

As 2014 begins, New York City's homeless population continues to grow

By Elliott Vernon
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According to the 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) presented to Congress by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in November, nearly 64,000 people, including 22,000 children, are homeless in New York City.

In 2013, the number of homeless in New York City increased by 13 percent compared to January 2012. New York State led the nation with the largest increase over 2012. These statistics, coming on top of federal cuts to unemployment benefits and food stamps, reveal the increasing misery in the city with the largest number of billionaires on the planet.

A recent report in the *New York Times* describes the city's upsurge in homelessness as "occurring even as the local economy has recovered," as though the phenomenon was paradoxical. But the exacerbation of New York's longstanding housing and homelessness crisis is inevitable, given the policies of the Bloomberg administration and the spiraling inequality that is a feature of daily life in America's largest city.

The economic recovery is a myth for all but the wealthiest. Ninety-five percent of income gains since the 2008 recession have gone to the top 1 percent.

Over its four terms in office, the Bloomberg administration has responded to New York's housing crisis with programs that rely on market forces and tax breaks for real estate developers to incentivize the creation of affordable housing. The failure of these programs is self-evident as the numbers of homeless people continue to break records, rising by 69 percent in 12 years.

Tax abatements for the real estate industry may indeed have created a few relatively affordable housing units, but the hundreds of millions in lost tax revenue provided the City is little more than an excuse for cutting programs designed to help families leave shelters by finding apartments and work. The "affordable" units thus created, meanwhile, are still well beyond the means of the working poor. In some buildings, the minimum income requirement to rent "affordable" apartments exceeds by thousands of dollars the median income in the very neighborhoods in which, and for which, the housing was ostensibly established.

The administration has made matters worse for the growing

homeless population with its well-documented poor management of the public housing system and its complicated homeless services bureaucracy. Bloomberg also discontinued a policy of giving homeless families priority for Section 8 vouchers, and has defunded rental assistance programs.

An increasing number of New Yorkers are barely hanging onto the housing they have. The decline of the real estate market in recent years has not been accompanied by a corresponding decline in rents.

Instead, rents have continued to increase as wages have stagnated. There has been a consequent increase in the numbers of people who are severely rent-burdened, i.e., whose rent and utilities cost half or more of their income.

Some families have resorted to doubling up, and overcrowding has trended upward over the past several years. The poorest borough, the Bronx, has the highest rate of overcrowding. According to the most recent data available from the US Census Bureau, New York has the distinction of being second only to Los Angeles in overcrowding.

There is little reason to expect the housing crisis to improve under the new administration of Democrat Bill de Blasio and his new commissioner of homeless services, Gilbert Taylor, who served in the Bloomberg administration. During his campaign, de Blasio declared his support for requiring developers to dedicate a percentage of space in their buildings to "affordable" housing—the same policy that has failed under Bloomberg. Even if his campaign promises were to come to fruition, it would mean building a pathetic 50,000 new affordable units over a decade.

The Real Estate Board of New York did not spend money to defeat de Blasio, and its president, Steven Spinola, has said, "He's not somebody that there's any reason for us to be frightened of. We've worked with him. We have no reason to believe he won't work with us."

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to people who were seeking shelter at the city's Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) center in the Bronx.

Shanika, a mother of two, has been homeless for two-and-a-half years since she came to New York City from Georgia to stay with her mother, who subsequently lost her section 8 housing subsidy. Shanika last worked in August at

Jamba Juice, but had to quit because of too-frequent appointments with the city's housing authority.

Shanika is caught in a catch-22. The Department of Homeless Services (DHS) insists that she could live with her mother but her mother's Supportive Housing (a government-funded program for the formerly homeless) rules forbid additional people living in her apartment who aren't on the lease.

Shanika has been found ineligible on the basis that she lives with her mother although, in fact, she does not, as demonstrated by documentation including a letter from her mother's Supportive Housing case manager.

This bureaucratic nightmare has been going on since October. "I've been staying out at my aunt's house," Shanika said, "or I have to bounce from house to house to house, with my two-year-old daughter.

"This is the third time I've come here and they found me ineligible for a homeless shelter. My kids miss school because every time they find you ineligible you have to bring everyone who is part of your case, which for me means my kids.

"If I come in after 5:00 PM, we have to be there overnight, which means we are forced to stay in a cold room for the night. Then at 5:30 in the morning we get dropped off back in front of the intake center, even though they don't open for a few hours.

"We are not allowed to bring food into the center, so we can only eat what they give us. This food is terrible, maybe some juice, a disgusting sandwich, or a bagel that is so hard you could chip your tooth on it. It is so bad because they are refreezing already stale food. That is what they are giving to us.

"While they are trying to figure out if you are eligible to stay in a shelter, they put you in a hotel for 10 days. That is a good situation, but I don't understand why the program is wasting money doing this. They should be putting people in apartments or in shelters. Instead they find people ineligible for benefits and when they come back to reapply, they spend another 10 days in the hotel."

Asked about how she got into this situation, Shanika replied, "Last year I had a home that I lived in for five years, but it was condemned because of Hurricane Sandy. The ACS [Administration for Children's Services] said kids couldn't live there. Since I had no one to stay with, it meant I had to become homeless in order to keep my kids.

"They put me on the Child Advantage program and said that it would turn into Section 8 [the federal housing assistance program], but that never happened."

Gesturing to her two-year-old daughter, Shanika said: "All I'm asking for is placement to at least get her out the cold."

Elizabeth Ramos and her husband, Edwin, told us that this was their first time at the intake facility.

"I am placed in a shelter on Grand Concourse, which they wouldn't give me the key to," Elizabeth said. "They were doing construction work, and there is debris in the air. My daughter has asthma. Also, my daughter has kidney disease, so she can't hold her urine. I waited 35 minutes for a security

guard to open the door to enter my apartment.

"I contacted Client Advocacy, and they just moved me to a facility, which is mice-infested, and the beds are all stained."

We asked how long they'd been homeless. "I just lost my apartment in October of this year," Edwin said, not long after he had lost his job as a roofer. "The company died out. They gave us the pink slip, and one thing led to another. I couldn't get unemployment so it was kind of hard to make ends meet. So the only thing we can do is come over here because in Connecticut they don't have shelter systems like out here. I work now. I'm a grill cook. I've done food service for 20 years."

"They downgrade us working people," he said, "even people who are trying to look for work. There are some people out here who are trying to better themselves. But there's always somebody who's bringing them down. So it's a win-lose situation. You have a job, you can't make ends meet.

"I don't have faith in the political institutions. I don't vote for that reason, because they don't help. They make situations worse.

"I do catering events as well. You've got all these political people, doing these little galas for fundraisers. Where is the money they raise going? They're spending \$2,500 on a plate of food.

"It's either you're wealthy, and you get to survive. If you're middle class, you're screwed. You go to the store and you get a loaf of bread, it's close to four dollars, a gallon of milk, five dollars. It's ridiculous. The rent is too high, and the minimum wage is way low."

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