

Homelessness sharply increases in Los Angeles County

Thomas Gaist, Marc Wells
9 June 2017

The number of homeless living in Los Angeles County grew by 23 percent over the last year, rising to 58,000. The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) registered double-digit increases in the number of Angelenos living on the street in Antelope Valley, San Gabriel Valley, Metro LA, West LA, South LA, and East LA County. Since 2015, Los Angeles city and county administrations have maintained a state of emergency in response to the sustained rise in homelessness.

During the past year, Los Angeles' youth homeless population between 18 and 24 surged to nearly 6,000, an increase of 64 percent over 2016. An uptick of 41 percent was also registered for youth under 18.

Almost 5,000 veterans sleep on the streets of Los Angeles every night. Nearly one-third of Los Angeles' homeless are battling some form of mental illness. Such cases have increased 13 percent in the last year, while the number of homeless with HIV/AIDS has increased a whopping 67 percent.

According to the Continuum of Care, part of the Homeless Services Authority, the numbers are even worse: more than 55,000 people experience homelessness on any given night in Los Angeles alone. This represents a 26 percent increase from last year and it does not include the neighboring cities of Glendale, Pasadena and Long Beach.

The number of homeless in Los Angeles suburbs and outlying areas grew significantly as well in the opening months of 2017. The homeless population in Antelope Valley and East Los Angeles County jumped by 50 percent to 4,600 and 5,200 respectively, the highest increases. The figure for the San Gabriel valley grew by 1,000 to nearly 4,200.

An alarming figure is the rise in chronic homelessness in the county: in one year an increase of

20 percent has been registered, bringing the total to 17,531. Another significant figure is the number of sheltered homeless people: a mere 15,000, only one out of four.

These figures are doubtlessly an undercount. However improved, the methods of measurement utilized ignore a substantial mass of homeless people who find shelter with friends or relatives. Moreover, the report reveals an increasingly polarized society, where vast masses are approaching unprecedented poverty levels, if not being thrown into homelessness itself.

Los Angeles housing is the least affordable of any city in the United States when rent is compared to income. More than 2 million households in the counties of Los Angeles and Orange are faced with a housing bill higher than 30 percent of their income.

Since 2008, the situation facing Los Angeles renters has worsened drastically as a result of the slashing of at least \$500 million in federal and state housing aid to the city. The state housing redevelopment budget, valued at \$275 in 2008, was completely defunded after 2015.

Rents have soared by over 30 percent during the past two decades, while the average income of renters has fallen. The median income of Los Angeles renters has fallen by \$1,500 since 2000, while the median price of housing increased nearly \$3,800.

As of January 1, 2017, the median asking price for housing in Los Angeles was \$2,500, a price that requires an hourly wage of \$48, according to the University of California Urban Analytics Lab.

Homelessness would increase even further with the implementation of President Donald Trump's proposed budget, which proposes to cut an estimated total of \$3.7 trillion in social programs for the next 10 years, from Medicaid, the federal health insurance program for the

poor and disabled, to food stamps and welfare benefits.

An example of the impact of social programs, albeit utterly inadequate, on homelessness is shown by the 21 percent decline in unsheltered people in families. This change was mostly due to the effects of an increase in families receiving CalWorks Temporary Homeless Assistance. In the 2017-18 budget proposal by Democratic California Governor Jerry Brown, CalWorks suffers a 2 percent cut justified by a projected decline in caseloads, the opposite of what the homelessness report evinces.

The continued growth of homelessness in Los Angeles, one of the main urban centers in the most advanced capitalist country on the planet, underscores the brutality of the existing social order, and its incapacity to meet the most basic needs of the population.

Within the framework of the capitalist organization of economy, the extraction of profits from production requires that the living standard of the working class be held down as close to bare subsistence as possible, with large sections permanently excluded from the labor process altogether.

Although often cynically presented by the political and media establishment as a matter of the “laziness” and “lack of personal responsibility” of individual homeless persons, the epidemic of homelessness arises from these economic, social and political processes.

The rise in homelessness is in fact a direct consequence of decades of policies—pursued at federal, state and municipal levels by both Democrats and Republicans—which redistributed wealth from the bottom to the top.

Especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the ruling class has responded to the qualitative deepening of the capitalist crisis by escalating its assault on the wages and living standards of the vast majority of society. Workers now face vicious attacks not only on their housing, but on all basic amenities of modern life, including nutrition, health care, employment and culture.

The LAHSA report also shows that more than 550,000 low-income households are severely burdened by housing costs in Los Angeles County. It therefore suggests 552,000 more affordable rental homes for very and extremely low income households. This contrasts with what is being planned by the political elite.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, a Democrat, noted that homelessness has persisted “through administrations, through recessions... Our city is in the midst of an extraordinary homelessness crisis that needs an extraordinary response. These men, these women, these children are our neighbors.”

What is this “extraordinary response” he is preparing? By force of two measures (H and HHH) the local government is planning to create or subsidize a paltry 15,000 housing units and pay for services to support those living in them. In other words, the political establishment is determined to make homelessness a permanent feature of modern society.

The ruling class views the provision of affordable housing and other social goods as an unacceptable drain on profits. From their standpoint, there is nothing to be lost, and much to be gained, from the expulsion of large sections of the population from the housing system altogether.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact