

# US: Homeless die in frigid weather

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While the US news media has provided ample coverage of the near-record cold wave, very little is being said this winter about the loss of lives and suffering among those forced to live on the streets. The toll has been particularly harsh during January, which has seen ice, snow and subfreezing temperatures settle in over much of the eastern half of the country. The severe weather has brutally exposed a deepening social crisis of poverty and unemployment that has left record numbers homeless.

Homeless shelters from Maryland to Colorado and throughout the Northeast have been filled to overflowing. In New York City, the homeless population has set new records, with over 38,000 people seeking aid from the city. In Kansas City, Missouri, the largest homeless shelter reported that it was filled and attempting to collect extra mattresses on Saturday.

In Omaha, Nebraska, a homeless shelter administrator told KETV Channel 7 News that it was feeding as many as 1,000 homeless and poor people a night as temperatures fell below zero. “Frankly, we’re maxed out,” said the administrator, Candace Gregory. “When it’s this cold, they do come in off the streets from living in their cars or under the bridge or in the campground.”

An administrator at the homeless shelter in the town of Salisbury on the eastern shore of Maryland told the local paper, the *Daily Times*, “We turn a lot of people away—about 200 to 250 a month.” Of those denied shelter, he added, 60 percent had come together with their children. He attributed the growth in the homeless population to recent layoffs at a Tyson Foods plant and the shutdown of a Black & Decker factory.

Among those turned away and those who do not make it into the shelters, there have been a mounting number of fatalities.

In Chicago, a homeless man became the eighth

known victim of hypothermia in the city since October. Pradeep Damera’s frozen body was found on January 22 on the Bank One Plaza downtown. The 33-year-old man had been reported missing some two weeks earlier by relatives in the central Illinois city of Bloomington.

Damera’s death follows on the heels of two others. On January 18, children playing in the snow came upon a lifeless Raymond Greenwald, thought to be in his forties, under a footbridge in River West Park. The next day, an unidentified homeless man, estimated to be between 45 and 55, was found in the stairwell of a West Belle Plain Avenue apartment building. An autopsy determined the cause of death to be cold exposure and alcohol intoxication.

In nearby Milwaukee, Wisconsin, two homeless men have died in the cold this month. Ira Porter, age 44, was found dead in a trash bin on January 20, and four days later, John MacDonald, age 53, was found dead in a truck.

Further loss of life can be expected sooner rather than later, as temperatures dove below zero degrees Fahrenheit across Chicago Friday morning, the coldest temperatures in over four years there.

Along the East Coast, the bitter cold persists as well. New York City, for instance, has seen the coldest January since 1977. On January 16, the temperature plunged to 1 degree Fahrenheit, tying a 110-year-old record for the date. There have been eight days so far this month when the mercury fell into the single digits, with wind chills of 25 degrees below zero and lower, creating conditions in which frostbite can set in on bare skin after only 10 minutes.

Four homeless men are known to have frozen to death in New York City during the last month. Other cases may simply have gone unreported.

Police divers pulled the body of the 23-year-old Miguel Flores, a homeless immigrant from Honduras, out of an icy lake in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park on

January 24, six days after neighborhood dog-walkers had seen him fall through. He presumably had been unable to read the warning signs posted about the thin ice.

Nobody reported him missing from the nearby shelter where he had been staying since December. Officials explain the lack of any report or search by saying it is common for homeless people to miss their curfews. Flores had lost all of his papers when his wallet was stolen. His body was identified by a card bearing his name and the name of the shelter where he was staying.

On January 16, an unidentified man was found frozen in the Van Cortland Village section of the Bronx. A few days earlier, a homeless New York man died after starting a fire in a vacant Brooklyn warehouse to keep warm. The fire ended up killing him when it got out of control.

On January 11, another homeless man was found dead in an outdoor encampment built under a Bronx expressway that about a dozen people called home. Two days after that, Mayor Michael Bloomberg ordered the encampment torn down, saying at a press conference that the outdoors was no place to sleep.

Bloomberg's concern is not for the homeless people themselves, a number of whom refuse to be relegated to the city's overburdened and underfunded shelter system. Rather, he is concerned about the image presented of a city run by billionaires like himself teeming with the poor and homeless.

In a separate incident, a woman died when her attempts to fight off the cold with a space heater and candles set her New York City apartment ablaze. Similarly, in Baltimore, a woman died of carbon monoxide poisoning from improperly vented space heaters that were being used to fight the cold.

Calls to a special city hotline for complaints about New York City apartments lacking heat and hot water reached a record of more than 5,000 a day during the recent cold wave. In response, the city has provided "tips" for residents on how to live without heat.

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the body of an unidentified man in his forties was found on January 17 near railroad tracks in the city's Fairhill section. His body temperature was measured at 67 degrees. The low temperature that morning was 7 degrees Fahrenheit.

There have been three other victims of hypothermia in Philadelphia in January, all found dead in unheated

homes.

The Bush administration has pushed through sharp cuts in federal funding for a program that provides assistance to low-income households in paying heating bills.

Death from exposure is not a phenomenon limited to the Northeast and Midwest. In December, a man known as Rick died outdoors in downtown Denver, Colorado, on a night when the temperature fell to zero. He was estimated to be 55 years old, and he had lived on the streets there for at least 10 years.

The man's death triggered a demand for more shelter beds, which one advocate pointed out were fewer today than 10 years ago, even though the number of Denver's homeless people has risen from 1,985 in 1990 to 9,725 in 2003, according to a study by the Denver Homeless Planning Group.

Last week, the Denver City Commission approved a plan to create a "tent city" to house the homeless on a "temporary" basis. Portland, Oregon, and Fort Lauderdale, Florida, already have set up tent cities, and Key West, Florida, is reviewing a similar plan.

The erection of tents—promoted as "stopgap" measures to deal with the emergency posed by homeless people being out on the streets—is a stark admission of the failure of the profit system to provide for the basic need for shelter. Far from being temporary, such tent cities will no doubt become a permanent feature of life in American cities, as has the phenomenon of widespread homelessness itself.



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