

COVID-19: Not the only scourge

by Phillip W. Weiss

The COVID-19 virus is not the only problem confronting New York City. There is another problem, more insidious and intractable, that continues to plague the city: homelessness. While the city along with the rest of country is undergoing rapid sociological changes, one feature of the city remains impervious to all change: homelessness.

The COVID-19 virus has inaugurated a period of rapid and unprecedented change. Old rules of social conduct are giving way to new rules. Old forms of economic organization are giving way to new forms of economic organization. Confronted by rapid sociological change and an eroding economy, elected officials are under tremendous pressure to act to protect the public. However, all their herculean efforts hit a brick wall, the brick wall of homelessness.

Compared to the homelessness problem, solving the coronavirus problem will be a cinch. Thus far the homelessness problem has defied all solutions. No strategy – punitive, financial, social - works. The availability of shelters and outreach services has failed to make a dent in the problem. Legislation to provide financial assistance and subsidized housing has failed to reduce the homeless population in the street.

In New York City, the homeless can be found just about everywhere. They are now a ubiquitous feature of the New York City landscape. They occupy parks and sidewalks located in some of the most affluent neighborhoods in the world. They can be found in subways and train stations too. It is impossible not to

notice them. Why homeless people are in the street in the first place is a matter for speculation. Debating over the “why” of homelessness merely distracts from the issue. No explanation offers a clue to ways to effectively deal with that population. It is enough just to know that they have planted themselves in front of someone’s apartment building, or someone’s business, or on a park bench, or under a construction shed.

The coronavirus has not had made the slightest dent in the homelessness problem. The coronavirus has not caused the homeless to flee from the streets into shelters. Just opposite is the case. Despite the lockdown, the homeless are situated in practically every neighborhood. For the homeless, government directives to shelter-in-place or maintain six-foot distance are meaningless. For the homeless, exhortations to help others are equally meaningless; they have nothing to give. While the mayor of New York City threatens to arrest people for violating COVID-19 restrictions, the city allows the homeless to remain in the street – and subways and parks - in defiance of the very same rules that the mayor wants to enforce against others. By failing to equally enforce the law, the city has conceded the streets to the homeless.

It is easy to forget that in the life of every homeless person, even the most bedraggled and disheveled amongst them, there was once a period of time when, for even a brief moment, the homeless person was not homeless. Every homeless person started out life with a mother and father; all were once young innocent children. Along the way something awful must have happened to derail their lives

and drive them to the street. What the something was that happened to them no longer matters. The damage has been done and it is irreversible.

If the City of New York applied the same level of diligence to dealing with homelessness as it has with shutting down and wrecking the economy, the streets would be cleared of the homeless in one day if not sooner. But in the current political climate that promotes partisanship over what is best for the entire community, that would be expecting too much. So, it is likely that homelessness will continue to be a part of the New York City scene for the foreseeable future if not forever.

Pics of homeless persons in midtown Manhattan, April 2020.



Pics by Phillip W. Weiss

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