# A History of Modern Homelessness in New York City

An old saying tells us that "the poor are always with us." However, regardless of the wisdom of that time-worn phrase, it is decidedly untrue about the homeless poor. While homelessness is certainly not a new phenomenon in the United States or in New York City, where it dates back to at least the colonial era, there is no question that modern homelessness is a unique historical occurrence. Indeed, one must go back to the Great Depression to find another period in New York history when homelessness was such a routine, persistent, visible feature of urban life.

From the end of World War II until the late 1970s it was a rare sight, outside of familiar "skid row" precincts like the Bowery, to see New Yorkers sleeping in the streets and other public spaces, or to witness tens of thousands of children and their families cycling each year through emergency shelters and welfare hotels. The question emerges, then: What changed twenty-five years ago? What were the historical causes of modern homelessness, and what can be done now to address the problem?

## The Late 1970s: The Emergence of Modern Homelessness in New York City

The first sign of modern homelessness in New York City was the appearance of thousands of homeless men sleeping in parks, on sidewalks, in transportation terminals, and in other public spaces in the late 1970s. Although historically the city had seen pockets of street homelessness in the Bowery and other "skid row" districts, the sight of homeless adults – many of them men living with mental illness – bedding down on streets became more commonplace throughout the city by the end of the 1970s.[1] At the same time, deaths and injuries among the street homeless also became commonplace. According to City officials, incidents of hypothermia and cold-related deaths and injuries among the homeless were "routine" in the early years of modern homelessness.[2]

At that time there was no legal "right to shelter" for homeless New Yorkers. The City's response to the growing crisis was woefully inadequate. There existed a rudimentary system of emergency shelters which were almost always filled to capacity, particularly in the winter, and thousands of homeless men seeking shelter were forced to turn to the streets. Among the early shelter facilities was Camp LaGuardia, a converted prison in Orange County which had been opened as a temporary residence for "vagrants" during the Great Depression and which sheltered an average of 700 men per night by 1980.[3] The most notorious of the early shelters was the cavernous Municipal Shelter on East Third Street at the Bowery, where conditions were deplorable and tuberculosis and other contagious diseases were commonplace. Indeed, due to the shortage of shelter beds, by the late 1970s as many as 250 men reportedly slept each night in squalid conditions on the floor of the Municipal Shelter's infamous lobby, dubbed the "Big Room."

The City's welfare agency also provided vouchers to some homeless men (called "ticketmen") to allow them to rent cubicles in Bowery lodginghouses. As far back as the 1960s, the City had provided an average of 1,000 such vouchers per day, with the numbers exceeding 1,500 per day in the winter months. However, in the years before the system was phased out in 1977, lengths-of-stay grew longer and vacant rooms became much more difficult to find, in large part due to the demolition of many lodginghouses or their conversion to higher-cost housing.[4]

*Securing the Right to Shelter for Homeless New Yorkers*

In short, with no right to shelter, thousands of homeless New Yorkers each year were forced to fend for themselves on the streets. In 1979 a lawyer named Robert Hayes, who co-founded Coalition for the Homeless, brought a class action lawsuit called *Callahan v. Carey* against the City and State arguing that a constitutional right to shelter existed in New York State. In particular, he pointed to Article XVII of the State Constitution, which declares that "the aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state and by such of its subdivisions…."

Hayes brought the lawsuit on behalf of all homeless men in New York City. The lead plaintiff in the lawsuit, Robert Callahan, was a homeless alcoholic whom Hayes, while commuting to his law firm, had discovered sleeping on the street. In August 1981, after nearly two years of intensive negotiations between the plaintiffs and the government defendants, *Callahan v. Carey* was settled as a consent decree. By entering into the decree, the City and State agreed to provide shelter and board to all homeless men who met the need standard for welfare or who were homeless "by reason of physical, mental, or social dysfunction."[5] Thus the decree established a right to shelter for all homeless men in New York City, and also detailed the minimum standards which the City and State must maintain in shelters, including basic health and safety standards.

In 1983 the right to shelter was extended to homeless women under the *Eldredge v. Koch* lawsuit, also brought by Coalition for the Homeless, and later to homeless families with children by the *McCain* lawsuit, filed by the Legal Aid Society. However, one tragic footnote to the history of the litigation is the fate of Robert Callahan himself. The autumn before the consent decree bearing his name was signed, Callahan died on the streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side while sleeping outdoors. Thus Robert Callahan himself was one of the last victims of an era with no formal right to shelter.

*Roots of Modern Homelessness in New York City:*
*Deinstitutionalization and the Decline of Single-Room Housing*

Why did so many homeless adults, particularly people living with mental illness, appear in such vast numbers on the streets of New York City in the late 1970s? Actually, the roots of modern homelessness can be traced back to dramatic changes in New York City's housing stock, particularly cheap housing for the poor, as well as mental-health policies adopted by the State government as far back as the 1950s.

