently

criticized the city's annual street homelessness survey, cast doubt on the city's findings when they were released last month. "Today's release of the City's street homeless survey estimates a 23 percent increase in street homelessness from last year and confirms what we already know - there are more and more New Yorkers sleeping on the streets and in the subway system each night," Patrick Markee, Senior Policy Analyst for the Coalition said in a statement. "Sadly, even this estimate understates the severity of the problem given that the City's survey consistently fails to count many unsheltered homeless people. More needs to be done to provide appropriate housing and services to the growing number of homeless New Yorkers—especially the record numbers of homeless children."

Last November, the Coalition for the Homeless released a report documenting how New York City's homeless shelter population had grown to over 41,000 people—including 17,000 children—by the end of October 2011, the highest number ever recorded. According to that report, homeless families are staying in the municipal shelter system for longer periods, and the percentage of families entering the shelter system who've been homeless before has nearly doubled since 2005, when Mayor Bloomberg ended permanent housing programs for the homeless.

While Bloomberg set a goal in 2004 of reducing both the number of people who sleep on the streets and use the shelter system by two-thirds by 2009, the report released by the Coalition for the Homeless last November found that the total homeless shelter population was 33 percent higher than when Mayor Bloomberg took office; the number of homeless families was 45 percent higher.

Over the years, New York's billionaire mayor has repeatedly demonstrated his indifference to the plight of the city's homeless population and his contempt for the working class as it has been battered by the financial crisis unleashed by Wall Street. Refusing to implement any initiatives to address the underlying causes of homelessness such as poverty, housing costs, unemployment and mental illness, Bloomberg's policies have been directed entirely towards forcing homeless individuals off the streets and out of sight.

Last Spring, the city eliminated the Advantage rent subsidy after it lost state funding for the program. The program was for low-wage workers, who had to pay 30 to 40 percent of their income for housing, with the subsidy making up the rest. Advocates for the homeless warned of a spike in homelessness after the Bloomberg administration immediately stopped admitting new participants. Their warnings proved correct. The Coalition for the Homeless report released last November, showed a 10 percent increase in the number of children in the shelter system between May and October of 2011.

Last year, the Bloomberg administration had also proposed a new policy of asking single adults seeking space in homeless shelters to prove they had no alternative housing in what was clearly a reactionary attempt to discourage homeless individuals from seeking space in the city's shelters. However, last February, a State Supreme Court judge ruled that the administration could not impose the new regulations, siding with the City Council which had filed a lawsuit to block their implementation.

In another failed attempt to limit the number of people in the city's shelters, the administration considered a plan earlier this year that would have required single adults currently living in shelters to return to their last place of residence. In return, the city would have offered furniture and possibly food stamps to residents who agreed to take the individuals back.

According to the proposed policy, if homeless single adults did not return to their former location, they would have been forcibly removed by an officer before becoming eligible for shelter again. And if family members or friends had refused to take back the individuals, homeless shelters would have had the authority to deny them space.

Bloomberg released a budget earlier this month that includes a proposal to cut 160 of the city's youth shelter beds in order to save \$7 million. This is despite the fact that there are only 250 youth shelter beds available in a city with an estimated 4,000 homeless youths.

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