

Homelessness, utility shutoffs lead to house fires, freezing deaths

US cold snap highlights depth of social crisis

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A protracted cold spell eased somewhat Wednesday, but wide areas of the US—from the Northern Plains to the East Coast and stretching to the South—were bracing for more winter weather and freezing temperatures this weekend. The cold snap has spelled misery for many, especially in areas unaccustomed and ill-prepared for the frigid conditions.

The freezing weather has placed in sharp relief the devastating social impact of mass unemployment, growing poverty and the refusal of the Obama administration to provide any serious relief for the victims of the economic crisis.

The arctic blast began last weekend and has been blamed for a least seven confirmed deaths. The number is likely far higher, and confirmed deaths can be expected to climb as packed shelters turn away people seeking refuge and communities struggle to provide a warm place for the growing ranks of the homeless.

Other households may have a roof over their heads, but have had their utilities shut off due to non-payment. The use of space heaters, fires, candles and other unsafe sources of heating and electricity leaves families vulnerable to house fires.

Three people died early Tuesday morning in Detroit when their home caught fire. It is believed the house—without gas or electrical service in below-zero temperatures—was being heated by a space heater. (See “Cut off from heat in freezing temperatures—Three die in Detroit house fire”)

A National Fire Protection Association report showed 73 percent of home heating fire deaths can be attributed to space heaters. These conditions can only be expected to worsen under conditions of bitter cold and increasing utility shutoffs. Over the past week in Georgia, six families have lost their homes to fires, all of them trying to heat their houses with space heaters. The families narrowly escaped death.

The Red Cross reports a 200 percent surge in house fires. The Red Cross’s Ryan Logan attributes this to a combination of the cold weather and the economic situation,

commenting, “Some of the most critical cases, I mean, people are actually heating their homes with their stoves and so things like that is really kind of what we’re seeing and I really believe it’s just a result of the economy at this point.”

Logan also says that because many families have consolidated to save money and are now living under one roof, these fires are affecting more people as well.

A broad swath of the nation’s midsection was under winter storm warnings Wednesday as parts of Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota and Illinois braced for more snow and frigid temperatures. South Dakota was under a blizzard warning until Thursday morning.

In the South, a region unaccustomed to such brutal winter weather, parts of Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana were under a hard freeze warning Wednesday morning. In Florida, Governor Charlie Crist ordered a state of emergency Tuesday as the state’s \$9 billion citrus crop was threatened by freezing temperatures overnight.

At least four cold-related deaths were reported in Tennessee. Three people were found dead in Memphis within a 24-hour period. Leroy Jones, 68, was found frozen to death in his home in South Memphis on Sunday. Although his utility bill had been paid, for some reason he hadn’t turned on his heat.

Jones, who lived alone, was paralyzed on one side and had other health conditions. Shelby County Medical Examiner Dr. Karen Chancellor commented to the local media that hypothermia can affect the brain and an individual’s decision-making. “Your sensations may be altered,” she said, “and you may not realize that you’re becoming too cold. Those most at risk include the elderly, chronically ill, people with heart disease and those who abuse drugs and alcohol.”

Two homeless men also succumbed to the cold in the Memphis area. The body of 51-year-old Daniel Foust, from Ohio, was found next to the railroad tracks in Bartlett. Another man, 55, whose identity has yet to be released by authorities, was discovered frozen to death at Memorial Park Cemetery in East Memphis.

In Nashville, Tennessee, John Anderson, was found dead outside his home Monday morning. Anderson, 81, who was in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's Disease, wandered outside in his bathrobe overnight, when area temperatures fell to a low of 12 Fahrenheit (-11 Centigrade). His case exposes the plight of millions of elderly Americans across the US living alone with serious medical conditions and with little or no social assistance.

Since the cold snap took hold, several Nashville area shelters have reported turning away up to 75 people a night. *USA Today* reports that the Nashville Rescue Mission, which has 747 beds, is filled to overcapacity.

State and local authorities wash their hands of the homeless crisis, leaving it mainly to charities and churches to deal with the growing numbers of individuals and families thrown onto the streets by the deepening economic crisis. The Nashville Rescue Mission sends out a "cold patrol" when the temperatures drop below 36 Fahrenheit (2 Centigrade).

In Broward County, Florida, the body of a homeless man was found Monday near Hollywood's Young Circle, a victim of the unusually cold weather for this region. Investigators were working to identify the 6-foot, 128 pound man who reportedly went by the name "Oklahoma."

Medical Examiner Dr. Joshua Perper said that the freezing temperatures are likely a contributing factor in other deaths in Broward County, particularly among elderly people who have other underlying conditions. Staying outside in the cold exposes the homeless to hypothermia, pneumonia, bronchitis and frostbite.

With temperatures dipping near the freezing mark, the Broward County Outreach Center in Hollywood, which normally takes in 15 to 20 people, has been averaging 40 people this week and is prepared to serve 70.

In Kansas City, Missouri, police found the frozen body of a homeless person in an underpass. It is likely the man had been there for days. The Salvation Army and other shelters and charities in the area report a desperate need for donations of hats, gloves and socks for the homeless.

In Cook County, Illinois, six people have died from exposure so far this year. The most recent victim was Raymond Baylock, 58, whose body was found partially clothed early morning December 31 in Jackie Robinson Park. The medical examiner's office determined he died of cold exposure in an accident.

More than four years after Hurricane Katrina, thousands of displaced people are still living in abandoned houses in New Orleans, Louisiana. With overnight temperatures expected to fall into the mid-20s this week, many people living in these homes without heat are at risk.

Martha Kegel of UNITY of Greater New Orleans, a

network of agencies aiding the homeless, told *USA Today* that while a team is out looking for people who need shelter, "There is no way to get to all of them." She added, "I have a sickening feeling we're going to lose people to exposure."

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, a city where frigid temperatures in winter are not unexpected, the local Salvation Army Harbor Lights shelter has been packed. Workers from the shelter have been combing the downtown area looking for people who need a place to stay. Harbor Lights is funded by contributions from individuals, churches and businesses, and donations are down this year.

While no cold-related deaths have yet been reported in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma this year, homeless shelters report increasing numbers seeking refuge. Grace Rescue Mission, which serves up to 120 men, has been full since mid-summer. Scott Allen, the shelter's director, points to the poor economy and increasing unemployment as contributing factors.

Even before the current extreme weather conditions, Maryland's state medical commissioner determined that hypothermia was a contributing factor in four deaths in November and December. As a warning of what is to come, last winter as a whole hypothermia contributed to 54 deaths across the state.

As the cold wave ravages the US, snow and winter weather continue to bring dangerous conditions to many areas of Europe. In Britain on Tuesday, up to 8 inches of snow fell in parts of Scotland and Northern England, disrupting travel for millions of people. London's Gatwick airport was closed Wednesday morning, while Heathrow, Birmingham, Luton and Southampton airports were operating with delays and cancellations.

The severe winter weather is expected to last at least another week. In Sussex, about 5,000 homes are without electricity. Thousands of schools have been closed and about half the UK workforce has reportedly stayed home as authorities have warned people to use their vehicles only in an emergency.

Temperatures plunging to as low as -22 Centigrade (-8 Fahrenheit) have claimed the lives of 122 in Poland this year, mostly the homeless. The main river, the Vistula, has frozen over, raising fears of major flooding.



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