The most significant single change in New York City's housing stock during the emergence of modern homelessness was the extraordinary reduction in the number of single-room housing units. Since the early part of the century, single-room housing – which includes single-room occupancy (SRO) units and residential hotels, typically with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities – had played an essential role in providing low-cost housing for poor single adults, childless couples, and even families (until regulatory enforcement in the early 1960s prohibited occupancy by families).[6] In the decades following World War II single-room housing continued to be a vital and relatively plentiful source of cheap housing in New York City. In 1960, by one measure, there were approximately 129,000 single-room housing units citywide.[7] By the 1970s, according to researcher Anthony Blackburn, single-room housing had become the "housing of last resort" for poor single adults, many of whom were disabled, elderly, addicts, or ex-inmates.[8]

Single-room housing was also a vital resource for discharged patients of New York State psychiatric centers and hospitals. In the 1950s the State began to adopt a policy of "deinstitutionalization" for thousands of mentally ill patients of State facilities. The policy was adopted largely due to the

development of psychotropic medications and new approaches to providing therapeutic treatment in the community instead of in institutional settings. Deinstitutionalization led to the discharge of tens of thousands of mentally ill individuals from upstate facilities to New York City communities. Between 1965 and 1979 alone, the number of resident patients in State psychiatric centers fell from 85,000 to 27,000 patients, a 68 percent decline.[9] However, the State and local governments failed to invest the enormous savings garnered from hospital closings in community-based housing for people discharged from hospitals, and many deinstitutionalized mentally ill individuals had no alternative but to move into single-room housing.

The single-room housing stock became increasingly regulated, and in 1955 changes in housing codes essentially prohibited the conversion or construction of new for-profit single-room housing; additional provisions of the zoning code made conversion practically impossible.[10] Therefore, after 1955 the number of single-room units had essentially reached a maximum limit, and erosion of this housing stock was inevitable.

In the 1970s the decline of the single-room housing stock accelerated at a tremendous rate due to conversion and demolition. By one measure, the number of single-room units fell from approximately 129,000 in 1960 to just 25,000 in 1978.[11] This erosion was especially rapid in the late 1970s. A 1979 study of "lower-priced hotels" (which included SRO units, residential hotels, and other facilities such as YMCAs) by the City found that the number of permanent residents had fallen from 35,000 to 23,000 between 1975 and 1979, a precipitous decline over a brief period.[12]

Changes in property tax policy played a decisive role in the loss of the single-room housing stock in the late 1970s. In 1975 the City amended a property tax abatement program – which had been created two decades earlier to encourage developers to renovate and upgrade deteriorating buildings, such as warehouses, into residential buildings – to include SROs. Because most SRO buildings were located in areas that were gentrifying, in particular the Upper West Side, owners took advantage of the tax amendment to convert single-room housing to higher-cost rental housing, cooperatives, or condominiums. By the early 1980s, the City was forced to reduce the tax abatement available for SRO conversions. Finally, in 1985, in response to the enormous loss of the SRO stock and the growing homeless population, the City established a temporary moratorium (eventually overturned by State courts) on all SRO conversions and later issued more restrictive procedures for the conversion of SRO housing.[13] Nevertheless, most of New York City's single-room housing stock had already been lost, and it continued to dwindle throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

There is evidence that the decline of single-room housing persisted through the 1990s. From 1991 to 1993 alone, according to one study, there was an 18 percent decrease in the number of single-room housing units in New York City, a drop from 57,000 units to 47,000 units.[14] The largest reductions, as in earlier decades, were among units in commercial hotels and rooming houses, continuing the loss of this low-cost rental housing resource.

## Modern Homelessness through the 1980s: The Growth of Family Homelessness

In 1979, the year that the *Callahan* lawsuit was filed, the daily shelter census was approximately 2,000 persons.[15] By 1982, the year after the consent decree settling the case was signed, the nightly adult shelter population had nearly doubled, and throughout the 1980s the shelter census for homeless single adults skyrocketed. By the end of the decade, more than 9,600 single adults per night (on average) slept

in municipal shelters, and on some winter nights more than 11,000 people sought emergency help in the adult shelter system.[16]

In contrast to the experience of single adults in New York City, rising homelessness among families with children did not appear until the early 1980s. The majority of episodes of family homelessness in the 1970s were relatively brief, although even in the early part of that decade the City had begun temporarily lodging homeless families with children in decrepit welfare hotels. In 1983 an average of 2,100 homeless families per night were sheltered by the City, which then relied almost exclusively on infamous welfare hotels like the Prince George and the Martinique as well as some barracks-style facilities. However, as with the population of homeless adults, the number of homeless families rose rapidly throughout the 1980s. By 1988 there were 5,100 families per night sleeping in the shelter system, comprising 17,400 adults and children.[17] By the late 1980s, two-thirds of homeless New Yorkers residing each night in shelters and welfare hotels were children and their families.

*Advocacy Efforts to Protect the Rights of Homeless New Yorkers*

In the wake of the early court victories securing a right to shelter for homeless New Yorkers, advocacy groups brought additional litigation to ensure basic civil rights and health and safety protections for homeless families and individuals. Coalition for the Homeless brought a landmark lawsuit, *Pitts v. Black*, to ensure the right to vote for homeless New Yorkers, who previously had not been permitted to register to vote. In addition, the Coalition brought litigation to prevent the dumping of mentally ill patients from hospital psychiatric units to the streets and shelters. Additional litigation sought to prevent homelessness among youth who were aging out of foster care. The Coalition also sought to secure medically-appropriate housing and shelter for homeless people living with HIV and AIDS. In the ongoing *McCain* litigation, which had initially secured the right to shelter for homeless families, the Legal Aid Society sought to challenge the dangerous conditions in welfare hotels and to end the City's practice of using barracks-style shelters for homeless families.

These early legal victories were essential in establishing bedrock protections for homeless New Yorkers. But against the backdrop of rising homelessness, and with the courts failing to order the provision of permanent housing assistance, litigation could only accomplish so much. The decade's homeless shelter population peaked in March 1987 with 28,700 children and adults residing in shelters, while thousands more slept rough on city streets.[18] As homelessness increasingly came to be seen as a crisis, it became clear that the structural cause of modern homelessness lay in dramatic shifts in New York City's housing stock and in government's role in providing affordable housing.

