

Extreme Flooding Reveals New York's Rising Homelessness Crisis

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Vito Montalto's wife of 20 years was sleeping with another man. Montalto's child, a teenage boy on the autistic spectrum, had been removed from his home and sent to live with a relative. His sister, ten years younger than him, had two kids and a dog and "didn't have the room."

The 44-year-old packed his motorbike with some essentials—a toothbrush, a camping kit—and drove the short distance from his then-home in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn to Brighton Beach. On the boardwalk, Montalto found an overhang to protect him from the rain, and then, a few other homeless—to protect him from the rest of the world—and slept.

"It took one year and 45 days to build the Empire State Building. What would it take the city to put up one shack?" asked Montalto on Wednesday. "One day. It'll take one day."

Montalto, who was "homeless on purpose last year," is part of a growing crisis in New York City. As of August, [over 100,000 homeless were recorded in the city's shelter population](#)—a record number. Yet as the number of homeless continues to rise, increasingly common severe weather events are compromising their safety. Last Friday, [a unprecedented eight inches of rain fell in Queens—usually the equivalent of two months of rain](#). Subway stations and public parkswere quickly inundated with water.

Governor Kathy Hochul declared the incident a ["life-threatening rainfall event."](#)

"I just ended up sitting in a parking lot and working on my laptop for hours because there was nowhere else to go," said Jennifer Smith of Our Lady of Angels, a food-service pantry run out of Bay Ridge, of the storm last week.

Videos and photos depicting the brunt of the storm have quickly circulated on social media: cars with their hazard lights on, marooned within flooded intersections; young men piggybacking older New Yorkers through waist-high water; a red Nissan crushed by a tree.

Yet Bay Ridge resident John Frouland, 54, who has been homeless for six years also said the impact of the storm was minimal. "I'm an outdoorsmen. I'm not afraid of the weather. I've lived in the park for years," he said last week.

The homeless know what to do during times of extreme weather, said Frouland. People will go to cafes, or to movie theatres, and stay as long as they can. They'll ride the bus all day. Froulandbelieves the city is "making it worse than it is."

Professor Dennis P. Culhane of the University of Pennsylvania disagrees. “Much of this country experiences extreme hot, extreme cold, and extreme rain. There should be a contingency plan for the homeless,” said the Dana and Andrew Stone Chair in Social Policy. “There is not. I can tell you this.”

Critics say [New York City is finally seeing the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). A mixture of rising house prices, unaffordable rental units, and a nation leering from opioid dependency is in part to blame for the increase in homelessness. Then, of course, there’s the high unemployment rate. [In 2018 and 2019, Brooklyn and the neighboring boroughs of Queens and Manhattan enjoyed an unemployment rate average between one and four percent. By 2021, this number had risen to an average of 17 percent across the same boroughs.](#)

It was around 2019 that Bay Ridge homeless resident Denis Dugan lost his “best friend”—his father—and then shortly thereafter, a roof over his head.

“We’re viewed as a scrounge that needs to be washed away—not people.”