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Should the next mayor allow homeless families to move to the top of the waiting list for housing vouchers or public housing?

In recent months, the homeless population in New York City has reached its highest level since the Great Depression. While the city and state have adopted a variety of strategies to house the homeless, the growth of the population shows that much more needs to be done to assist homeless households seeking to move from shelter to permanent housing.



WHY IT MATTERS

In recent months, the homeless population in New York City has reached its highest level since the Great Depression.¹ While the city and state have adopted a variety of strategies to house the homeless, the growth of the population shows that much more needs to be done to assist homeless households seeking to move from shelter to permanent housing.

THE BASICS

According to the New York City Department of Homeless Services, 49,184 individuals spent the night in the New York City shelter system on August 6, 2013.² This included 9,870 single adults, 18,284 adults in families, and 21,030 children. The 2013 NYC Street Survey, conducted on January 28, 2013, counted an additional 3,180 unsheltered individuals citywide,³ for an estimated total of over 50,000⁴ homeless individuals on a given night in 2013. Figure 1 shows how the nightly shelter population in New York City has changed over the past 30 years.

In October 2004, the Bloomberg Administration ended the practice the three previous mayoral administrations had followed of giving homeless families priority for receiving

housing assistance.⁵ The administration's justifications for the change included both the limited supply of vouchers and public housing units and concerns that the practice encouraged some families to deliberately enter the shelter system to receive priority for vouchers and public housing. The city instead began providing a short-term rental subsidy to help families transition out of the shelter system. The second incarnation of that program, called Advantage, was terminated, however, in March 2011 following budget and policy disputes with the State of New York.⁶

Homeless advocates propose reinstating priority status for homeless families applying for public housing or housing choice vouchers. Several candidates for New York City mayor have endorsed this approach. Currently, priority for housing choice vouchers is given to victims of domestic violence and to families for whom lack of permanent housing is the "primary barrier" preventing reunification with children in foster care.⁷ NYCHA gives priority for public housing units to these same groups plus youth aging out of foster care, and intimidated witnesses.⁸ NYCHA also gives working families a preference for public housing.⁹

1 Markee, P. (2013). *State of the Homeless 2013*. Retrieved from <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/state-of-the-homeless-2013>

2 New York City Department of Homeless Services. (2013). *Daily Report, 8/7/2013*. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/dailyreport.pdf> (on file with the Furman Center)

3 New York City Department of Homeless Services. (2013). *HOPE 2013: The NYC Street Survey* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/downloads/pdf/hope_2013_web_presentation.pdf

4 The Street Survey has been criticized for undercounting the number of unsheltered individuals in the city, so this may understate the actual total.

5 Bosman, J. (2009, April 22). Bloomberg policy blamed for families in shelters. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/>

6 Secret, M. (2011, May 31). Clock ticks for a key homeless program. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/>

7 Office of the New York City Public Advocate. (2013). *Section 8 - Housing Choice Voucher Program*. Retrieved from <http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/housing-guide/A/1>

8 Office of the New York City Public Advocate. (2013). *Affordable Housing*. Retrieved from <http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/housing-guide/B/>; New York City Administration for Children's Services. (2013). *Housing Support Services*. Retrieved from http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/html/support_families/housing.shtml#3

9 New York City Housing Authority. *Applying for Public Housing*. Retrieved from http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/assistance/working_family_pref.shtml



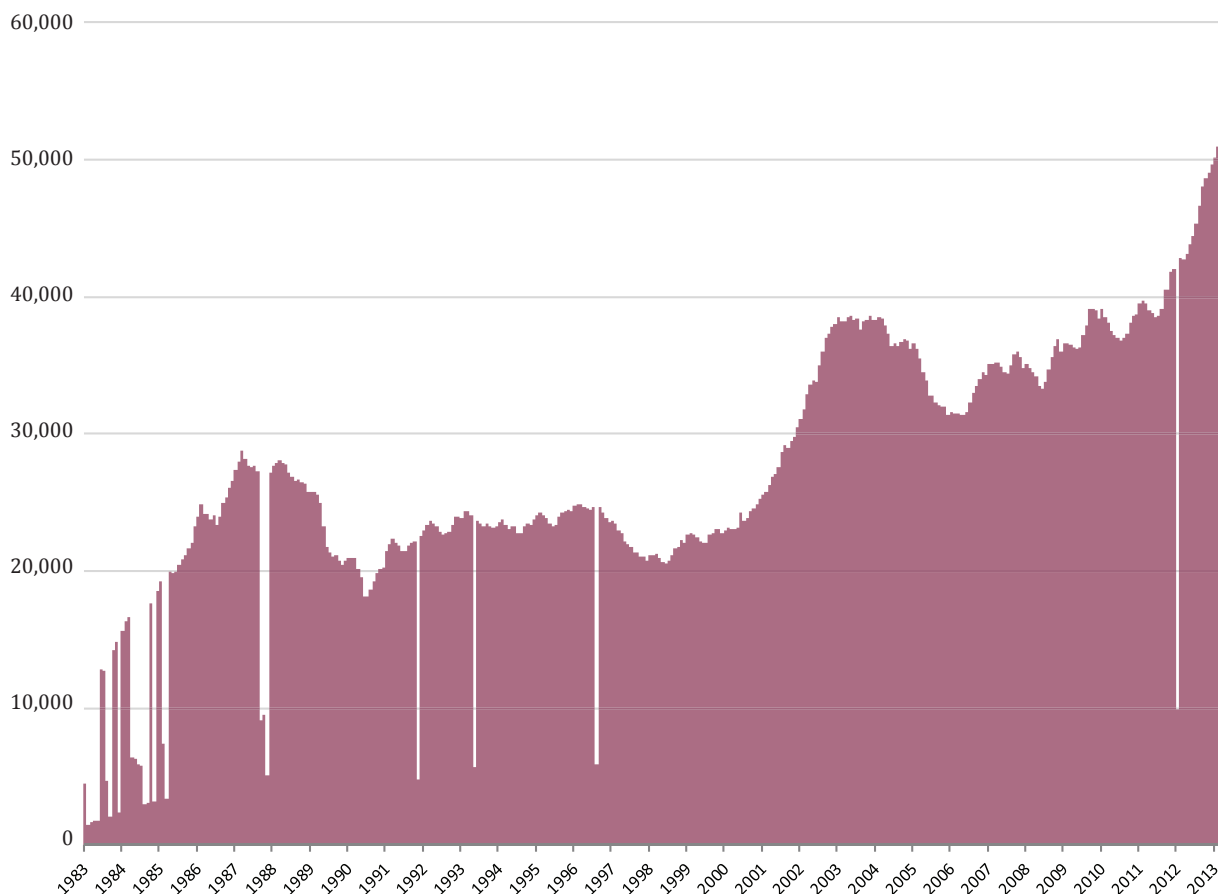
QUESTIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