*The Widening Affordable Housing Gap in New York City*

Beginning in the 1970s, the most severe problem characterizing New York City housing changed from substandard physical conditions to affordability. In simple terms, from the end of World War II to the 1970s New York City's poorest renter households were badly housed, but they were housed. Afterwards, however, homelessness became a routine feature of the lives of poor New Yorkers and the poorest households were often forced to turn to shelters or the streets. As the 1970s began, the number of poor renter households in New York City actually exceeded the number of low-cost rental units affordable to those renters. By the end of the decade, the situation was reversed, and the affordability gap has widened ever since.

The widening affordable housing gap results from structural changes in New York City's housing markets and economy. Simply put, rents increased at a much faster rate than other consumer prices,

while the incomes of the poorest New York City households actually declined in real terms. As the gap between rents and incomes widened, many families and individuals were pushed out of the housing market altogether or were unable to enter it. In addition, dwindling government housing assistance made it harder for the poorest households to obtain tenant-based subsidies or to access subsidized housing units.

The dimensions of the worsening housing crisis confronting New York City housing from the 1970s to the present is documented in numerous studies and in periodic United States Census Bureau surveys, and can be summarized as follows:[19]

- *Soaring Rents and Stagnant Incomes*. Since 1981 median rents in New York City have increased at nearly twice the rate of inflation. Over the same period, real median incomes (adjusted for inflation) have been stagnant, and the average income of the poorest fifth of New York City households fell by 33 percent from the late 1970s to the late 1990s.
- *Falling Housing Production*. In the 1990s New York City produced less than one half the number of new housing units each year than it did in the 1970s – around 8,000 new units per year in the 1990s compared with more than 17,000 per year in the 1970s.
- *Loss of Low-Cost Apartments*. From 1990 to 2000, New York City lost over 510,000 apartments with monthly gross rents (i.e., rent plus utilities) under $500, representing the loss of more than half of all low-cost units.
- *Severe Rent Burdens*. Rent burdens – i.e., the portion of household income devoted to housing expenses – have worsened dramatically in the past three decades. In 1999 more than 500,000 renter households paid more than half of their income for housing, representing 27 percent of all New York City renters.
- *Overcrowding*. From 1978 to 1999 the number of crowded apartments increased by 71 percent. Throughout the 1990s, there were more than 200,000 doubled-up households at any given time in New York City.
- *Severe Housing Problems among Black and Latino Renters*. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the median renter incomes of black and Latino renters were more than one-third lower than those of white renters, and black and Latino renters were much more likely to suffer from severe housing problems.
- *The Widening Affordable Housing Gap*. In 1970 the number of low-cost apartments in New York City actually exceeded the number of extremely-low-income renter households (i.e., those earning below 30 percent of area median income) by more than 270,000 units. By the late 1990s, there was a net shortfall of more than half a million available low-cost apartments for very-low-income households (i.e., those earning less than 50 percent of area median income).

*Reductions in Government Housing Assistance*

Severe cutbacks in government housing investments and assistance have played a major role in shaping New York City's worsening housing problems. Government plays a crucial role in the housing market, through production, regulation, and direct assistance provided to low-income households. Since the 1970s the Federal, State, and City governments have substantially abandoned their traditional role in financing the development of new housing and providing vital housing assistance for the poorest households. These changes can be summarized as follows:

- *Reductions in Federal Housing Assistance*. Cutbacks in Federal housing assistance since the 1970s have resulted in 40 percent fewer new Section 8 vouchers being provided each year to needy

households in New York City. From 1976 to 1979, the Federal government assisted 361,500 new affordable housing units nationwide, compared to just 98,700 new units from 1981 to 1989.

- *Threats to Publicly-Assisted Housing*. Expirations of subsidies and recent legislation have reduced the stock of public housing and Federally-subsidized apartments. By the end of the 1990s New York City was at risk of losing 30,000 Federally-subsidized apartments due to expirations, and poor households lost access to as many as 10,000 public housing apartments due to restrictive new admissions rules.
- *Declining City and State Housing Investments*. Beginning in the 1950s, the Mitchell-Lama program produced 125,000 new affordable apartments in New York City, but had expired by the end of the 1970s. Under the Giuliani Administration, the City reduced real capital investments (adjusted for inflation) in housing by 40 percent compared to the previous mayoral administration.
- *Declining Value of Welfare Housing Allowances*. Welfare housing allowances – which provide vital housing assistance to tens of thousands of poor households annually – have lost more than 50 percent of their real value since 1975, at the same time that median gross rents have increased by more than one-third in real terms.

*Rising Income Inequality and Modern Homelessness*

Another important factor behind the widening affordable housing gap in New York City is growing income inequality and its impact on the housing market. A landmark study of the relationship between income inequality, housing markets, and homelessness was conducted by economist Brendan O'Flaherty, who analyzed homelessness and housing in six large cities in industrialized countries (including New York City).[20]

O'Flaherty argues that a shrinking middle class leads to less housing construction, less low-cost housing, and more homelessness. As income distribution becomes more unequal and the size of the middle class shrinks, there are significant changes in housing markets. This occurs for several reasons, but perhaps the most important is this: The housing occupied by middle-class households becomes, over time, the housing occupied by poor households. Thus, as the middle-class shrinks, fewer housing units are constructed for the middle class and, over time, fewer housing units become available to poor renters. As this occurs, demand, and hence prices, for low-rent housing increases, further shrinking the number of low-cost housing units.

