

Five homeless people froze to death in US capital last winter

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Five homeless adults died this past winter on the streets of Washington DC. All of these people succumbed to hypothermia.

One man froze to death after being ejected from a homeless shelter earlier that night. Jesus Blanco, a 43-year-old Salvadoran immigrant, was found dead December 23 about 50 yards from the entrance to the La Casa shelter where he sometimes stayed. Blanco froze to death on a night when temperatures fell below 26 degrees.

La Casa is the primary homeless shelter for Hispanic men in the city. According to other men staying at the shelter the night Blanco died, he became upset when one man was using the bathroom for a long time and then got in a fight with two other men.

Blanco and 17 other men were being housed in the trailer of an old truck that is equipped with 18 beds, stacked three high, and one bathroom. The shelter consists of five of these trailers. The night supervisor on duty did not speak Spanish, and was unable to mediate the dispute between the men.

Another homeless man who died last winter in DC was Russell T. Gould. The 65-year-old homeless man was found dead January 4 in the garage of a person who had let him use it to store his tools and other belongings. Gould would earn money performing odd jobs for people in the neighborhood. The garage is unattached and unheated and temperatures fell to 23 degrees that night.

The conditions for homeless in the nation's capital are deplorable. Four hundred of the shelter beds available are in the backs of old trucks, like the La Casa shelter. There is only one homeless shelter in Washington DC set up to treat hypothermia and that facility has no shower or hot water. A city office building that had been used as an emergency shelter when temperatures

fell to below freezing was closed last year.

The five deaths were the first documented deaths of the homeless in DC since 1996. The situation underscores the growth of homelessness in the nation's capital and the unwillingness of government officials to provide the resources necessary to deal with it.

“They treat us like cattle,” said Raymond, a homeless man sleeping on a subway vent grate only a few blocks away from the White House. “I try and stay out of the shelters as much as possible. You can see how dirty I am and all they do at the shelters is make you feel worse. All they say is: find a job. I lost my job three years ago and I was not able to keep things together. Who is going to hire me now in the state I am in?”

Washington DC has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the country. On any given day, there are approximately 12,850 homeless people in DC and the surrounding counties; 7,000 in the district and nearly 6,000 in the suburbs. The spread of homelessness to the suburbs has accelerated during the past decade. While in the 1990s only one quarter of the area's homeless lived outside of DC, today it is nearly half.

Over the course of a year, more than 30,000 people in the area experience homelessness at some point. More than a quarter of all the homeless are children. Families, mostly women with children, make up 36 percent of the homeless. As throughout the country, homelessness in DC has grown as a result of a combination of federal cuts in social services, skyrocketing housing costs, and growth of low-paying jobs.

“The two fastest groups among the homeless are women with children and the working poor,” said Michael Stoope of the National Coalition for the Homeless. “The five-year time limit on welfare is

approaching and we are fearful of the number of families who will be thrown out onto the streets.

“The second fastest growing group of the homeless is the working poor. We have all heard of a minimum wage job, but there is no such thing as minimum rent. More and more people are working but can't afford a place to live.”

Nationally, more than quarter of the homeless are employed and nearly half have work at least part-time. The economic boom of the 1990s saw housing prices and rents soar, making it impossible for a growing number of working people to afford housing. In DC, a person earning the minimum wage of \$6.15 an hour would have to work 108 hours a week in order to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent.

Over the next year and a half, cuts in federal programs will exacerbate the problem. The contracts on 10,000 federally subsidized rental properties are due to expire and landlords may opt out of the Section 8 program to take advantage of the higher rents. In addition, 5,200 families are due to lose all cash assistance as federal time limits on welfare benefits kick in.

The homeless situation in DC also exposes the inability of private organizations to solve the homeless problem. The granting of federal, state and local funds to local service providers has become a major factor in the administrating of social services. The Bush administration seeks to expand the use of private service providers to include religious organizations.

Washington homeless shelters, services and programs have been run by the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness since 1994. The coalition of homeless advocates and service providers took over the running of homeless services for the city when the district was near bankruptcy. Despite the commitment of many involved in these private organizations, the deaths on the streets of DC this past winter make tragically clear that the problem of homelessness can only be resolved if vast resources are committed to end poverty and inequality, which are its root causes.



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