

Fourteen cold-related deaths in Chicago region since November

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Extreme cold hit the Chicago region in early January, when arctic air moving through the region with significant winds caused wind chills to plunge to -20 Fahrenheit for several days. The National Weather Service warns that frostbite can occur in a matter of minutes in such extreme conditions.

Harsh winter weather poses severe risks for the most vulnerable population—children, the elderly, the poor and the homeless. Since the first severely cold weather in November, 14 people have died in Cook County, which includes the city of Chicago.

The most recent victims of the cold were three men found dead, frozen to death, on January 12 inside an otherwise abandoned home in the Avondale neighborhood of Chicago. The Cook County Medical Examiner's office determined that they died from hypothermia, with alcohol intoxication as a contributing factor. Neighbors said that the men likely were squatting and were homeless. Two of them were in their 40s and the third was in his 50s.

On January 3, a 62-year-old man was found dead in a vacant building on the city's Far South Side. Ronald Turner was believed to have been homeless, and the medical examiner listed his cause of death as heart disease and cold exposure.

Ben, an unemployed 70-year-old man who was out asking for donations on downtown State Street on January 13, spoke with the WSWs about the effects of the cold temperatures.

"I'm 70 years old. I'm too old to be out here in the cold, asking for help. But who is going to hire a 70 year old? The money I do get goes towards buying a room for the night to stay out of the cold. If I don't have enough, I ride the train," Ben explained.

Chicago's transit system has two L (subway) lines that run 24/7, and during the winter, it is common to

see homeless people riding in the middle of the night to stay out of the cold or to try to get some sleep.

That brings its own set of risks though. "If you go to sleep, someone will cut your pocket open and take your money, or steal your bag," Ben said. "There is no security. But, the shelters are full by 8pm, plus, they put you out at 5am."

During the extreme cold last week, the city's largest shelter—the Pacific Garden Mission—was over capacity. On the night of January 7, 1,075 people, including 300 women and children, crammed into the 990 bed facility, sleeping on mats when all the beds were taken.

The same shelter was over capacity several nights during the notoriously bad winter of 2013-2014. Despite this, no new emergency shelter beds were added in Chicago in 2014, even as the homeless population continued to rise.

The 2014 US Mayors' report on Hunger and Homelessness states that shelters in Chicago did not need to turn away homeless individuals or families in 2013 because they lacked capacity. Yet they did have to "increase the number of persons or families that can sleep in a single room; consistently have clients sleep on overflow cots, in chairs, in hallways, or other sub-par sleeping arrangement; and increase the number of beds in current facilities."

In effect, while no one was turned away, individuals had very strong incentives to risk another situation to escape the cold.

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) estimates that in 2013-2014, there were 138,575 homeless individuals in Chicago. This represents a 19.4 percent increase from the previous year. Most of those counted by CCH are sharing space with friends or relatives with no address of their own.

The Department of Family and Support Services

“point in time” count from 2014 found 6,294 homeless individuals either staying in shelters or on the street, but it does not include those who temporarily stay with a relative or friend as homeless, which the CCH finds to be the majority of the homeless population.

Chicago Public Schools reported a record 22,144 homeless students in the 2013-2014 school year, an 18.6% increase from the previous year. Eighty-eight percent of these students were staying in friends’ and relatives’ homes, often in overcrowded conditions.

During the day, aside from warming centers, libraries around the city become a crucial space for homeless individuals to escape the cold and access resources. But despite the size of the library system, hours are limited—on Sunday, 77 out of 80 locations are closed.

Last winter, there were 32 cold-related deaths in Cook County, more than double the total for several years before. With 14 deaths already in the middle of winter, the total for 2014-2015 will also likely surpass all recent years except 2013-2014.

Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who is campaigning for his reelection in February, on which he has spent nearly \$5 million so far, has made no recent comments about cold deaths in Chicago.



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