O'Flaherty summarizes his argument in this way: ""[I]ncome inequality is behind the increased homelessness in North America. Income inequality went up the most in those cities with the most severe homelessness. In cities where poor people get most of their housing from richer people, a smaller middle class means a smaller supply of housing for the poor, and this in turn makes bad housing more expensive so that fewer poor people buy into it."[21] One major result is that homelessness rises.

In New York the trend towards more unequal income distribution between 1970 and 1980 was the greatest among the six cities in the O'Flaherty study, and growing income inequality in New York City continued through 1990.[22] In addition, the share of New York City families and individuals living in extreme poverty (i.e., earning below 75 percent of the Federal poverty line) rose substantially in the 1970s.[23]

Thus, on a structural level, modern homelessness was largely the result of changes in New York City's housing markets triggered by rising income inequality. According O'Flaherty's analysis, homelessness increased more in New York City than elsewhere because its rate of income inequality was higher than those in other large cities. As a result, the number of housing units produced for the shrinking middle

class – which, over time, becomes housing for poor households – declined, driving up prices at the bottom end of the housing market. The consequence is that thousands of households were literally pushed out of the housing market and became homeless.

## The Late 1980s and Early 1990s: Declining Homelessness and Successful Housing Initiatives

At the close of the 1980s, a series of ambitious housing initiatives launched by the City and State resulted in dramatic reductions in New York City's homeless population. The centerpiece of these efforts was the Koch Administration's 1986 "Housing New York" initiative, a ten-year, $5.2 billion capital investment plan that created or rehabilitated 150,000 affordable apartments citywide, with fully 10 percent of the apartments targeted to homeless households.

Thousands of homeless families were relocated to new apartments produced under the Koch housing plan; indeed, in the early years of the initiative, an average of 3,700 apartments were produced annually for homeless people.[24] As a result the number of homeless families in the shelter system declined dramatically from 1988 through 1990, falling from 5,100 to 3,600 families per night, a 29 percent decline.[25]

During the early 1990s the single-adult shelter census also fell by 37 percent, from an average of 9,300 people per night in 1989 to 6,100 per night in 1994, a low not seen since 1983.[26] At the same time, the population of street homeless individuals declined dramatically, with street homelessness much less visible by the mid-1990s. The major cause of this remarkable decline was the construction of several thousand units of supportive housing as part of the New York/New York Agreement, a joint State-City initiative begun in 1990 to create housing with on-site support services for mentally ill homeless individuals. In addition, in the late 1980s the Koch Administration had embarked on a plan to renovate and construct other supportive SROs for homeless individuals. Another major factor was the provision of supplemental housing assistance to individuals living with HIV/AIDS; in the early 1990s, in the wake of litigation brought by Coalition for the Homeless, the City began providing rental assistance and supportive housing to an increasing number of individuals and families with AIDS.

## The Early 1990s to the Present: Record Homelessness, and New Research and Advocacy on Long-Term Solutions

Thus, in the early 1990s New York City had already experienced remarkable declines in homelessness as a result of ambitious housing investment initiatives. Unfortunately, while service providers, advocates, and researchers would build on this record of success during subsequent years, government again slashed spending on housing assistance throughout the 1990s. The result was persistently high homelessness throughout the 1990s, reaching all-time record numbers by 2001.

### *Homeless Single Adults: Renewed Growth in Homelessness, and New Research on Demographics*

From the mid-1990s to the present the population of homeless single adults in shelters and on the streets began to rise again, largely as a result of cutbacks in supportive housing in the second half of the decade. After 1994 – at the same time that nearly all of the supportive housing units created under the New York/New York Agreement had been completed and vacancy rates for supportive housing began to plummet – the single adult census rose again, from an average of 6,100 people per night in 1994 to 7,700 people per night in 2002, a 27 percent increase.[27] In addition to the municipal shelter population,

by 2002 more than 1,500 homeless single adults turned each night to private shelter accommodations through churches, synagogues, or drop-in centers. And, while New York City's street homeless population has never been measured with any accuracy, soup kitchens and outreach teams reported that the population of homeless people sleeping outdoors began to rise at the end of the 1990s. In short, by the winter of 2002-2003 there were more homeless single adults in New York City than at any time since before the New York/New York Agreement was signed.

The large majority of homeless single adults are men, although the homeless single women's population has increased at a much greater rate since the early 1980s than the men's population; in 2002 women comprised 23 percent of the single adult shelter census, compared with 11 percent in 1982. Blacks and Latinos are disproportionately represented among homeless single adults; an analysis of all homeless adults (including parents and adults in families) who utilized the municipal shelter system from 1988 through 1992 found that 62 percent were black and 24 percent were Latino, while only 8 percent were white.[28]

Homeless single adults have higher rates of serious medical problems, chronic mental illness, and addiction problems than adult members of homeless families. Estimates of the incidence of chronic mental illness among the single adult shelter population range from 40 to 50 percent on an average day, although the incidence for all shelter users over several years is much lower. Similarly, estimates of the incidence of addiction problems among homeless individuals in the municipal shelter system range from one third to one half on an average day.

Street homeless adults have even higher rates of chronic mental illness, addiction problems, and co-existing psychiatric and substance abuse disorders. A 1996 survey of street homeless individuals who utilized drop-in centers found that 69 percent had a history of mental illness.[29] According to the same survey, 78 percent of those surveyed had a history of substance abuse, while 48 percent had both a history of substance abuse and a mental illness.

