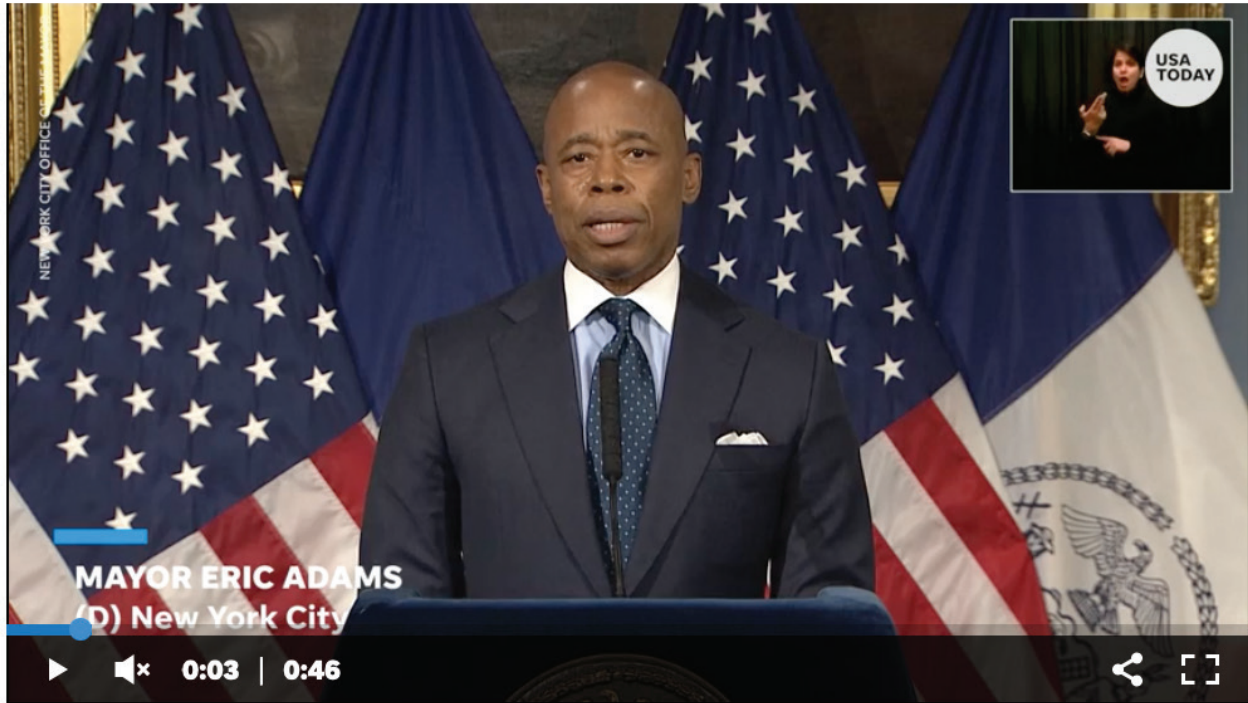


New York wants to stop people from living in the subways. But where will they go?



NEW YORK – Amid a rising concern about crime and homelessness on its subways, New York City plans to increase the presence of police officers and mental health care workers to stop people from sheltering in the subway and connect people with care and other city services.

Mayor Eric Adams said the approach aims to address “decades of failure” that have led to many people living and sleeping in the city’s subway system. But some homelessness and mental health advocates raised concerns that the plan’s reliance on law enforcement will lead to “criminalizing” people experiencing homelessness and leave them with no where to go but jail.

The plan, which Adams unveiled Friday alongside Gov. Kathy Hochul, addresses meeting the untreated mental health needs of New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, but also includes a mandate that the city’s police officers enforce the system’s often-ignored code of conduct, such as fining people who smoke, litter, evade fares and lay across multiple seats.

“No more just doing whatever you want. No. Those days are over,” Adams said at a news conference last week. “Swipe your MetroCard, ride the system, get off at your destination. That’s what this administration is saying.”

No ‘surrender’: Mayor Eric Adams lays out gun violence plan after NYPD officers killed

Adrienne Adams, speaker of the New York City Council, said enforcement of these rules, however, should not be “counterproductive by criminalizing people who are in need of housing or treatment.”

“Cycling people through a destabilizing revolving door of the criminal justice system to end up in a worse condition back on the subways and our streets would only make us less safe,” said Adams, who is not related to mayor, in a statement.

New York City saw a violent weekend on the subways, where at least six people were stabbed over the course of three days, according to the New York City

Police Department. Mayor Adams referenced another stabbing last Thursday when announcing the plan.

