

The Subway Was Their Refuge on Cold Nights. Now It's

New York City's homeless population has faced a particularly brutal winter as coronavirus indoor public spaces closed.



1 more account



By Christina Goldbaum

Feb. 8, 2021

On a piercingly cold December night, a handful of homeless passengers sought refuge on heated subway trains rumbling deep into Brooklyn. But when they arrived at the end of the line just after 1 a.m., those riders awoke to a grim reality: The subway was shutting down and they would have to leave.

Some slipped out of the Stillwell Avenue Station and disappeared into the shadows of nearby buildings in search of a safe place to sleep. Others slumped onto a bus stop bench, burying their heads and hands deep inside puffy winter coats to brace against the frigid temperatures from the ocean, steps away, in Coney Island.

A few simply refused to leave the station, prompting police officers to drag them out.



Since last spring, when New York City subways were ordered shut from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. for disinfection, many homeless people have lost their safe haven. *Jonah Markowitz for The New York Times*

For decades, the city's sprawling subway system has offered a shelter of last resort for thousands of homeless New Yorkers. Particularly during the winter months, many who are wary of the city's often crowded and sometimes violent shelters descend into the system from the parks and streets above, seeking sanctuary in its round-the-clock trains.

But last spring, when the pandemic ripped through New York and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo mandated that the city's famously 24-hour subway system be shut down overnight for disinfection, that safe haven vanished.

Now, homeless people living on the streets are confronting a dangerous mix of winter weather and a lack of indoor public spaces — like subway stations, trains and fast-food restaurants — that once offered a respite each night.

"I've tried everything, everything, but there is nowhere else to go," said Justin MacDonald, 66, who became homeless last spring after losing his job as an office cleaner. With the subway no longer an option, he has been spending nights on the Staten Island Ferry, which is operated by the city and continues to run its 25-minute trips in each direction overnight. Also, the ferry is free.

"You can't sleep, you just have to sit there," he said. "But at least it's warm on the ferry, as opposed to the street."



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“There is nowhere else to go,” said Justin MacDonald, 66, who spends his nights on the Staten Island Ferry because it has continued to operate overnight. [Jonah Markowitz for The New York Times](#)

In response to the subway shutdown, the city has ramped up its outreach program, deploying a small army of workers to try to coax people into shelters. New York, unlike most other American cities, is required under a decades-old court order to provide emergency shelter to anyone with no place to stay.

But those on the streets or in the subway today tend to be the least open to the city’s services, outreach workers say, creating a particularly precarious situation since the pandemic ripped away the informal social safety nets on which many homeless people relied.

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The 24-hour diners and fast-food restaurants that doubled at night as heated havens for those with a few dollars to spare have largely been closed for indoor dining since March. Friends and family, whose couches or spare rooms are often a landing pad for recently homeless people, have been wary of allowing anyone from outside their household to stay with them for fear of contracting the virus.

At the same time, the city’s unemployment rate reached its highest level in nearly half a century in May, and thousands of low-wage New Yorkers became even more susceptible to homelessness — a troubling development in a city where the number of single, homeless adults had reached record highs even before the pandemic.

“Every winter we prepare for an increased number of single adults seeking shelter,” said Steven Banks, commissioner of the New York City Human Resources Administration, which oversees homeless services. “Particularly this winter, as the subway shut down and other pandemic restrictions continue, we have made sure more specialized beds are available.”

Since the beginning of December, the city has opened 125 new beds in specialized shelters and will add 175 more by mid-February, according to the agency.



