

Freezing temperatures lead to dozens of deaths in the US

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Record low cold temperatures have gripped the Eastern half of the United States in recent days, leading to dozens of deaths from freezing temperatures and home-heating-related fires throughout the country.

At least ten people have died from the cold this winter in the Chicago area alone, according to the Cook County medical examiner's office, after a 51-year-old man was found dead Wednesday. In Milwaukee a 58-year old homeless man was found dead near a liquor store on January 1, while another Milwaukee resident, aged 91, died in his unheated home, which had a temperature of 30 degrees, on January 3.

Even more deaths have been caused by house fires this winter, many of which were caused by the use of space heaters. On Monday, a fire in Erie, Pennsylvania, caused by a space heater, engulfed a two-story apartment building and left a dozen people without a home. Another house fire Monday, in Roy, Utah, left a home temporarily uninhabitable for the family of five living in it. Two of the children were treated for smoke inhalation.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, space heaters were the cause of thousands of home fires and hundreds of deaths between the years 2007 and 2011. Despite the danger involved, many Americans resort to using portable space heaters because they are unable to keep up with gas bills.

Temperatures dipped as low as -15 and -25 degrees Fahrenheit in parts of the Midwest and Northeast and, even as low as -54 degrees in one area. Many school districts around the country have announced school closures as a result of the cold.

The homeless have been affected particularly badly, with increasing numbers seeking refuge in shelters provided by charities and church groups.

"It's been colder the last two years than before," said

lifelong Detroit resident David Winans, who is currently staying at the Detroit Rescue Mission shelter. "It's not unusual for people to freeze to death."

The cold weather also poses immense difficulties for the millions of Americans who struggle to keep up with their bills. Major cuts in social programs that occurred last year have compounded these difficulties. As a part of the farm bill passed in February of last year, about 1.7 million people around the country experienced food stamp cuts averaging \$90 per month. Hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers also experienced cuts in unemployment benefits as a result of a congressional deal reached in December of 2013.

"Housing is a problem," stated David. "The system makes it very difficult to qualify for section 8 because there is paperwork that many don't have access to, and the stipulation that you need to be checked into a bed at a shelter for several consecutive days is very difficult for people to meet. If someone has a chance to make money at an odd job, and they leave, there isn't always a guarantee they will be able to get a bed again for that night."

In Detroit, the largest poor city in America, social conditions have been exacerbated by the citywide bankruptcy which recently terminated. The bankruptcy included cuts to city worker pensions, the elimination of health care and death benefits for thousands of retirees and dependents, and the selloff of city assets.

In addition to the bankruptcy, tens of thousands of city residents had their water shut off last year in order to make the water department more attractive for investors. And recently, 75,000 homes around Detroit, occupied by over 100,000 city residents, have been served foreclosure notices. The foreclosures will take effect during the course of the current year.

Reporters from the WSWS spoke to several Detroit

residents in warming centers located in the city. “Not all of the visitors to the center are unemployed,” stated Linda Werthman, who has volunteered at the Ss. Peter and Paul Jesuit Warming Center for the past three years. She gestured to one of the guests and stated: “The one man who is sleeping at the table near the wall has been sleeping for three hours now. He has a job where he has to work nights and so he comes here afterwards, in the morning.”

Marissa Misslin, the director of the warming center, estimated that “about 80 percent of the guests are homeless” but she added, “it was hard to say for certain.”

“Typically we have more people coming in at the end of the month. My guess is that this is because people have resources at the beginning of the month which run out towards the end, prompting them to utilize services like this warming center.”

“I’ve only been going to warming shelters for the last three weeks,” said Harvey Bailey, a 65-year old resident of Detroit. “But I’ve been looking for an apartment I can get soon.”

“If it just wasn’t so cold, if the weather wasn’t so bad it wouldn’t be as bad ... I’m a victim of circumstance and so are all these other people here.” He added, “I’m retired now, but I used to work at University of Detroit Mercy as the Director of Project Maintenance.”

“I’ve lived in Detroit my whole life,” said Kevin Allen. “I had a job and a house only two months ago. I used to drive a high-low at a factory I worked at.”

“If you’re homeless, you’re going to have to find a place to warm yourself. You’ll have to go place to place, shelter to shelter, warming center to warming center. You can stay at one for a while but then it will close, like this one will in a bit.”



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