

GLEAMING NEW AIRPORTS WON'T HELP HOMELESS NEW YORKERS

BY BOB HENNELLY | JANUARY 11, 2017 |



*Gov. Andrew Cuomo gives a speech for the Association for a Better New York.
(Governor's Office)*

It was a stark contrast at the Midtown Hilton last week: Inside the grand ballroom New York's business and political elites were convened at an Association for a Better New York lunch listening to Gov. Andrew Cuomo. He was pitching his \$100 billion infrastructure plan that includes reimagining the state's airports with world-class amenities. It was a warmup for this week's start to his State of the State speeches.

Outside on the sidewalk, Marc Greenberg with the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing made an impassioned plea over a megaphone for Cuomo to follow through on a year-old commitment to fund 20,000 supportive housing units for New York's most vulnerable population.

"You really want to make a better New York? Release that \$1 billion for 6,000 units over the next five years for supportive housing. We are here for those 20,000 families that the governor made a promise to," Greenberg said to a crowd of several dozen supporters. They chanted, "We will not be going away. We are here to stay."

A year ago, Greenberg was one of the signatories on a letter that more than 280 clergy members from all faiths wrote to Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio entreating them to take concrete steps to deal with the homelessness crisis. The problem has only gotten worse since they sent that letter.

"With 60,000 people in New York City homeless today, and 80,000 statewide – and given that only one out of six of the 20,000 approved applicants for supportive housing annually actually receive a housing placement due to the severe lack of available units, it is imperative that we all work together to establish a new city/state supportive housing agreement that fully funds the creation of 35,000 supportive housing units throughout New York state," the clergy members wrote.

Inside the Hilton's grand ballroom, the homelessness and affordable housing crises may as well have been happening on another, much-less-fortunate planet. But at both the ABNY event and Cuomo's subsequent State of State speeches this week, he talked about a New York in economic rebound where the middle class could be preserved. All would be well as long as the subways were gleaming and you were guaranteed a one-seat ride on the train to the airport for your flight to Paris or Dubai.

But what he seems to not appreciate is that for many New Yorkers, his efforts to preserve their middle-class status comes a number of years too late.

Now, thanks to a new, detailed analysis of the economic conditions in all 62 of New York's counties from the United Way, we know just how pronounced the level of economic insecurity has become for working-class households across the state. This is the State of the State for folks that, for too long, have been ignored because they are no longer in the politically appealing middle class.

The United Way developed county-by-county metrics to identify the cohort of households that exist above the federal poverty line, but still struggle to get by with no financial reserves to buttress them from a health or personal crisis. The United Way's acronym for these households is ALICE: asset limited, income constrained and employed.

In contrast to the federal definition of poverty, the ALICE matrix includes local costs to find housing, buy food, use transportation, provide child care, access health care and pay taxes. These numbers can vary widely, even within the same state. The project has conducted comprehensive research in Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. New York's report is among the latest group to be published.

Overall, 44 percent of New York households either are living below the established poverty line or are defined as marginal households within the ALICE cohort, living paycheck to paycheck. In the five boroughs, the data is even more alarming and paints a picture of a 21st-century feudalism with a perilous tipping point that may be a more emergent threat to our society than our crowded highways and subways.

Consider that according to the latest United Way data for the city's five boroughs, the combined categories of those living below poverty or living paycheck to paycheck account for 71 percent of households in the Bronx, 56 percent in Brooklyn, 50 percent in Queens, 42 percent in Staten Island and 35 percent in Manhattan. It should come as no surprise that New York City represents the widest contrast between counties in terms of wealth disparity in the state. In New York City, the United Way data indicates that 51 percent of the households are either living in poverty (20 percent) or in the struggling ALICE category (31 percent). In Buffalo, Rochester, Schenectady, Syracuse, and Utica, more than 60 percent fall into these struggling cohorts. For these families, rising rents exact a heavy price.

Back before the 2016 presidential primary City & State did a county-by-county analysis of U.S. Census Bureau poverty data for New York. That story found that, in addition to the traditional pockets of poverty in upstate cities and places like the Bronx, suburban and rural communities were also grappling with rising poverty and household income insecurity. Since the 1970s, there has been a daily economic decline for an increasing percentage of the families that

call the state home.

In the years since the late Mario Cuomo was governor, 58 of the state's 62 counties have seen a rise in the percentage of adults in poverty. Also, 59 counties saw a jump in the percentage of children living in poverty. In the aggregate, the state's adult poverty rate went from 13 percent in 1989 to 15.4 percent, according to the most recent data available. Childhood poverty rose from 18.8 percent to 22.6 percent over the same 25-year period. In some neighborhoods, childhood poverty approaches and even exceeds 50 percent.

In April, the data indicated the only three places that posted a decline in both childhood and adult poverty rates were Essex County, Manhattan and Brooklyn. In both Essex and Brooklyn, the decline was negligible, dropping less than a full percentage point over 25 years. Manhattan's poverty percentage dropped from 20.5 percent in 1989 to 11.7 percent in 2014. The borough's incidence of childhood poverty declined even more dramatically, from 35.9 percent in 1989 to 23.5 percent in 2014.

But the improvement in Manhattan is not a reason to celebrate. "That Manhattan poverty decline was the result of people being forced out by high rents," said James Parrott, chief economist at the Fiscal Policy Institute. "One of the things we have been looking at is the sky-high incidence of childhood poverty ... in places like Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo, where in some places it is above 50 percent."

As the United Way documents, this post-Great Recession squeeze play is even more acute now here in New York. This crisis of affordability that forces families from shelter to the street, or into marginal conditions, is having real generational consequences. So many of its victims are children.

If this does not give us a sense of fierce urgency now, nothing will. Making sure that Kennedy Airport can handle increased traffic decades from now is important, but decent housing for the children of the Empire State must be a more pressing concern.

Bob Hennelly is an award-winning investigative journalist and a contributor to Salon. Follow him @stucknation.