Homelessness in New York City has reached crisis levels, and many of the mayoral candidates have said they support policies to help homeless individuals and families transition to permanent housing. Recent policy discussions have focused on prioritization for federal subsidies. However, the number of vouchers and public housing units that become available in any given year is nowhere near enough to house all the families currently

in shelters. NYCHA reported a public housing turnover rate of 3.04% in 2012,¹⁰ which would make just over 5,000 units of conventional public housing available each year. The turnover rate for vouchers is similarly low, and federal funding shortfalls, compounded by the federal budget sequester, puts even the availability of

¹⁰ New York City Housing Authority. (2013). *About NYCHA Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/about/factsheet.shtml>

FIGURE 1: New York City Nightly Shelter Population, 1983-2013



Source: Coalition for the Homeless (using data from New York City Department of Homeless Services, New York City Human Resources Administration, and NYCStat shelter census reports)*

* Coalition for the Homeless. (2013). *New York City Homeless Shelter Population, 1983-Present*. Retrieved from http://coalhome.3cdn.net/jfa876dd2296ef791b_4rm6i64oh.pdf



this small number of vouchers at risk.¹¹ With a homeless population of approximately 50,000, the vouchers and public housing units available don't come close to meeting the need.

Moreover, there are many non-homeless individuals and families competing for these limited spaces. The New York Times recently reported that the waiting list for public housing had grown to 227,000 in July 2013, with wait times ranging from three months to many years.¹² And the populations listed above also receive priority. As a result, the number of individuals entering public housing from shelters shrank from 1,600 in 2004 to 100 in 2012.¹³

Critics of granting a priority for shelter residents contend that such a priority may create incentives for people to leave undesirable living situations (where they are doubled up, for example) to enter a shelter when they otherwise would not. The Bloomberg Administration cited a decline in shelter applications following the announcement of the end of the Advantage program as evidence for this theory.¹⁴ Supporters of giving priority

to shelter residents countered that this decline was a seasonal fluctuation and that moving into shelters remains the last resort for struggling individuals and families.¹⁵

Some researchers point out that the debate often assumes that the homeless population is monolithic, and that any priority would have to be given to shelter residents across the board. But the research indicates that most homeless families are homeless because of income problems, just like the many other families on the waiting list for public housing or vouchers, while a much smaller group of families have other serious barriers to stable housing, such as disabilities. The city's policy about priorities should distinguish between these populations and their differential needs.

But, as was discussed above, even if the priority policy is adopted (whether for all shelter residents or just for those at most risk of extended homelessness), it will come nowhere close to meeting the housing needs of the city's homeless population.¹⁶ Other policies that aim to reduce the number of households who enter the shelter system in the first place are also essential. For example, the next administration may want to expand the Homebase Community Prevention Program, which studies suggest has been effective in reducing the number of shelter entrants.¹⁷

11 In its 2012 analysis of a city council proposal to reinstate preference for homeless families for vouchers and public housing, the Independent Budget Office reported that vouchers are not likely to be available for a year or two because of federal funding constraints. When and if they do become available, according to NYCHA, there would be 4,500 vouchers total turning over in a year. Champeny, A., New York City Independent Budget Office. (2012, June 14). Letter to Patrick Markee, Coalition for the Homeless. Retrieved from <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/dhspriorityletter61412.pdf>

12 Navarro, M. (2013, July 23). 227,000 names on list vie for rare vacancies in City's public housing. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/>

13 Navarro, M. (2013).

14 Secret, M. (2011).

15 Secret, M. (2011).

16 It is also important to note that some households will not qualify because they will be eliminated by NYCHA's eligibility rules.

17 Rolston, H., Geyer, J., and Locke, G. (2013). *Evaluation of the Homebase Community Prevention Program: Final Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.abtassociates.com/Reports/2013/Evaluation-of-the-Homebase-Community-Prevention-Praspx>



In short, meaningfully reducing the city's homeless population will require both an influx of resources and creative thinking that goes well beyond the question of whether or not to give all or some shelter residents priority for NYCHA housing subsidies. It will also require a significant commitment from the state, which is a critical partner in homelessness prevention and shelter programs because of the large share

of the funding for these programs that comes from the state budget. Accordingly, candidates for mayor should be pressed for specifics not only about their views on the priority issue, but also about the other strategies they think are most viable to reduce the swelling ranks of the homeless.