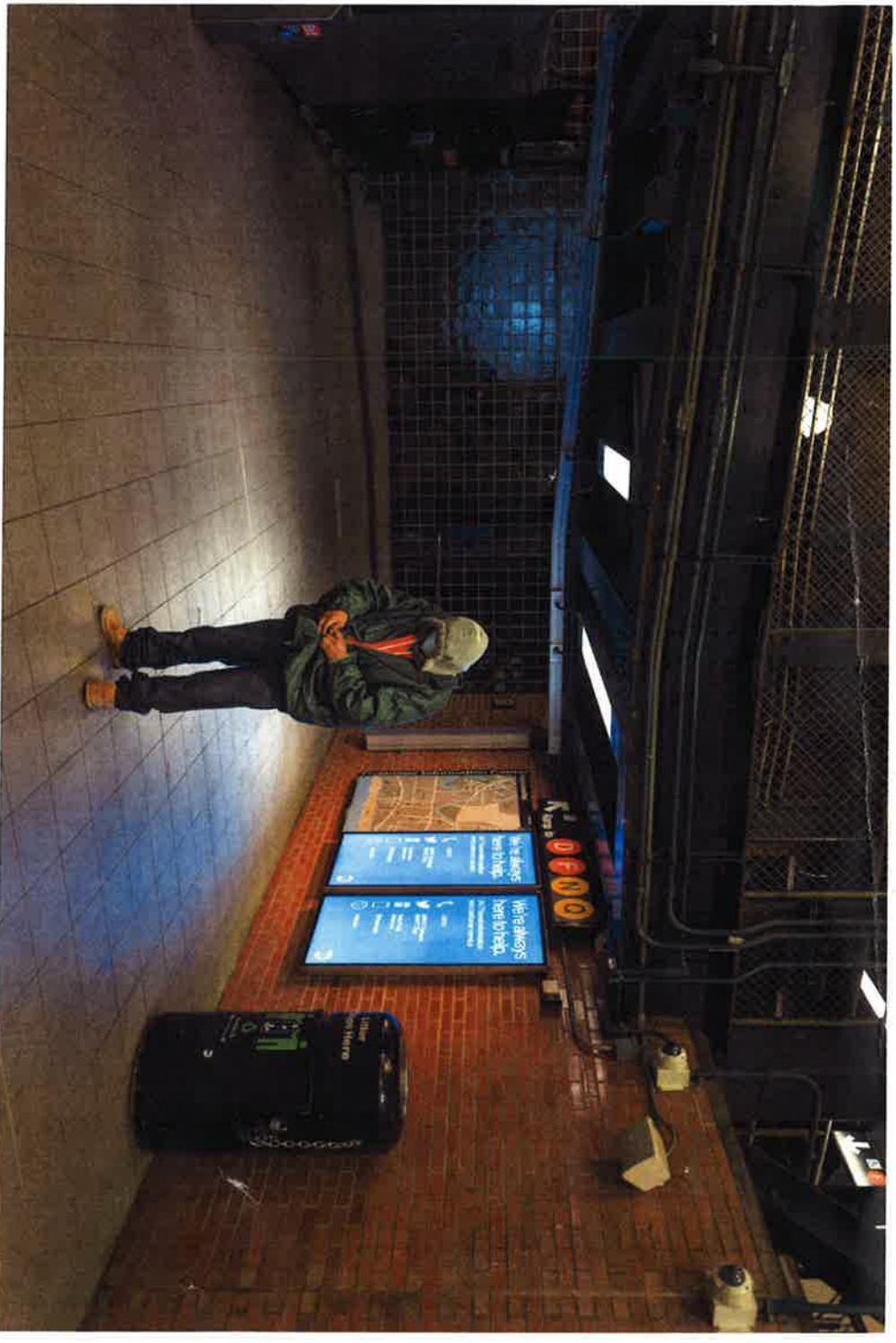
Marvin Robertson, 56, who used to sleep on the subway, is now staying at a specialized shelter in Queens that offers private or shared rooms. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

But data from the subway outreach program suggests that specialized shelters can work: Since May, just 29 percent of people who went from a subway station to a traditional shelter decided to spend the night. Of those taken to a stabilization bed, 66 percent remained for the night.

“The city has said that all people who live on the streets are ‘service resistant’ and don’t want to come inside,” said Josh Dean, executive director of Human.nyc, a policy organization that focuses on homelessness. “The big takeaway here is that people do want to come inside, they just need the right offer.”

One night at the Stillwell Avenue Station, Luis Mananas, 65, leaned against a wall as he waited for an outreach worker.

Since the day-wage construction work he relied on dried up last summer and he could no longer afford his rent in a shared Brooklyn apartment he began sleeping on the streets of Brooklyn. When it got colder he turned to the train. At first, he assumed he would have to spend the nightly 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. shutdown outside.



¹In the hotel I had my own bed, my own space," Luis Mananas, 65, said of his stay at a specialized shelter in Queens. Markowitz for The New York Times



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But on his first night on the train recently, he met outreach workers who placed him in a hotel in Queens. He has since returned to the station every night to be taken back to that hotel.

"It's difficult these days," he said. "But in the hotel I had my own bed, my own space, I have privacy. Others have not been as fortunate in their interactions with the city's outreach teams."



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At the beginning of the subway shutdown, Larry Hammonds, 59, and his wife, Patricia Hammonds, 59, were on the subway in Brooklyn, where they were greeted by outreach workers and agreed to board a bus to a shelter in the Bronx. But when they arrived there around 3 a.m., the shelter's beds were full and they spent the night sitting in a crowded hallway, he said.

"After that I said I'm not riding the train until the end of the line," said Mr. Hammonds, who has been homeless for most of the last decade.



"This winter is just impossible," said Larry Hammonds, 59, who along with his wife has been seeking shelter at the West Fourth Street-Washington Square Station. Jonah Markowitz for The New York Times

Around 12:30 a.m. one recent night, the couple huddled around a wooden bench in the West Fourth Street-Washington Square Station with a few other homeless people, chatting and piling their plastic bags of belongings onto a bench as the last trains of the night rolled by.

After disavowing the end-of-the-line outreach, Mr. and Ms. Hammonds had tried to stay in the Times Square-Port Authority Station, but were kicked out by police officers as the nightly shutdown went into effect, he said.

At West Fourth Street, they have so far not encountered any officers, even after the system closes.

Still, every few minutes Mr. Hammonds nervously eyed a stairwell close by.

"This year has already been tough for us," Mr. Hammonds said. "But this winter is just impossible."



Questions to answer about homelessness as explained in the 2/7/21 print edition of the NYT by Christina Goldbaum:

1 message

nitchel vermon <vnitchel@gmail.com>
To: vnitchel@gmail.com

Thu, Feb 25, 2021 at 11:17 AM

Questions to answer about homelessness as explained in the 2/7/21 print edition of the NYT by Christina Goldbaum:

6:18 PM

1. How many homeless people are there currently in NY?

6:19 PM

2. What special problems do the homeless now have b/c of the pandemic?

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