Landmark research on the different patterns of shelter utilization has provided important insights into the varying characteristics of sub-populations of homeless single adults. In addition, it has pointed towards effective long-term solutions for those various sub-populations. One important study, by Randall Kuhn and Dennis P. Culhane, was based on New York City shelter database information and analyzed patterns of shelter utilization for 73,000 single adults who resided in the municipal shelter system during the period 1992-1995.[30] Among the major findings of the report were that the vast majority of single adults utilizing the shelter system did so for relatively brief, one-time stays, while a smaller cohort of homeless adults, characterized by long-term stays, utilized the most shelter resources.

The Kuhn and Culhane study identified three major categories of shelter users and compared the patterns of utilization with information about medical problems, substance abuse history, and mental illness. Because the data analyzed involved self-reporting about mental health, addiction, and medical problems, Kuhn and Culhane considered it likely that it under-represented the actual incidence of those problems.

- *Transitional shelter users*. "Transitional" shelter users were by far the largest category, representing 81 percent of all clients. This category was characterized by short and infrequent, usually one-time, stays, and utilized only 35 percent of shelter resources (i.e., "shelter days"). Transitional users also had the lowest incidence of medical, mental health, and addiction problems.
- *Episodic shelter users*. "Episodic" shelter users, who represented 9 percent of all clients, nevertheless had frequent, although brief, shelter stays. While the average length-of-stay per episode

of homelessness was relatively brief (54 days), over the three-year period episodic users utilized shelters for an average of 264 days and utilized 18 percent of shelter resources. Episodic users reported a higher incidence of health and mental health problems, and 40 percent reported a history of substance abuse problems.

- *Chronic shelter users*. Finally, "chronic" shelter users represented 10 percent of all clients, but consumed by far the most shelter resources – chronic users consumed 47 percent of all "shelter days." Chronic shelter users were characterized by very long (average stays of 638 days over the three-year period) and relatively infrequent shelter stays (i.e., one or two long shelter stays over the three-year period). Unsurprisingly, this group was also characterized by the highest rates of disability – 15 percent of chronic users reported that they had a mental illness, while 24 percent reported serious medical problems. (However, it must be noted again that the self-reported data understates the incidence of these problems.)

The Kuhn and Culhane study confirmed what had been known anecdotally for years – that there is a group of long-term shelter residents who have high rates of disability and who are in need of more intensive services, but who represent a small share of the total adult population using shelters over time. For most chronic shelter users, permanent housing with on-site services is the most appropriate and effective long-term solution. The "episodic" shelter users, on the other hand, may utilize shelters between stays in rooming houses, in hospitals, in jails, or on the streets, and may also require supportive housing as well as additional services. For many episodic shelter users, what is required are discharge linkages with other institutions (e.g., correctional facilities or hospitals) and access to stable affordable housing and housing assistance to prevent episodes of homelessness.

Finally, eight out of ten shelter users who access shelters over time reside in the shelter system for relatively brief, one-time stays. For this sub-population, homelessness results primarily from external economic factors – evictions, unemployment, and a shortage of affordable rental housing for the working poor. Thus, for the vast majority of individuals utilizing the shelter system, housing assistance is the most appropriate and effective means of addressing homelessness.

*Homeless Children and Families:*
*Dramatic Increase in the Shelter Population, and the Impact of Severe Housing Problems*

After declining from the late 1980s, the population of homeless families rose again during the early 1990s economic recession and then remained at high levels throughout the decade. However, from 1998 through 2002 the family shelter population skyrocketed, eventually reaching all-time record levels. The family shelter population more than doubled, growing from 4,400 families sheltered nightly at the beginning of 1998 to 9,100 families (comprising 30,000 children and adults) lodged nightly at the end of 2002.[31]

Dramatic cutbacks in targeted housing assistance in the second half of the 1990s were the major cause of rising homelessness among families. Under the Giuliani Administration, the number of total housing placements from the family shelter system was reduced by 34 percent, from 5,466 in 1994 to 3,614 in 2002.[32] The largest reduction in housing assistance came among City-funded apartments like those that successfully re-housed thousands of homeless families under the Koch housing plan. Compared to some 3,700 such apartments constructed annually in the early 1990s, in 2002 the City produced fewer than 300 new apartments for homeless families.[33]

The majority of homeless families are single-parent, female-headed households, with an average family size of three persons. Over a five-year period (1988-1992) approximately 63 percent of homeless

families were black, 32 percent were Latino, 3 percent were Asian or other race, and 2 percent were white.[34] In the 1990s homeless parents were younger than in the 1980s. According to one survey, the average age of homeless heads of households in New York City fell from 35 years in 1987 to 22 years in 1992. According to the same survey, 43 percent of homeless parents in New York City had a history of domestic violence, and 20 percent had been in foster care when they were children.[35]

As noted above, homeless New Yorkers have been disproportionately black or Latino. Some 61 percent of homeless children who resided in the shelter system over a five-year period were black and 31 percent were Latino, while only 3 percent were white. According to an analysis of the City's shelter client database and New York City population data, over that same five-year period (1988-1992) nearly one out of every ten black children and one of every twenty Latino children in New York City utilized the municipal shelter system, compared to one of every 200 white children.[36]

A survey of newly-homeless families, conducted in 1997 by researcher Anna Lou Dehavenon at the City's Emergency Assistance Unit intake center in the Bronx, found that only 6 percent of newly-homeless parents were employed. The remaining 94 percent either were receiving public assistance (sometimes in combination with child support or another public benefit), were in the application waiting period for public assistance, or were receiving disability benefits.[37]

The same survey of newly-homeless families found that, prior to seeking shelter, 46 percent had left a doubled-up living arrangement due to overcrowding. Another 17 percent of families had been evicted from their own apartments, the vast majority in non-payment proceedings. Domestic violence or other life-threatening violence was cited by 8 percent of families as their immediate reason for seeking shelter. Finally, 5 percent of families were forced to seek shelter due to unlivable physical conditions in their own housing.[38]

