

Four homeless dead in Portland, Oregon since beginning of 2017

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Four homeless people died of exposure on Portland, Oregon's streets in the first 10 days of 2017. The deaths were directly the result of unusually cold temperatures and record snowfall; temperatures had dropped into the teens, along with a record 12 inches of snow.

Portland's Democratic Mayor, Ted Wheeler responded by declaring a state of emergency and issued an appeal for volunteers and donations of food, clothing and blankets. He also announced the opening of city-owned buildings as a supplement to the inadequate and overcrowded shelters, and the activation of emergency beds.

While these limited measures may prevent immediate additional deaths from exposure, the four recent deaths take place against a backdrop of an ongoing and grim toll of homeless lives.

The deaths of 279 homeless persons in the Portland area since 2011—when the medical examiners' office first started recording these fatalities—underscores not only the life-and-death conditions facing the homeless on a year round-basis but makes clear the entirely predictable, and therefore preventable, nature of these latest deaths. In 2015, 88 homeless persons, the highest recorded so far, died on Portland's streets.

The official figures are unquestionably lower than actual death totals since the survey deliberately excludes those who died while under medical care, in a health care facility or a transitional living situation, such as a hotel room. A 2008 survey determined that nearly half of 650 homeless people interviewed were medically compromised.

There is no national count of homeless deaths in the United States, however the National Coalition for the Homeless estimated in 2010 that those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness suffer 700 deaths

every year due to hypothermia.

A January 2015 one night, or "snapshot," count of homelessness in the Portland city and Multnomah County area tallied nearly 4,000 homeless men, women and children. The "snapshot" method has been criticized by homeless advocates as inherently limited, as has conducting the count in January when many homeless desperately seek whatever housing they can scrape together to shelter themselves from the cold.

According to the city's web site, the 2015 count found that 1,914 homeless were in shelters while another 1,887 survived on the street. Additionally, 653 homeless consisted of families with children.

The plan of the Democratic Party-dominated City Council to construct 1300 units of low-income housing vividly highlights its indifference and callousness to the victims of the for-profit housing system.

First, the plan fails to address the full scope of homelessness and, second, it totally fails to provide housing or rehabilitation programs for an indigent population that often struggles with mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction as well as the growing number of homeless workers who have given up on finding a job.

Indeed, the death of 52-year-old Karen Lee Batts—one of the four homeless individuals who have died this year—was precipitated by her eviction for failure to pay two months' rent of \$338. Despite her diagnosis of schizophrenia, market-driven considerations—non-payment of rent—forced the mentally ill woman, unable to take care of herself, onto the streets.

The *Oregonian* quoted Martha McLennan, director of the nonprofit Northwest Housing Alternatives which evicted Batts: "Right now, our mental health system, our addiction system, our domestic violence system are all based on the victims seeking out support, and if they decline services, those systems kind of go away."

Even as conditions facing working class and poor people have deteriorated, the financial prospects for the real estate market have flowered.

A major driver of homelessness in the Portland area has been the massive rise in housing costs in which lower-income homes and rentals have all but disappeared. Average home prices rose slightly over 15 percent from April 2015 to April 2016, to \$325,400 according to Zillow, average rentals are \$1603, while an average two-bedroom apartment rents for \$1753 per month.

Across the country, the number of homeless, graphically documented in the proliferation and persistence of tent cities, has grown even as politicians, the media and industry assert the revival of the economy nearly a decade after the 2008 financial crisis.

In 2015, six years after the recession's so-called end, more Oregon residents were in poverty than the year before the recession began. A study by the Oregon Center for Public Policy found that, "In 2007, prior to the Great Recession, the share of Oregonians that lived below the federal poverty line stood at 12.9 percent. In 2015, the year with most recent data, 15.4 percent of Oregonians—more than one in every seven—were poor." Over 600,000 currently scrape by below the federal poverty line.

The growth of poverty and the increasing economic precariousness for ever-larger sections of workers and youth is not an aberration but the deliberate policy pursued by the Obama administration over the last eight years in order to funnel wealth from the bottom to the top 1 percent. The Trump administration intends to carry out this same policy, only more nakedly and with greater brutality.



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