

Death toll rises from North American “polar vortex”

Matthew MacEgan
8 January 2014

The “polar vortex” which has assaulted North America over the past several days has left hundreds of thousands of people without major utilities, and reports of deaths are trickling in to news outlets across both the United States and Canada. The lack of adequate infrastructure that has exacerbated the weather’s impact has proved the most devastating for ever-growing homeless populations.

A polar vortex is a pool of counter-clockwise rotating air that forms over the North Pole or other polar regions. While the condition usually remains in the far northern regions of Canada, this particular incarnation was felt as far south as Florida and as far east as Great Britain due to a “kink” that developed in the vortex’s winds. This vortex is already the second major storm system to pummel the United States’ Midwest and Northeast since the beginning of the New Year. The first caused at least 19 deaths and was responsible for thousands of flight cancellations and power outages.

Atlantic Canada received a total of 38 cm of snow on Friday before the system moved across to the island of Newfoundland, where severe weather caused a fire that resulted in the loss of power for 190,000 customers. 65,000 of those residences remained in the cold and darkness through Monday and Tuesday where their occupants waited for utilities to be restored. Newfoundland and Labrador reportedly received 15 inches of snow on Saturday.

On Monday, more than 4,500 flights in the United States were canceled, and more than 14,000 were delayed. Three thousand more flights were canceled on Tuesday. Schools and government offices across the eastern United States, even as far south as Georgia, were closed Friday and remained closed on Monday and Tuesday. The entire state of Minnesota remained closed for the duration while Nashville, Tennessee

schools are also slated to be closed until Wednesday.

A winter storm warning was issued for the Detroit area on Saturday, and a wind chill advisory was put into effect on Tuesday in Tampa, Florida, where temperatures dipped below 35 degrees Fahrenheit. Cold weather shelters opened elsewhere in Florida on Monday. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo declared a state of emergency for the western part of New York, where up to 36 inches of snow were expected to fall with wind chills taking the temperature down to 40 degrees below 0.

As of Tuesday, 30,000 customers in Indiana remain without electricity due to downed power lines, and the Electric Reliability Council of Texas declared its second highest emergency level, giving them the option to order rolling blackouts. A power company in South Carolina was forced to implement 15-minute blackouts for the same reason.

Three Amtrak trains were stranded over Monday night as subzero temperatures brought severe snow and ice buildup onto the tracks. The approximately 500 passengers were 80 miles west of Chicago on Monday afternoon, where they remained stranded until charter buses began to arrive Tuesday morning to rescue them. While some reported having adequate heat and food, others explained to Good Morning America that they were forced to wear coats and were unable to use overflowing toilets and clogged sinks for 14 hours.

Tom Moore from the National Weather Service told NBC News that under conditions such as those experienced in the north and central United States, frost bite can set in on exposed skin within five minutes. “A person not properly dressed could die easily in those conditions,” he explained. “Anybody living out in the streets should be rounded up and put into a shelter. The repercussions for not [doing so] could be deadly.”

The Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness reports on its web site that there are approximately 750,000 homeless people in the United States, 44 percent of whom live unsheltered and 23 percent of whom remain chronically homeless for extended periods of time. It also shows that over the course of a single year anywhere from 2.5 to 3.5 million people in the United States will live either on the streets or in a homeless shelter.

A homeless man in Chicago explained that “a lot of shelters are full during the winter time.” He continued, “I have no choice. You know survival is rough, so I go on the trains to keep warm, or in the train stations, or in the stores they let you go in to keep warm.”

The Pacific Garden Mission, which has provided shelter since 1877, is seeing occupancy rates, reaching 1,050 on Monday night. An operator of the mission told reporters that “we need more blankets, we need more gloves, hats, these things we need. The government does not support us, but the city will bring people here for us to house.”

Temperatures reached 36 degrees below freezing in North Dakota, where an estimated 2,069 homeless people live. A 2012 report shows that in Minnesota, where temperatures reached 40 degrees below zero on Monday morning, 10,214 people are homeless, 3,546 of them children. A September 2013 report shows that 52,400 homeless people live in New York City, where temperatures fell to 4 degrees Fahrenheit, breaking a 118-year-old record low. The same report states that thousands of these homeless are unsheltered and sleep in the streets and subway systems every night. Furthermore, many homeless people go uncounted, making these reported estimates conservative at best.

The polar vortex has been responsible for at least 17 known deaths in the United States so far. A 90-year-old woman was found dead stranded next to her car in Ohio, and a one-year-old boy was killed in Missouri when his vehicle collided with a snow plow on Monday. Other deaths, which have reportedly occurred in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan, have resulted from exposure to the extreme cold and heart attacks while shoveling snow.

On Sunday, a space heater sparked a fire in New Albany, Indiana, killing three children and sending another to the Indianapolis Burn Center. According to the investigation, the fire was caused by the close

proximity of combustibles to the heating device. The National Fire Protection Association reports that space heaters accounted for one-third of home heating fires in 2011. Despite these statistics, many impoverished families are forced to heat their homes in this fashion due to worsening economic conditions and living standards.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact