



NATION

'Likely won't be the last time': NYC, DC shootings yet another stressor for homeless men



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Key Points

Men experiencing homelessness in New York said recent targeted shootings were another worry to daily challenges around personal safety.

The pandemic forced many unhoused New Yorkers and organizations providing them services to adapt.

Mayor Eric Adams has made addressing homelessness a key part of his administration's goals, including in a recent subway safety plan.

NEW YORK — Sean has always had to stay alert sleeping outside. It's "not only someone could come to kill you, but someone (could) try to steal something," he said.

As one of thousands of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, the recent shootings of men experiencing homelessness in New York and Washington were jarring, but not something that made the 52-year-old change his routine.

"There is such concern. However, I don't feel like an increased, too much concern," said Sean, who asked that USA TODAY identify him by only his first name out of fear his status as an unhoused person could impact his future job prospects.

In interviews with USA TODAY, men experiencing homelessness in New York City and advocates highlighted the many stressors unhoused New Yorkers faced in recent years and how the spate of attacks became yet another worry added to daily challenges around their personal safety while living on the streets.

Jacquelyn Simone, policy director at the Coalition for the Homeless, said the attacks were "not the first time that people have been victimized because of their housing status."

"And it likely won't be the last time," she added. "People who are without housing are forced to make a variety of difficult choices about their safety on a daily basis."

Last month, three men in Washington and two men in New York were shot in what police said was a targeted string of attacks on men experiencing homelessness. Morgan Holmes, 54, in Washington, and Abdoulaye Coulibaly, 57, in New York, were killed. Within days, Gerald Brevard was arrested in connection with the shootings.

Coulibaly was remembered at a memorial service March 24 at the Bowery Mission, a nonprofit that provides shelter, meals and other services to people experiencing homelessness in New York.

"What happened here is something that could happen to any one of us," said James Macklin, director of outreach at the Bowery Mission.

Coulibaly was an occasional guest at the Bowery Mission, and James Winans, the organization's president and CEO, said the past few weeks have been "sobering" for its staff and people they serve. On the night Coulibaly was shot, the Bowery Mission had 20 beds available in its emergency shelter just blocks away, Winans said.

"It's just another clarion call to the work to do. We have to be so committed to making sure that the resources that are available are being used by our neighbors who are experiencing homelessness, and that requires building trust," Winans told USA TODAY.

For Sean, living in shelters is not always a better option than the park where he sleeps. Some days, he wants a shower, but some shelters are known for bad conditions. He's seen bed bugs and also faced restrictions on the size of bags he can bring inside.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant avoiding shelters even more, he said.

"I tried to stay away (from shelters). I know other homeless people, they tried to stay away because there's too much risk" with COVID, he said.

In 2020, 120 of the 613 deaths of people experiencing homelessness in New York were COVID related, according to a recent report from the Coalition for the Homeless. In 2021, 31 of the 640 deaths were COVID related.

The pandemic forced the city and nonprofit organizations providing homelessness services to adapt. Congregate shelter quickly became hotbeds for virus spread, and the city responded by moving thousands of people living in shelters to the largely empty hotels as tourism

sank as well. Sean said he lived in a hotel room for a few days, but his assigned roommate was violent, so he left.

The Bowery Mission kept its residences open, switched to to-go meals and brought portable toilets and showers to the block outside so people could have a safer place to wash up, Winans said.

Winans said the group knew it had to continue to provide its services in whatever ways it could because it felt like many had forgotten about New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.

"The public mantra, the way we were going to defeat the coronavirus ... was we were all going to stay at home. That was a very convenient slogan to help us all stay safe. But for somebody who doesn't have a home, that was very alarming and confusing and frustrating," he said.

Jose Ramirez, 71, has been coming to the Bowery Mission in Manhattan for 15 years to get daily meals. When COVID-19 hit, he was shocked to find the dining room inside was closed.

"The Bowery Mission is, for me, my house," he said with a smile.

Lingering effects from the economic impact of the pandemic have made it challenging to find jobs, too. Sean said he currently has temporary employment, but Ramirez has struggled to find work. He said he's seen many more people coming to Bowery Mission as a result.

And when his meals could only be to-go, Ramirez said he spent much of his time riding the subways in between trips to the mission.

In recent months, the subways have also become a focal point of Mayor Eric Adams' efforts to address public safety as transit crime has ticked up this year, according to NYPD statistics. However, Adams' subway safety plan released in February centered largely on increasing police and mental health care workers' presence on the trains to prevent people from sheltering inside the system.

"This isn't about arresting people," Adams said when announcing the plan. "This is about arresting a problem."

"You can't put a Band-Aid on a cancerous sore," he added, referring to homelessness in the subway system. "That is not how you solve the problem. You must remove the cancer and start the healing process."

Simone said she saw the plan as "equating homeless people in transit facilities with a lack of safety for the riding public." While crime is an issue in the city, there are intersecting crises of

the pandemic, mental health and substance use disorders, and too often homelessness is not viewed as a symptom of "broken economic and health systems," Simone said.

Sean said he has ridden the subway for shelter before, but it's challenging to sleep on trains. He got a ticket even before the subway safety plan was announced so he tries to avoid it. Still, for some people, that's where they chose to sleep, highlighting the range of experiences people who are unhoused in New York City face, Sean said.

"(People experiencing homelessness) are a diverse population. They become homeless for different reasons. Some homeless people, they are ... just regular persons," he said, "Just for some reason, (they) have to live on the street."

Since the shootings in New York and Washington, Adams has vowed to tear down encampments throughout the city where unhoused people have been living, drawing harsh criticism from advocates including from Simone, who said in a statement, "Mayor Adams is demonstrating his lack of understanding of unsheltered homeless New Yorkers."

However, as part of his subway safety plan, Adams last week also announced the opening of a new 80-bed facility in the Bronx to provide housing and health services to people experiencing homelessness. Overall, the mayor's office said more than 350 of the 500 beds included in the subway plan would be online as of last week.

To protect the physical safety of people living on the street, Simone said the policy solutions are the same that advocates asked for after a string of beatings in 2019 left four men experiencing homelessness dead and one injured in Chinatown and stabbings in 2021 on the subway killed two unhoused people and injured two others.

"Give people a better, safer place to go than the streets," Simone said. "That means expanding access to low-barrier, private shelters that people on the streets will be willing to accept and helping people move into housing much more quickly."

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