

New York City intensifies assault on the homeless

By Philip Guelpa
30 December 2015

Two years into the administration of New York City's Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, the crisis of housing and homelessness continues to worsen. Reports of the brutal treatment of homeless people on the street and of the appalling conditions of the city's homeless shelters, as well as the continuing critical shortage of genuinely affordable housing, point to the utter failure of the mayor's policies.

In sharp contrast to the prosperity of the city's wealthy elite, who are paying ever-greater prices for luxury residences, the city's homeless population continues to grow. According to the city's own statistics, approximately 58,000 people live in homeless shelters, an increase of roughly 8,000 in the two years since de Blasio's election based on promises to address income inequality. More than one third of the homeless are children. In addition, another 3,000 to 4,000 live "in the rough" (i.e. on the streets, in the subways, in parks, etc.). The US Department of Housing and Urban Development estimate is even higher—75,000 homeless in New York City. These figures represent the highest rates of homelessness since the Great Depression.

The city's response to growing homelessness has included an intensification of its assault on people living on the street. The new policy is termed "aggressive homeless outreach." In what amounts to the creation of an intelligence-gathering unit for the police, mayor de Blasio recently announced a new program, the NYC Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement Street Action Team, or HOME-STAT, that will conduct daily sweeps in a large portion of Manhattan, between Canal Street and 145th Street, to locate people living on the streets.

At the same time, the mayor and police commissioner Bill Bratton have increased the size of the police unit dealing with the homeless by 100 officers. Bratton has stated that he wants to step up the enforcement of "quality of life" infractions (i.e. the harassment of the homeless),

reminiscent of the notorious "Broken Windows" and stop-and-frisk policies. Over the last several months, city police have demolished more than 30 homeless encampments in public spaces such as parks.

Recent news accounts state that the subjects of these assaults report being rousted by police in violent, early morning raids; with all of their belongings, including important documents such as Social Security cards, confiscated and thrown into the trash. One of the victims of such a police attack, Floyd Parks, 61, stated, "Beat cops told us they were operating on orders from downtown that this was an edict from the mayor." The New York Civil Liberties Union has filed a lawsuit against these actions by the city on behalf of three homeless men.

City Comptroller Scott Stringer recently reported that conditions in the city's "cluster sites" homeless shelters, privately owned apartments leased by the city to house homeless families, were "appalling" and remain virtually unchanged nine months after a report by the city's Department of Investigation last March which characterized the shelters as "Dickensian" and called for major changes. The situation at these cluster sites is reportedly even worse than at the city-owned shelters.

Stringer was announcing the results of a new audit, which found that families living in cluster site shelters faced an environment of rats, cockroaches, mold, peeling paint, and broken windows. Other problems included broken faucets and showers, faulty smoke detectors, walls with holes, gas leaks, and blocked fire escapes. The audit found that 87 percent of the apartments that were inspected were unsafe. Furthermore, it concluded that the city has failed in its legal requirement to transition people from shelters to permanent homes, leaving them trapped in these deplorable settings.

The cluster housing program constitutes a substantial giveaway to the city's slumlords. New York's

Department of Investigations cited one example in which the landlord was paid \$95 per night on average, two to three times the market rate for apartments in that neighborhood. Many of these units would otherwise fall under the city's rent regulations. New York currently has 3,079 units of cluster housing.

Homeless advocates and even some city officials have called for the program to be scaled back. Nevertheless, despite these horrendous conditions, the city recently announced that it is proposing to extend four existing cluster housing contracts for another four and a half years, at a cost of \$200 million dollars, with a potential further extension of an additional four years.

In an admission of the failure of his policies, days before the results of the audit were announced, the mayor called for a "top to bottom" review of the Department of Homeless Services following the resignation of its commissioner. De Blasio stated that it would take many years to address the city's homeless problem.

It is a testament to the utter incapacity of capitalism to meet the most basic human needs that the conditions revealed in the city's shelters are reminiscent of those under which the working class of New York City lived a hundred or more years ago, as exposed in Jacob Riis' 1890 *How the Other Half Lives*.

The growth of homelessness in New York City is merely the most visible symptom of the critical lack of affordable housing and the growing impoverishment of a large portion of the city's population. Decades of rising rents, stagnant or declining wages, and attacks on social services have resulted in increasingly difficult living conditions for the working class. In New York, a third of the population earns less than \$35,000 in annual income, and 47 percent pay more than one-third of their income for rent.

During his two years in office, Mayor de Blasio has proposed a hodge-podge of measures intended to incentivize private developers to increase the availability of affordable housing. This approach continues the decades-long trend, under both Democratic and Republican mayors, away from the construction of city-sponsored housing that took place from the 1930s to the 1960s. Instead, there has been a radical change in approach, predicated on the primacy of the real estate industry's right to make profits and, as a consequence, to focus on higher end residences. This has created an artificial shortage of affordable housing, resulting in a dramatic increase in rents and real estate prices.

One of the mayor's recent proposals is based on the

rezoning of poor neighborhoods, allowing the construction of more and taller buildings to encourage private development, while requiring the inclusion of a limited number of supposedly affordable housing units. The proposal, dubbed "mandatory inclusionary housing," has been heavily criticized for using a formula to calculate "affordability" that would cut out a large proportion of current residents. It has been characterized as being little more than city-sponsored gentrification, a boon to the city's real estate developers.

The proposal is so unpopular that most of the city's 59 community boards have rejected it, as have four of the five borough presidents. The city's own comptroller has estimated that the first targeted neighborhood, East New York in Brooklyn, could suffer the displacement of nearly 50,000 current residents because they would no longer be able to afford the rent.

Fundamentally, the city's approach to the crisis of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing is predicated on advancing the interests of the private real estate industry at the expense of the city's residents. The scale of the problem may be gauged by the fact that over the past decade 400,000 affordable housing units have been converted to "market rate" apartments.

According to Tom Agnotti, a professor of urban affairs and planning at the City University of New York's Hunter College, "If [the] government were to build the housing itself with capital funds, it would end up costing government much less than the other schemes which depend on private funding.

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