

C I T Y



Edward Keating/The New York Times

Moscoe Ringo stood in the darkness outside a shantytown on the Lower East Side, feeding a trash fire on Friday with planks of a wooden door. Smoke and an acrid chemical smell rose off the embers, but Mr. Ringo, a 26-year-old former hotel porter, said he would live with it.

In Chill of the Night, the Homeless Change Habits

His bare feet jammed into high-top sneakers, James Murray stumbled out of his shack and into the 14-degree weather late Sunday night. He would not have gone out at all, but charity workers were serving pea soup at his shantytown, an encampment on the lower East Side built around a 20-foot canvas tepee.

Like others there — and many of the city's homeless people — he had only a few frosty words for the weather, the coldest in New York City this winter.

"It's terrible — simple as that," said the 58-year-old Mr. Murray, who was a worker in a Bowery hotel before taking to the streets in August.

The cold spell that has dropped temperatures to as low as 11 degrees since last Tuesday has been especially hard on the city's homeless.

This year, their options are fewer than usual. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and the Transit Authority began an effort in recent months to take homeless people to city shelters when they are ejected from the bus terminal and the subways for lying down on benches, smoking, or breaking other rules.

More Agree to Shelter

The Port Authority reported no increase in the number of homeless people who agreed to go to a city shelter or to take advantage of other charitable services since the cold weather began. But over the week-end, more than 100 people ejected from the subways agreed to take a transit police bus to city shelters, more than double the usual number, transit police said.

"Their options are limited," said Capt. John J. Romano, commander of the transit police's 27-person Homeless Outreach Unit. "On a cold day, if you are ejected you might be more likely to accept services."

Although the unit's sweeps have been criticized as being inhumane, Lieutenant Romano said that no one

When the weather is freezing, city shelters may not seem so bad.

improperly dressed was left in the cold and that shelters made better homes than subway cars or stations.

"This is not a smokescreen so we can throw them out," he said.

When the temperatures drop, many homeless people scramble to find a private bed or drop their reluctance to go to city shelters, which many complain are dirty and violent.

At the Fort Washington Men's Shelter, an old armory on 168th Street, up to 850 people a night have been housed there since the middle of last week, up from the usual 650, the shelter's director, Irving Perez, said. He said he has not turned anyone away.

Over the last two days, Mr. Perez said, he has given away 930 blankets and 60 warm coats.

'Who'll Die Tonight?'

Mary Brosnahan, executive director of the Coalition for the Homeless, said that the demand for services, mostly a warm bed, has doubled since the temperatures began to drop, although she had no exact numbers. The coalition's offices, near Pennsylvania Station, are overflowing, she said, and its social workers are using all their persuasive skills to find beds.

"When I'm just walking from the subway station to my apartment and my fingers feel like they are going to fall off I think, 'My God, who is going to die tonight?'" she said.

Yet many homeless steer clear of the web of institutions that offer shelter, and draw on their own resourcefulness to stay warm.

James Bush, a 50-year-old former

construction worker, sat on the floor of Grand Central Terminal the other night, an hour before its 1:30 A.M. closing time, when he would be forced to leave.

Sitting next to his girlfriend, Siegrid Preciosi, 54, Mr. Bush complained for a while about the bitter cold and about hating the shelters.

Then he bent over as if to share a secret.

"We know a hallway," he said. "We've got a mattress. We've got five blankets. I've got lasagna."

Too Cold to Give

A few feet away, Shorty Lawry, a 39-year-old man who lost his left eye, his job and then his home after a construction accident in 1988, said that it was too cold even to panhandle.

"Ain't nobody going to stop and give you a quarter," he said, resigned to a simple truth of the season: the cold freezes street charity as quickly as it does flesh.

"When it gets this cold I try to hustle \$6 to go an all night-movie," he said. "They got a place on 42d Street that plays karate movies. They got another plays sex movies."

Many others try to hustle money for a cheap room, a luxury most of

the time but worth the \$12 to \$15 a night in subfreezing weather.

One man, who calls himself Gumby the Frame Man — his usual panhandling trick is to stand with a picture frame around his face and say, "I've been framed" — was trying to scrape together enough money at 73d Street and Columbus Avenue for a room.

He stood with two blankets on his head, but said there was no way he could keep warm.

"Blankets don't work, plastic don't work either," he said. "The only thing that works is to get inside a furnace."

Or in some cases, the idea is to bring the furnace inside. Roscoe Ringo stood in the darkness outside the shantytown on the Lower East Side where Mr. Murray lived, feeding a trash fire with planks of a wooden door.

He would not even think about sleeping without a bucket of "coal" — his word for the embers he was stoking to take inside the cardboard and plastic hut. Smoke and an acrid chemical smell rose off the embers, but Mr. Ringo, a 26-year-old former hotel porter, said he would live with it.

"It feels like an icebox," he said. "When I'm in the hut and when the wind blows, the wind is so cold."

