

Deaths in US capital highlight homelessness crisis

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The deaths of at least two homeless people from hypothermia in one night in Washington DC shed light on the reality of American social life virtually in the shadow of the White House and Congress. Moreover, it lifts the lid on the growing crisis of homelessness in the US as a whole.

DC officials initially reported that six people appeared to have died February 4-5 from hypothermia, in a tragedy which barely made the national news. Further investigation indicated that “only” two of the individuals—homeless men, one found at a bus stop and another discovered in the water near a boathouse—had died from the cold. Three of the other deaths, however, seem related to social conditions in one fashion or another: a third homeless man collapsed at a soup kitchen; a 72-year-old woman with Alzheimer’s died in her home; and a 67-year-old man was found unclothed in bed near a window. All in all, an extraordinary commentary on conditions in the US capital city.

On Christmas morning a homeless man was found in the cold in Washington and died the next day. The man, in his fifties or sixties, was hypothermic and never regained consciousness. At least five people—and by some accounts, seven—died of the cold in DC last year.

Last April District officials shelved plans to convert an 1862 fire station into a shelter for homeless women when they realized it would make life less pleasant for residents of 765 luxury apartments in the process of being built in the area.

Homelessness advocates reported in January that more people used publicly funded services for the homeless in Washington last year than in any year since 1997 and that the need for such services was growing. The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness reported that as many as 16,350, or one-fifth of the District’s poor, used programs for the

homeless in 2001. On an average day, the Partnership estimated that about 600 adults lived on the street and about 200 families resided in precarious, unstable housing.

According to a Clinton administration study done in 1994, some 12 million adults in the US have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.

The economic slump has forced many out on the streets this winter, including an increasing number of families. Homelessness has jumped 13 percent nationwide; in Chicago, by 22 percent, in San Francisco, 20 percent, in Washington, 32 percent. In Massachusetts there has been a 40 percent rise in homeless families since August 1999. In Connecticut, where there is no legal right to shelter, officials had turned away 11,241 people seeking shelter by late December.

A record number of people are crowding New York City’s shelters this winter; in Chicago, all the city’s shelter beds are full. Boston also reports homeless shelters crammed “to the point where people are being turned away” (*Boston Globe*). The *Christian Science Monitor* notes: “Families of the working poor appear to be hit the hardest by the combination of high housing prices—a legacy of the ’90s—and shrinking job opportunities.” The National Low Income Housing Coalition in Washington reported in October that there was nowhere in the US where a person working full-time at the minimum wage could afford a typical two-bedroom apartment.

The horror story in Washington occurred only weeks after officials in San Francisco announced a new “get-tough” policy on the homeless in that city. A proposed ordinance would ban “loitering” on median strips; violators would be subject to a \$500 fine and six months in jail. The measures are part of the ongoing

efforts by San Francisco city authorities to criminalize homelessness

Officials in Salt Lake City, home to the Olympic Games, are reporting a sharp increase in the number of the homeless. Some are victims of recession; others are construction workers who flooded into the city seeking Olympic employment; still others have been evicted from motels and apartments by landlords seeking to charge exorbitant rents to tourists in town for the winter games.

Homeless advocates in Denver report a crisis in that city, “including the growing number of middle-class families facing layoffs and in need of food and housing assistance” (*Denver Post*). Jack Real of the Colorado Committee for the Homeless told a Denver city council committee in January: “The fastest-growing segment among the homeless are families who can’t afford housing, have wages that aren’t adequate and are facing layoffs.” Tom Luehrs of Denver’s St. Francis Center said the demand at food banks was “alarming.” A Denver city official commented: “Families who were earning \$37,000 to \$40,000 and lost their jobs are coming to us. Unfortunately, we have not hit bottom yet.” The city has also seen a 20 percent increase in food assistance.



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