A landmark study of the previous addresses of homeless families revealed that the vast majority hailed from the New York City neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of poverty and severe housing problems. The study, which analyzed previous addresses for all homeless families from 1987 through 1994, found that 61 percent had previously resided in four neighborhoods: Harlem (15 percent of the total), the South Bronx (25 percent), and the Bedford-Stuyvesant and East New York neighborhoods (21 percent combined).[39] The analysis – which looked at census tract data on household, economic, and housing characteristics – found high statistical correlations between the number of homeless families and the poverty and unemployment rates, the ratio of female-headed households with children, the rent burden ratio (i.e., the portion of household income devoted to rent), the ratio of boarded-up buildings, the housing vacancy rate, and overcrowding.

Additional academic studies from the 1990s concluded that subsidized housing is the most successful type of re-housing assistance for homeless families, and that it dramatically reduces subsequent episodes of homelessness. A five-year study of homeless families relocated from shelters to housing, published by New York University researchers in 1998, found that 80 percent of homeless families placed into subsidized housing remained stably housed (i.e., were still in their initial apartments one year later), and 92 percent were in their own apartments. In contrast, among families who left shelters but did not receive subsidized housing placements, only 18 percent were stably housed, and only 38 percent were in their own apartments.[40]

A similar study, utilizing data from the City's homeless client database, found that families who left the shelter system "on their own" or to unknown housing arrangements were the most likely to have subsequent episodes of homelessness. In contrast, families that received Federal housing subsidies had

return rates that were less than a third of the rate for families who found their own housing, and families placed into City-funded apartments had return rates that were half of those of families who found their own housing.[41] Subsidized housing placements therefore substantially reduced subsequent episodes of homelessness among formerly-homeless families.

## The Current Crisis: Record Homelessness and Renewed Attacks on New York City's Right to Shelter

By the end of 2002 New York City's homeless shelter population stood at all-time record levels. More than 38,000 New Yorkers, including 16,600 children, bedded down each night in the municipal shelter system, compared to 30,000 a year earlier and 28,700 in the peak year of the 1980s. The rapid increase in New York City's homeless population in recent years has been nothing less than startling. The numbers of homeless children and families have doubled over a four-year period, with families growing to comprise nearly 80 percent of the shelter population. In addition, street homelessness was more visible than it had been in a decade, while the number of homeless single adults in shelters had reached the highest levels since 1990. Thus, a quarter-century into the era of modern homelessness, more New Yorkers were in need of emergency shelter than at any time since the Great Depression.

Recent years also witnessed renewed attacks on the legal right to shelter for homeless New Yorkers, a basic protection secured two decades earlier. Since 1979, when the *Callahan* lawsuit was first filed, more than half a million homeless men, women, and children in New York City have been provided with vital emergency shelter because of the legacy of that landmark litigation. In addition, injuries and death from exposure and hypothermia were much less frequent than before the *Callahan* decree was signed. However, in the twentieth-anniversary year of *Callahan*, and at a time when homelessness was again on the rise, then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani proposed a plan to eject homeless families and individuals from shelters. State courts blocked the plan but, two years later, Mayor Michael Bloomberg declared his intention to appeal those court rulings and pursue a plan to eject homeless families and individuals from shelters to the streets.

### *Defending the Right to Shelter for Homeless New Yorkers*

The recent skirmishes over the right to shelter arose as a result of a 1995 State regulation promulgated by Governor George Pataki at the request of then-Mayor Giuliani. The regulation would force localities to eject homeless families and individuals from shelters for a minimum of 30 days if the household failed to comply with administrative rules and social service plans. In October 1999, the Giuliani Administration announced its intention to implement the shelter termination regulation and also require shelter residents to perform workfare assignments in exchange for shelter. Under the proposed plan, homeless families and individuals who failed to comply with new welfare and shelter rules would be ejected from shelters, and children of ejected families would be placed into foster care.

Coalition for the Homeless and the Legal Aid Society led the legal challenge to the Giuliani plan, while dozens of New York City organizations mobilized to oppose the plan. In December 1999, on the twentieth anniversary of the first court ruling in *Callahan v. Carey*, thousands of New Yorkers rallied in Union Square Park to protest the Giuliani Administration's homeless policy. Shelter providers, advocates, religious leaders, civic groups, and elected officials publicly opposed the Giuliani Administration's plan, and joined a rapidly organized "Campaign to Save the Right to Shelter."

Responding to the legal challenges, in February 2000 State Supreme Court Justice Stanley Sklar issued a ruling in *Callahan* prohibiting the City from implementing the State shelter termination regulation. The

strongly-worded decision affirmed the importance of the *Callahan* decree in preventing the death and injury of homeless individuals. Moreover, it recognized the dangers inherent in the Giuliani Administration's proposal to link the welfare system to the provision of emergency shelter for homeless New Yorkers, and to deny shelter to all homeless people who have a welfare sanction or case closing. As Justice Sklar wrote about the City's plan, "bureaucratic error is as much a part of bureaucracy, as human error is a part of life." Therefore, his decision continued, "the simple bureaucratic error which might send an individual out into the street, because he or she was unable to understand or cooperate with these requirements, might be the error which results in that individual's death by exposure, death by violence, or death by sheer neglect. The risk is simply too great to take." Justice Sklar's decision concluded with this powerful statement: "If [the City and State] defendants sincerely want to create a system in which our homeless citizens can rejoin, and contribute to society, as is evident, they should do so by means which do not endanger those very persons. The court is confident that such a goal can be accomplished. This was, in fact, the goal of the Consent Decree, and still is."[42] Similar rulings in *McCain* and related litigations also blocked the City's plan for homeless families and children.