Meanwhile, the man accused of pushing Michelle Alyssa Go to her death into front of a subway train last month was experiencing homelessness, police have said. Go's death and other high-profile attacks in the city have sparked safety concerns especially in the city's massive transit system, where no barriers block riders from oncoming trains.

Asian woman continue to face 'terrifying' attacks in the US: What advocates say needs to change.

Most people experiencing homelessness are not violent, Adams said, and the plan calls for 30 teams made up of police, health and homeless services employees to deploy in targeted parts of the city and across the subway system to connect people with resources.

The plan proposes opening up almost 500 temporary private beds for people experiencing homelessness and new drop-in centers. It also aims to expand a city pilot program to divert certain 911 calls for mental health emergencies to non-police response teams.

"This is not just about solving a 'problem,'" said Dr. Ashwin Vasan, the city's incoming health commissioner. "This is about proactively reaching out to support our brothers, our sisters, our friends and our neighbors."

Vasan stressed that the plan was a starting point to address wider problems with the city's housing and mental health care services.



A New York City Police Department officer and a subway conductor look down the subway platform at the Grand Central subway station on May 18, 2021. New York Mayor Eric Adams last week announced a plan to boost safety in the city's sprawling subway network and try to stop homeless people from sleeping on trains or living in stations. Frank Franklin II, AP

Tens of thousands of people sleep in the city's shelter systems, but the exact number who seek refuge in the subways is unknown. The New York Times reported an estimate that placed the figure around 1,300 in 2021. To support the city, Hochul vowed to increase the share the state pays to hospitals for psychiatric beds. The governor described the plan as part of the city's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, saying officials want more riders back on the city's subway.

Roughly 3 million people ride the subway each day, about half of the pre-pandemic ridership, according to Metropolitan Transportation Authority data.

But NYPD statistics show the number of assaults and other violent crimes in the city's transit system are back to around pre-pandemic levels.

"We know it's a big problem," Hochul said. "But shame on us if this moment in time, if we don't turn over every single stone, find every possible way to deal with this."

It's working in Eugene, Olympia, Denver: More cities are sending civilian responders, not police, on mental health calls



A person holds a candle during a vigil, Jan. 18, 2022, in New York's Times Square, in honor of Michelle Alyssa Go, a victim of a subway attack several days earlier. Yuki Iwamura, AP

Adams' plan also called for a more expansive use of the state's Kendra's Law, which requires court-ordered outpatient treatment for some people experiencing severe mental illness who refused care.

The city's plan said police officers will receive additional training on the system's rules. Meanwhile, teams at "end of line" stations will require, instead of request, people to leave the trains.

But Adams, a former transit police officer, said enforcement would not be “heavy handed.”

“This isn’t about arresting people,” he said. ‘This is about arresting a problem.

“You can’t put a Band-Aid on a cancerous sore,” Adams 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.”

Some advocates took issue with Adams’ characterization of homelessness and mental illness.

Comparing those things to a cancerous sore is “incredibly dehumanizing. It does nothing to foster compassion,” said Cal Hedigan, CEO of Community Access, a housing and social services nonprofit for people experiencing mental health concerns

Hedigan said she was encouraged by the plan adding private beds and drop-in centers, but she worried the immediate law enforcement response would sow more distrust in the system.

Regarding enforcement at the end of the line stations, for example, she said, “How’s that going to happen? That’s going to happen with people in handcuffs.”

The more that force plays a role in addressing a mental health need, she said, people will be “less and less likely to seek help or be able to look at people and even believe that they have a helping hand because all you’ve experienced is harm.”

Shelly Nortz, the deputy executive director for policy at the Coalition for the Homeless, said “criminalizing homelessness” is not the answer.

“Repeating the failed outreach-based policing strategies of the past will not end the suffering of homeless people bedding down on the subway,” Nortz said. “It is sickening to hear Mayor Adams liken unsheltered homeless people to a cancer. They are human beings.”

Some also say the plan focuses too much on enforcement and not enough on the new services to help people.

“The emphasis of the plan is on cleaning up the subways, and by that we mean getting people who have no other options out of the subway,” said Ruth Lowenkron, director of the disability justice program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest.

She noted there’s “very little detail” on what comes next.

Ramping up enforcement before having more permanent housing and long-term mental health services available, she added, will lead to more people in the city’s criminal justice system.

If the goal is simply removing an allegedly violent person from the subway, “what happens when that person gets out and has been more traumatized by involuntary services?” she said.