US blizzard, cold wave hit the poor

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A severe winter storm swept through the Midwest of the US and parts of Canada over the New Year's weekend, leaving at least 89 dead. The storm dumped nearly two feet of snow in Chicago, making it the second worst in that city since records began being kept 100 years ago. Detroit received 16 inches of snow, as did Buffalo, New York. The storm was the worst in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the second half of the century. Hundreds of thousands of people were left without power as far south as the Carolinas and Arkansas. Tornadoes hit the Florida panhandle January 3, damaging homes and causing injuries.

The eastern two-thirds of the US were plunged into record low temperatures in the wake of the blizzard. Tuesday was the coldest day ever recorded in Illinois, with the temperature dipping to 36 degrees below zero Fahrenheit in Congerville, about 120 miles southwest of Chicago. The wind chill on the northern Plains measured 60 below. Temperatures fell to the teens in a number of Southern cities: Meridian, Mississippi hit a record low of 11, Jackson, Tennessee had a low of 6 above zero; in New Orleans, the temperature fell to a record 20 degrees.

While the snow and cold wave affected everyone in their path, their consequences were unequally distributed. The most impoverished layers of the population, as always, suffered the most, starting with the homeless, who number in the thousands in the largest US cities.

In Milwaukee, Thomas Tresidder, 43, was found dead in a garage on New Year's Day. Authorities said he might have been in the structure for several days before its owner discovered him lying on a mattress. In Oklahoma City a man identified as 40-year-old Robert Stumblingbear was found dead in a trash bin, clad only in a T-shirt and jeans. He apparently died from exposure. In Tulsa, Oklahoma a homeless man died after the cardboard box he was sleeping in caught fire.

Frigid temperatures in Oklahoma City drove record numbers to homeless shelters. The Traveler's Aid Society has reported a 15 percent increase in requests for help. In the Cincinnati, Ohio area a man was found dead in a hallway Monday morning; his body temperature had fallen to about 75 degrees.

In Chicago an infant wrapped in dirty clothing froze to death after being left on the steps of a city church Monday. The baby was several hours old. Paramedics tried to revive the infant, as did emergency room technicians at St. Anthony Hospital, where the baby was pronounced dead at 8:18 a.m. Temperatures hovered in the pre-dawn hours around zero. On Saturday two women were found frozen to death in Chicago.

The executive director of a homeless shelter in Milwaukee, Wisconsin told the Associated Press that when he opened his doors at 8:30 a.m., "I could see, through the swirls, the men through the park and down the street emerging from the snow. They were so grateful to have a warm place to go." The shelter's capacity is about 60 people, but it has been over capacity since the cold snap began. Brian Davis, director of the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless, told a reporter that his agency had run out of sleeping gear for people huddling in empty buildings, under bridges and on sidewalk steam pipe covers.

In the Detroit area homeless shelter officials recounted the same story. Cheryl Johnson, administrator of the COTS emergency shelter, told a reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We are generally filled year round, but when we have a cold spell like this one we try to squeeze in more people, especially children. Often children, especially if they are small, can sleep with their mothers and provide a little extra room."

LaNeice Jones of the Neighborhood Service Organization commented, "Before the storm we were

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full. Due to the holidays a lot of people went to shelters, but there was also a fire at the senior citizens' complex that may have added to the number of beds that have been taken."

The Pontiac Rescue Mission, the oldest shelter in suburban Oakland County, has also seen an increase in the number of women and children seeking shelter from the cold. Tuesday night it reached its capacity of 65 women and children. John Davis, a 46-year-old Pontiac man, who lived with family but often walked the streets, was found slumped against a tree early Monday. Davis was rushed to hospital, but pronounced dead. An 86-year-old woman who wandered away from a group home in Troy, Michigan froze to death Monday.

At the height of the storm more than 374,000 Duke Power customers in central and western North Carolina and South Carolina lost electric service as power lines were pulled down by ice and falling trees. In northern Arkansas more than 100,000 people were left without power as the area experienced wind-chill readings of 10 to 20 degrees below zero. More than 40 people were left homeless following a fire in east Baltimore. The blaze destroyed four buildings, as firefighters found it extremely difficult to do their work as water froze immediately and ice hampered their operations.

Nature is blamed for dozens of deaths--as well as the massive inconvenience and suffering, including loss of wages and childcare problems--but the media ignore a basic question: how much of this results from official indifference, neglect and years of cutbacks? Budget conscious state and local governments, as well as profit-making utility companies, make the most minimal provisions for extreme weather.

Detroit is a case in point. The city has an official policy of not plowing residential streets. The authorities who preside over a city of approximately 1 million people used 59 trucks to clear city streets during the blizzard. Milwaukee, with two-thirds of the population, operated 400, plowing and salting every main and residential street. Chicago used 700 trucks.

Detroit Public Works Director Clyde Dowell defended the city's policies. He told the press, "It's a matter of equipment and manpower. We just don't have the capacity to plow residential streets. Detroit has never been able to deal with plowing residential streets. It would take a huge capital investment."

The wealthy subdivision around Mayor Dennis Archer's mansion, however, was one area that received considerable attention. Dowell defended the action against criticism from residents in nearby snowbound neighborhoods. "We do it because [Archer] is the chief executive officer of this city. Why would you want him blocked in? If he lived somewhere else in the city, we'd plow there."

Deaths in the US due to cold and exposure are part of an international trend. At least 11 people have died in Mexico in January, bringing the death toll in recent weeks to about 100. The northern border states of Coahuila and Nuevo Leon have experienced record low temperatures. Two women died in Nuevo Leon after their natural gas heater broke down while they were sleeping. Two homeless people in the central State of Mexico died after temperatures fell to 16 degrees.

A cold spell in northern India has killed at least 61 homeless people and left hundreds of thousands shivering in unheated houses. The victims were among the thousands who sleep in bus and train stations or on the streets.

Freezing temperatures killed at least 29 people in Europe during the Christmas holidays. Nine people froze to death in Moscow last week, bringing this winter's total to 69. In Hungary, where an estimated 30,000 are homeless, 17 people died over the holiday; the total dead from cold in the country is 76, a new record. In Poland 162 people have died from the weather this winter, most during a cold spell that lasted from mid-November to mid-December.

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