

Political tussle over NYC subway reveals how the powerful treat the homeless

Mayor denies cops swept homeless people out of subway before a photo op.

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New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio (D) finds himself in a spat with a major city tabloid this week over his handling of homeless people.

An email published Tuesday by the New York Post appears to show police officers planning to clear two subway stations of homeless people so that press coverage of the mayor's ride on the F train would not feature them in the background of photographs. De Blasio's staff have insisted no such sweep occurred, suggesting the email may have been faked to embarrass the mayor and pointing to a conversation he had with a homeless woman at the end of the trip as evidence he ordered no such sweep.

But the Post's version of events fits into the general pattern of NYPD behavior toward homeless people that Floyd Parks has seen in years moving between corners and shelters. Individual police know they're sent out to clear this or that corner for a day or two based on the arbitrary whims of politically influential actors high above the street level, Parks told ThinkProgress.

"What they say is, they're being told by upper higher powers, by superior officers, to go out and do this," Parks said. "It's coming from the mayor's office, from people with business influence telling them 'I got so much money invested in this, and if you don't do us right...'"

The Harlem neighborhood where Parks and his friends have spent years bouncing between sidewalks and shelters has seen a rapid and radical transition in the past few years. Developers have thrown up condos and ritzy department stores just a few blocks from the famous Apollo Theater. The blocks immediately surrounding the 125th Street stop on the commuter rail system that imports downtown office workers from western Connecticut and the New York suburbs is suddenly bustling with a very different kind of activity. The people profiting off the aggressive change are even trying to rebrand the area from "Harlem" to "SoHa."

All of these changes mean rich people with open lines to city leaders feel they have investments to protect—and that homeless people are a sort of feral threat to their profits.

"The more they try to get businesses in there, get things more profitable, the more things get glamorized for high society, then it's time for us to move," said Parks.

"Somebody made a call. 'Get rid of 'em, get 'em out of here. We may have somebody coming through. We don't want to see 'em.' All of a sudden you've got 20 cops, harassing people," he said. "And then pass some hours, and people are going to come right back. Because they've got nowhere else to go."

Sometimes the city defends these aimless move-along sweeps as a matter of security. When Pope Francis was passing through Harlem in 2015, NYPD officers pushed through the area aggressively the week before. The pope, whose reign atop the Catholic Church has been largely defined through outreach to the poorest people on earth, was insulated from seeing the reality of New York's homeless for his own protection.

In other cases, Parks said, cops seem tangibly unhappy to be doing what they're doing—and flat-out admit they're following mandates from on high.

"I've been told by cops, 'You guys cannot be here because my boss told me to get you guys outta here. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be bothering you, but I've been given orders to tell you guys to move,'" he said. "'We got orders, now we're giving you orders.'"

The subway ride where police allegedly swept homeless people out before the mayor and the press passed through was part of de Blasio's ongoing fight with Governor Andrew Cuomo (D) over which man should own responsibility for recent debacles with the city's mass transit system.

Both the conservative-minded Post and the NYPD itself have significant motives to kick dirt on the mayor. The tabloid has run hateful coverage of homeless people and vilified de Blasio in the past, and the NYPD has looked to undermine de Blasio politically for years over his public rhetoric about criminal justice reform.

The city's political dynamics cast some shadows over the Post's reporting, but the underlying notion that homeless people are at greatest jeopardy of being targeted by police when their presence is inconvenient to powerful people is far from unique to New York. Cities across the country conduct similar sweeps, with the same basic lack of housing resources into which those camped on street corners could realistically move.

San Francisco is perhaps the most notorious for sending work crews and cops out to move homeless people along once powerful interests protest. City outreach workers and local non-profit advocates alike have told ThinkProgress of "the Five-Block Shuffle," where encamped homeless people get moved off of a given site because of business complaints, then moved off their new location once neighbors gripe, only to land back where they started.

Washington, D.C. presents its sweeps policy as a more humane version of the same idea, but its ground reality is much the same. Cops and work crews may not aggressively destroy homeless campers' personal property as they do elsewhere, but people who had found relative stability in a tent for months or years are suddenly shuffled along to no particular destination once business development begins to overtake the neighborhood.

City outreach workers and homelessness organizations who work directly with local governments usually insist that sweeps are motivated by public health concerns. Once a camp gets to a certain size, they say, it simply isn't safe any more. But whether it is coincidence or cause, there is almost always a new cluster of businesses and condos springing up within a block or two at the time officials decide to pull the plug.

Once they do, it doesn't really matter how humanely the workers at the tip of the spear behave. Most of those pushed off the corner, highway median, or train underpass won't be able to move into an affordable supportive housing unit, because there aren't enough of them.

"The only change [in the past few years] is they talk a little more politely. The attitude is changed a little. It's a little more respect, a little more civil. But they're still doing the same thing," Parks said.

It might be different "if they gave us a outline to what we can achieve, to what we can accomplish and look forward to. Because we don't have nothing to look forward to," he said. "We're in the streets. We have nothing to do but pick up and survive."

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