

State of the Planet

VIEWPOINTS

SUSTAINABILITY

New York City's Recovery Will Be Built on Our Resiliency and Ingenuity

BY STEVE COHEN | MAY 2, 2022

I've seen New York City fall and rise and now stumble. Over the past several years, we've been pounded a bit, but nothing resembles the 1980s and early 1990s. This analysis is based on personal observation. I am one of those people easily recognizable as a New Yorker. And I love New York City and root for its people and places. Except for the 1970s and a couple of years in the 1980s, I've spent most of my life in New York City. Growing up, I worked summers for a bicycle company, a locksmith and a recording studio and took the subway to "the city" to get to work. Wherever I went, I was surrounded by the energy, work ethic and incredible diversity of New York's people and places. That has continued for decades. I've constantly witnessed the challenges and opportunities posed by this amazing city.

We are again in a tough situation. Our new mayor is trying to figure out some way to address crime, homelessness and unemployment while keeping morale up and selling his vision of a safe and welcoming city. This past weekend he held a strategy session with the NYPD's precinct commanders. Looking for creative strategies to end this crime wave. As *NY1's* Dean Meminger reported:

"According to a source, tables in the auditorium in police headquarters were put into a large square so every commander could participate in the discussion, and no one was taken to task. Since the meeting was called for a Saturday afternoon, many commanders feared they would be grilled about crime and violence in the neighborhoods they are responsible for keeping safe, but according to people who attended the meeting, Adams broke the ice by asking each commander if they were a Yankees or Mets fan. 'It was hard to get the mic because so many people wanted to speak,' said the commander who wanted to remain anonymous. 'The mayor listened more than he spoke. He really wanted to hear our ideas.'"

Amazing, a politician who knows how to listen, and a manager who seems to know how to manage. Even arranging the room so people feel empowered to participate....

New York City is a place built on crowding people together, and we are now trying to recover from over two years of social distancing. The city's traditional land use pattern of business districts separated from residential neighborhoods is being upended by folks working by Zoom from home. New York has adapted before. Manhattan was once filled with garment factories that were converted into residential and commercial spaces. Columbia University has an administrative building called the Studebaker Building which once housed an auto factory. Wall Street used to be empty on Sundays, but now one sees baby strollers and dog walkers as people moved in and made a new neighborhood. All of this will happen again.

While hate-crimes, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia are part of New York's landscape, so too is tolerance and a culture that delegitimizes intolerance. Very few New Yorkers can say their family lived here more than a century ago. Our elite turns over on a regular basis. Many newcomers to New York have a tough time of it but find support from family, friends and communities that speak their language and lend a hand. People soon learn that New York City is not a single place but a collection of neighborhoods, each with a distinct character and ambiance.

A great danger to the city's future is not its ability to attract people, but its affordability because, in some ways, it is too attractive. The process of gentrification may well be unstoppable, and so the only way to maintain the economic diversity necessary for a vibrant city is to get back to the business of building public housing. Of course, we can't even think about doing that until we rehabilitate our decaying public housing whose 400,000 residents have been neglected for decades. The current strategy of requiring affordable housing set-asides in exchange for allowing luxury developers to build larger buildings is fine in theory but hasn't been implemented successfully.

Much recent attention has been paid to homeless individuals on the subways and in makeshift encampments, but a far more profound problem is the number of homeless families and children in New York City. In February 2022, there were 60,732 people living in New York City's homeless shelters. Estimates vary, but at least 25,000 of our homeless are children. According to the [Family Homeless Coalition](#):

"Almost 70% of New York City homeless shelter users are families with children. The Department of Homeless Services shelters house more than 13,000 families with over 22,000 children. At least 1,500 additional families with another approximate 2,800 children and youth use shelters operated by HRA, DYCD, and HPD[1]. Homelessness is traumatic for everyone but especially for children because of the long-term negative impacts it has on their physical and mental health, education, and the likelihood they will experience homelessness as an adult...The average length of shelter stays for homeless families is well over a year."

There is no more innocent victim than a homeless child. My friend and long-time colleague Ralph Nunez wrote an insightful essay on family homelessness in the *Gotham Gazette* last week. Based on more than three decades of experience working on family homelessness, Nunez divides the homeless family population into three groups. The first are families that have fallen on hard times, but with a helping hand can be brought out of homelessness. The second is young, mainly female single parents with little work experience but, if given extensive support, job readiness, training and education, might could find their way out of poverty and homelessness. And the third, he terms "chronically homeless:"

"Many are survivors of domestic violence, experience mental health or substance abuse issues, are typically older, and experience multiple episodes of homelessness. These are the chronic users of the shelter system..."

According to Nunez:

"With three different groups, the one-size-fits-all policies of "housing first" will never work. Instead, the homeless family population must be triaged for short-, intermediate-, and long-term stays, and serviced within a different kind of shelter in tandem with policies targeted to their specific needs."

Given the need for services as well as housing, he proposed the construction of community centers that would provide social services both for local residents and homeless families. Instead of segregating all homeless people from community life, he calls for a more integrated, community-based approach. Nunez observed that these:

"...would be actual community centers with a transitional homeless residential component and a mandate to provide comprehensive job training and employment services; adult and youth educational programs; and child care and health care, among other supports, to meet not only the needs of homeless residents, but also those of the whole community at large."

This approach is more in synch with New York City's traditional approach to lending a helping hand to those in need. It also means that homeless families will receive that helping hand side by side with neighbors who are not homeless. Communities are not asked to site a homeless shelter, but a community center that includes temporary housing for people in need.

We need a creative and redesigned approach to homelessness, and we need a similar approach to address crime. Mayor Adams is correct when he connects public safety to public morale and our economic revival. As a former police officer, he ran for office promising to focus on public safety and New York is in the midst of a crime surge. In a recent *Politico* post Erin Durkin and Sally Goldenberg wrote that:

"Though most agree it is too early for Adams' policies to take effect, major crime is up by 44 percent... compared to the same period last year. Shootings, which doubled last year compared to 2019 levels, are up another 14 percent this year. Robberies have increased by 47 percent, burglaries by 31

percent, and assaults by 19 percent. Murder is the only major crime to have fallen, by 9 percent. Crime is up in every borough and across the city's subway system and public housing complexes."

While Mayor Adams searches for the correct formula, everyday New Yorkers continue to return to the subway and streets while demonstrating the resiliency for which they are famous. New Yorkers are also capable of great empathy, bravery, and quick thinking. When a deranged man started shooting an automatic weapon at a subway stop in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, MTA employees and subway riders helped those who were injured and prevented a horrible situation from getting even worse. Miraculously, no one died from the attack, and by the next day, the subway returned to normal operations.

I am confident that the post-pandemic New York will be different than the city of 2019, but we will come back and resume our role as the global capital we were pre-pandemic. There is no shortage of challenges, but as before, the diversity, work ethic, ingenuity and resiliency of our people will ensure success. This diverse and intense city has the brainpower and motivation to engineer a comeback. We did it before and we will do it again.

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