

Twenty-six died from the cold in Chicago area this winter

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Twenty-six cold-related deaths have been reported this winter in the Chicago area, claiming the lives of elderly residents and many homeless people who lacked access to adequate shelter, heating, and assisted care.

According to the Cook County medical examiner's office, nearly 50 percent more cold-related deaths have occurred in the Chicago area so far this winter than the entire season's average over the last several years. Of the 26 cold-related deaths confirmed so far, 4 occurred during the "polar vortex" of January 5-7, when temperatures dropped to minus 16 degrees.

The record cold temperatures have exposed the brutal reality of homelessness in the city. The city's largest shelter has broken two records in the last three months, with well over 1,000 people sheltering within its walls, many on floor mats. It is not the cold alone, but the social consequences of years of cuts to mental health and other social services that are reflected in the 25 to 30 percent increases in need being reported by shelter workers.

The Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) has a capacity of 3,000, most of which is interim housing. Between 600 and 700 beds are available in homeless shelters. Catholic Charities' 287 beds in Cook and Lake counties are full.

The DFSS operates warming centers—six community warming centers, and six for seniors, whose fixed incomes often prevent them from adequately heating their homes—open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with one offering overnight shelter. The centers have extended their hours to 8 p.m. on some of the coldest days. The DFSS's Matt Smith reported that between January 5 and 7 of this year, more than 1,500 people had used the warming centers.

In its December 2013 report on Hunger and

Homelessness, Chicago officials at the US Conference of Mayors reported an 11.4 percent increase in homelessness over 2012, and anticipate a further rise in 2014. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that about 7,000 people are on the streets of Chicago at any given time. In July 2013, a Chicago Coalition for the Homeless survey identified a total of 116,042 homeless people in the city, in shelters, on the streets, or living with friends or family. Of these, 18,669 are homeless students, most living doubled-up with family or friends.

Filthy, pest-ridden and violent conditions in shelters keep many people on the street. As people seek any way to get out of freezing temperatures, city transit rail cars and buses are remarkably full at off-peak travel hours. Recent and highly publicized cuts to Chicago Transit Authority train cleaning and maintenance have created conditions where trains are coated in road salt and sand, and litter and other debris pile up in the cars.

The trains and buses can be very tense environments. Since the shutdown of half the city's mental health facilities in the last several years, the poor who are mentally ill live on the street or in the county jail (see "Cook County jail most crowded jail in the US"). Some homeless people on the trains and buses are in need of treatment for paranoid schizophrenia, and lash out at other riders whom they perceive to be a threat. Public begging on the trains, while never rare, is now a regular phenomenon.

In addition to intense cold exposure from inadequate shelter and access to heat, the homeless are also increasingly at risk of cold-related death due to the increased prevalence of alcoholism and substance abuse. Alcohol consumption increases the sensation of feeling warm, while increasing actual heat loss to the body's vital organs. It impairs shivering, decreases

one's awareness of environmental conditions, and increases the risk of falling. The autopsies for nearly all of the confirmed deaths among the homeless in Chicago this winter, including those found dead in alleys and under bridges as well among other residents found dead in their homes, listed alcohol intoxication as a contributing factor.

In addition to the deadly burden of the record-cold temperatures on the homeless, 18 of the 26 people who have died from the cold so far in Chicago were elderly. Police reports and autopsies reveal that several of these elderly residents were found dead or dying in their homes without adequate heating. Those who had apparently fallen or collapsed outside near their residences were not found in some cases for days.

Freezing temperatures and inadequate indoor heating exacerbate the health conditions of the elderly, particularly for those who are unable to receive adequate medical care and social assistance. The elderly and those with heart disease and other serious health conditions face increased danger, since their ability to maintain a normal internal body temperature often decreases, and because harsh winter weather often requires additional work, leading older people to overexert themselves.

With the brutal cold temperatures expected to continue into mid-March, the cold-related deaths are expected to continue. This is inseparable from the rising costs of health care and the systematic cuts to Medicaid, social services, pensions, and retiree benefits that have been made by Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, Illinois governor Pat Quinn, and the entire Democratic Party in collusion with the Obama administration.

Emanuel's city budget proposal for 2014 consists of various tax and fee increases, and the beginning of a phase-out of retiree health care benefits at the end of 2016, with a resulting rise in monthly premiums for many retired workers (see "Chicago mayor announces elimination of retiree health subsidies").

The mayor's attack on the conditions of Chicago workers is accompanied by the Illinois state legislature's December 2013 passage of pension cuts, the raising of the retirement age by five years for workers currently under 45, and the elimination of 3 percent annually compounded pension adjustments in favor of much lower "base amounts" to which smaller

increases would be applied. Chicago city workers stand to lose an estimated one third of their potential pension earnings from the changes, a loss of income that is estimated to amount to \$145 billion over the course of 30 years.



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