Unfortunately, the Giuliani Administration declared its intention to appeal the court decisions and to move forward with its plan to deny shelter to many homeless families and individuals. Indeed, in December 2001, only weeks before leaving office, then-Mayor Giuliani filed a notice of appeal of the February 2000 decision in *Callahan*, giving the incoming Bloomberg Administration less than nine months to decide whether or not to pursue the appeal.

In June 2002 the *New York Times* reported that "Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg will appeal a state court ruling that barred the Giuliani administration from ejecting homeless families from shelters and putting their children in foster care…. Linda I. Gibbs, Mr. Bloomberg's commissioner for homeless services, called the appeal 'critical in achieving the kind of goals we want to achieve.'"[43] That same day, the New York City Department of Homeless Services released a new strategic plan that also declared Mayor Bloomberg's intention to move forward with a plan to eject homeless families and individuals from shelters under the State shelter termination regulations. Although the Bloomberg plan did not include linking shelter termination to welfare eligibility, it mandated compliance with shelter rules and social service plans as a condition for receiving emergency shelter, and also denied shelter to sanctioned families and individuals for at least 30 days. Under the proposal, sanctioned families could also have their children removed from their custody and placed into a form of foster care. The Bloomberg Administration announced its plan despite opposition from shelter providers and religious leaders; the *New York Times* article quoted Fred Shack, president of an association of family shelter providers, saying "The idea of discharging families to the streets we believe is unacceptable."

Fortunately, in January 2003 the City and the Legal Aid Society announced a settlement agreement that preserved the right to shelter for homeless families with children, effectively removing the threat that families would be ejected from shelters and children separated from their parents. Nevertheless, the Bloomberg Administration continued to pursue its appeal of the Court order blocking the ejection of homeless single adults from shelters to the streets, despite numerous requests from elected officials, religious leaders, and shelter providers to withdraw the appeal. As of this writing, the Bloomberg shelter-ejection plan is before the appellate courts awaiting a ruling.

*Shifts in New York City Housing Policy Amidst Record Homelessness*

With New York City's homeless shelter population at all-time record levels and growing, and reports that street homelessness was on the rise, the Bloomberg Administration took some tentative first steps to revive City commitments to providing affordable housing. In June 2002 the administration re-allocated

existing Federal housing resources, including rental vouchers and public housing apartments, to assist a much larger number of homeless families, effectively reversing the Giuliani-era policy of reducing such assistance. And in December 2002 Mayor Bloomberg announced an ambitious five-year plan to create or preserve 65,500 affordable housing units. While the Bloomberg plan contained only limited resources for homeless households – around 4 percent of the apartments were targeted to homeless New Yorkers, compared to 10 percent under the Koch Administration's ten-year plan – the initiative represented a first step towards addressing New York city's worsening housing crisis.

Nevertheless, enormous challenges remained. Amidst a lingering economic recession, Census Bureau data documented a worsening shortage of affordable housing and the accumulated effects of years of cutbacks in government housing programs. Advocates, service providers, and homeless people continued to mobilize for effective, housing-based solutions to the problem of homelessness. Dozens of New York organizations joined a "Campaign for a New York/New York III Agreement" to urge the renewal of the successful State-City initiative to provide housing with services for homeless individuals living with mental illness.[44] And more than 200 New York City organizations – including banks, real estate groups, religious congregations, housing organizations, and social service agencies – formed the "Housing First!" campaign in 2001 to advocate for a new ten-year plan to create and preserved 185,000 affordable homes.

These campaigns delivered a common message, bolstered by landmark academic research and the experience of declining homelessness in the late 1980s and early 1990s: Homelessness can be successfully reduced though affordable and supportive housing assistance, and the solutions are often as cheap or cheaper than the alternative approach of shelter and emergency care. A quarter-century after the emergence of modern homelessness, it a message more urgent than ever.

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[1] A comprehensive history of homelessness in the United States (including a wealth of information about New York City) before the modern era can be found in Kusmer, Kenneth (2002), *Down and Out, on the Road: The Homeless in American History* (Oxford University Press, 2002), as well as Hopper, Kim (2003), *Reckoning with Homelessness* (Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 25-56.
[2] New York State Supreme Court, *Callahan v. Carey*, City defendants' expert medical testimony (1999).
[3] O'Flaherty, Brendan (1996), *Making Room: The Economics of Homelessness* (Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 57-59.
[4] O'Flaherty (1996), pp. 48-51.
[5] New York State Supreme Court, *Callahan v. Carey*, Final judgment by consent (August 1981). Available at http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org.
[6] Blackburn, Anthony J. (1986), *Single Room Occupancy in New York City* (New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, January 1986), pp. 1-1 through 1-8. SRO buildings were primarily converted old- and new-law tenement buildings, whose units were subdivided during the 1930s.
[7] Blackburn (1986), p. 2-5. Note that this figure, from the United State's Census Bureau's triennial Housing and Vacancy Survey, used a constrained definition of single-room housing units that almost certainly underestimated the actual number of single-room units.
[8] Blackburn (1986), p. 1-5.
[9] Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government (1998), *New York State Statistical Yearbook* (Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 1998), Table K-5. Data are for the respective State fiscal years.
[10] O'Flaherty (1996), pp. 175-176.
[11] Blackburn, (1986), p. 2-3. These figures are based on Housing and Vacancy Survey data for units classified as "SRO-type" or "Single Room Occupancy," and exclude rooming houses and transient hotels where at least 25 percent of units were used for transient occupancy. After 1978 the Housing and Vacancy Survey changed the categories it used to collect data on single-room housing.

[12] Blackburn, (1986), pp. 2-1 through 2-3.
[13] Hoch, Charles, and Robert A. Slayton (1989), *New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel* (Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 239-240.
[14] Blackburn, Anthony J. (1996), *Single Room Living in New York City* (New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, September 1996), p. 15. This study utilizes a very broad definition of single-room units, including Class A SROs, rooming houses, so-called transient hotels, and, in some instances, supportive SRO housing.
[15] O'Flaherty (1996), p. 58.
[16] New York City Human Resources Administration, shelter census reports.
[17] New York City Human Resources Administration, shelter census reports.
[18] The United States Census Bureau's decennial census in 1990 attempted to enumerate the number of homeless people sleeping outdoors. In a very flawed count – which by some accounts may have missed as many as 45 percent of the unsheltered homeless – the Census Bureau reported approximately 10,000 people sleeping in public spaces in New York City.
[19] Data in this section is drawn from the triennial Housing and Vacancy Survey, conducted by the United States Bureau of the Census. A comprehensive analysis of this data can be found in Coalition for the Homeless, *Housing a Growing City: New York's Bust in Boom Times* (New York, July 2000), also available at http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org.
[20] O'Flaherty (1996).
[21] O'Flaherty (1996), p. 3.
[22] O'Flaherty (1996), pp. 128-132. O'Flaherty analyzed income distribution histogram slopes and found that the slope for New York City in 1980 was the "flattest" (i.e., the ratio of middle-class to poor households was the lowest) of the six cities in the study.
[23] O'Flaherty (1996), pp. 132-135. O'Flaherty argues that a city's share of poor and extremely-poor households is a factor in causing mass homelessness, but is not as important as income inequality.
[24] City of New York, *Mayor's Management Report* (various years).
[25] New York City Human Resources Administration, shelter census reports.
[26] New York City Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports.
[27] New York City Human Resources Administration and Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports.
[28] Culhane, Dennis P., Edmund F. Dejaowski, Julie Ibanez, Elizabeth Needham, and Irene Macchia (1998), "Public Shelter Admission Rates in Philadelphia and New York City: The Implication of Turnover for Sheltered Population Counts," in *Housing Policy Debate* (Volume 5, Number 2, 1998, pp. 107-140), Table 3. Available at http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd_0502_culhane.pdf.
[29] Barrow, Susan M., and Gloria Soto (1996), *Closer to Home: An Evaluation of Interim Housing for Homeless Adults* (Corporation for Supportive Housing, August 1996), p. 25. Available at http://www.csh.org.
[30] Kuhn, Randall, and Dennis P. Culhane (1998), "Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from Analysis of Administrative Data," in *American Journal of Community Psychology* (Volume 26, Number 2, 1998).
[31] New York City Department of Homeless Services, shelter census reports.
[32] City of New York, *Mayor's Management Report* (various years). Figures are for City fiscal years (July 1st-June 30th).
[33] City of New York, *Mayor's Management Report* (various years). Figures are for City fiscal years.
[34] Culhane *et al* (1998), Table 3.
[35] da Costa Nuñez, Ralph (1996), *The New Poverty: Homeless Families in America* (Insight Books, 1996), Table 1.
[36] Culhane *et al* (1998), Table 3.
[37] Dehavenon, Anna Lou (1998), *Charles Dickens Meets Franz Kafka in 1997: How the Giuliani Administration Flouted Court Orders and Abused Homeless Families and Children* (Action Research Project on Hunger, Homelessness and Family Health, November 1998), p. 24.
[38] Dehavenon (1998), pp. 25-29.
[39] Culhane, Dennis P., Chang-Moo Lee, and Susan M. Wachter (1996), "Where the Homeless Come From: A Study of the Prior Address Distribution of Families Admitted to Public Shelters in New York City and Philadelphia," in *Housing Policy Debate* (Volume 7, Number 2, 1996, pp. 327-360), p. 340. Available at http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd_0702_culhane.pdf.
[40] Shinn, Marybeth, Beth C. Weitzman, Daniela Stojanavic, James R. Knickman, Lucila Jimenez, Lisa Duchon, Susan James, and David H. Krantz (1998), "Predictors of Homelessness Among Families in New York City: From Shelter Request to Housing Stability," in *American Journal of Public Health* (Volume 88, Number 11, November 1998, pp. 1651-1657), p. 1654.
[41] Wong, Yin L.I., Dennis P. Culhane, and Randall S. Kuhn (1997), "Predictors of Exit and Re-Entry among Family Shelter Users in New York City," in *Social Services Review* (Volume 7, Number 3, 1997, pp. 441-462).
[42] New York State Supreme Court, *Callahan v. Carey*, Decision (February 2000). Available at http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org.
[43] *New York Times*, "Bloomberg to Fight Ban on Shelter Evictions" (June 19, 2002).
[44] A "New York/New York II Agreement" was signed by Governor Pataki and Mayor Giuliani in 1999 after more than a year of mobilization by advocates, mental health organizations, and supportive housing providers. However, the agreement provided only 1,500 units of supportive housing over five years, only a fraction of the need for 10,000 units cited in a New York City Department of Mental Health report. When the agreement was announced, advocates, homeless people, and providers staged a protest rally at Governor Pataki's midtown Manhattan office blasting the agreement as too little, too late.