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PICTURE THE HOMELESS ACCUSES NYPD OF DEPRIVING HOMELESS OF SLEEP
Picture the Homeless held a press conference and rally calling on the NYPD to end its abuse of homeless people in public space

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Penn Station, New York.—On July 25th, the member –led organization Picture the Homeless (PTH) held a press conference and rally against policing practices that violate the human rights of the homeless. In particular, members of PTH called attention to the NYPD's practice of waking up homeless people who attempt to sleep in public spaces. Due to the dangerous and dehumanizing conditions in the city shelter system, many homeless New Yorkers are driven to sleep in public spaces such as parks, trains, and train stations. The constant disturbances from the police amount to nothing short of sleep deprivation, which is a form of torture according to the United Nations.

Joan Harrison, a member of PTH who is currently homeless and has spent many sleepless nights at Penn Station, reports "[the police] regularly shout into the faces of the homeless while prodding them to wake up and wake them nearly every hour so that they cannot sleep. Some even make exultant 'woo-hoo' cries or bang their batons loudly and rhythmically as if on exuberant drums or speed up their carts ostentatiously while calling out 'wakey! wakey!' as they rush past the sleeping bodies of exhausted homeless people."

PTH member Indio X also reported abuse from NYPD officers. While he was street homeless, Indio said that the police "beat me with their nightsticks when I was on the train." He believes this abuse to be part of a broader set of policies that try to remove the homeless from public space. "[The police] are charging us with disorderly conduct and harassment and other unfounded allegations just to keep us out of sight," said Indio.

Members and allies of PTH called for an end to policies that punish the homeless. Mayor Bloomberg would rather "manage" homelessness through policies that try to shelter, imprison, or displace poor and homeless New Yorkers than create affordable housing for the homeless. The shelter system is at best, a temporary solution, and at worst, a dehumanizing institution that further destabilizes an already vulnerable population. Until truly affordable housing is available, the homeless will continue to be driven into public spaces. As citizens, the homeless have a right to be in public space free of harassment. As human beings, they have a need to sleep in a safe environment and the shelter system fails to address that need.