

Homeless rate among Seattle public school students rises by 55 percent

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Two years after Mayor Ed Murray declared a “homelessness state of emergency” in Seattle, a new report has shed light on the explosive growth of student homelessness within the city’s public school system. The “tech boom” that Seattle has experienced over the past several years has coincided with a sharp rise in student homelessness in the city and across Washington State, as working families are pushed out of housing by soaring rents and meager wages.

Seattle is headquarters for both Amazon and Microsoft, the tech giants whose corporate owners, Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, are the two richest men in America, with fortunes estimated at \$100 billion and \$90 billion respectively. Together with Warren Buffett, these three richest Americans own more wealth than the bottom half of the American population.

While social inequality grows exponentially, no serious efforts have been made by Democratic Party officials to address the plight of homeless students in Seattle, whose intolerable living conditions serve as an almost insurmountable barrier to getting a decent education and reflect a deepening social crisis in the United States and internationally.

The report—published in early November by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH)—found that the number of homeless students, including those living “doubled-up” with relatives or other families, in Seattle Public Schools grew by a staggering 55 percent between the 2012-13 and 2015-16 school years. In 2015-16, the total number of homeless students stood at over 3,600, or more than 6 percent of the student population. Over half of these students had also been homeless for at least one of the prior three years.

Although some schools served far more homeless students than others, the number of homeless students

increased in every Seattle neighborhood except for Beacon Hill, where the number declined slightly. A staggering 97 percent of the city’s public schools had at least one homeless student in 2015-16, and 71 percent had more than 10. Interagency Academy, a network of alternative high schools for struggling students, reported a 36 percent homelessness rate among its students that year.

Homelessness had predictable effects on student achievement and absenteeism. During the 2015-16 school year, students in stable housing were proficient in English at a rate of 69 percent and in math at a rate of 66 percent. By contrast, homeless students met standards in English at a rate of 35 percent and in math at a mere 30 percent. Homeless students were also four times more likely to transfer at least once during the course of a school year. Meanwhile, rates of chronic absenteeism were 2.5 times higher among homeless students compared to housed students and over half of homeless students in grades 9-12 were chronically absent.

The Seattle report is the latest in a series by the ICPH examining student homelessness in various locations across the United States. The rate of growth in student homelessness in Seattle is among the fastest in the country. Between the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years alone, student homelessness increased by 20 percent across the city, roughly the same increase experienced in New York City public schools over the same year.

In August, the WSWWS reported that the number of homeless students in New York City has grown by 33 percent since 2011 and today approaches 100,000. Similar to Seattle, student homelessness increased in every borough during this period, which has coincided with a drop in official unemployment figures and a

stock market boom following the 2008 crash.

The official unemployment rate in Seattle today stands at 3.7 percent, down from 5.3 percent at the start of the 2012 school year. However, average apartment rental prices have grown by nearly 35 percent over the same period, from \$1,585 to \$2,138. Even with Seattle's \$15 an hour minimum wage—promoted above all by pseudo-left politicians and the trade union bureaucracies—working families are increasingly being forced out of a housing market that has seen the fastest price increases in the nation over the past year, due in large part to Seattle's much-heralded “tech boom.” As a result, Seattle today has the third largest “official” homeless population in the country, behind only New York City and Los Angeles.

Student homelessness has been rising throughout Washington state in recent years. According to an annual report released by the ICPH in July, the state experienced a 30 percent increase in student homelessness over three years from 2012 to 2015. In 2014-15, four school districts across the state served more than 1,000 homeless students each, and homeless students made up more than 20 percent of the student population in 10 districts.

The sharp rise in student homelessness is an indictment of the policies of Barack Obama, who never tired of telling audiences that his America was “the best time in history to be alive.” Certainly it is for Bezos, Gates and the super-rich who were and are the real constituency of both the Democrats and Republicans.

Increasing levels of homelessness in Seattle, New York, and elsewhere are a reflection of the intractable crisis of American and world capitalism. Following the financial crisis of 2007-08 and bailouts of the banking industry, jobs that were lost as a result of the crisis have been replaced by contract, part-time, and temporary work across the United States. These low-paid positions, which account for the vast majority of job gains during the “recovery,” often have no benefits and minimal job security. As a result, many workers have given up on finding employment that would do little to meet the needs of their families anyway.

In 2014, a panel convened by Democratic Mayor Ed Murray released a plan, called the Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda (HALA), for the city to build 20,000 new affordable housing units over 10 years. To put this number in perspective, Seattle was

short 23,500 “very-low income” housing units alone in 2014. Since then, no significant progress has been made toward the achievement of this timid proposal which—even if carried out as Democratic Mayor-elect Jenny Durkan has pledged—will be of little comfort to the thousands of working families already forced into homelessness in recent years.

For his part, while student homelessness soared across Washington, Democratic Governor Jay Inslee signed an unconditional \$8.7 billion tax handout to the airplane manufacturer Boeing in 2013. The deal—ostensibly to “maintain and grow [Boeing's] workforce within the state” —was the single largest corporate tax break any state had given to any company in U.S. history. This prostration, which Boeing rewarded by laying off 15 percent of its workforce in Washington over the following years, belies handwringing by Democratic politicians over a supposed lack of funds to address the state's housing crisis.

As the WSWS wrote in July, “Democratic Party politicians represent a system that has nothing to offer, except gentrification and the ever-widening chasm between the super-rich and their upper middle class backers on the one hand and the vast working class majority on the other. Only the independent struggle of the working class, armed with a socialist program, can tackle the desperate social crisis reflected in student homelessness.”

This latest report on the explosive growth of student homelessness in Seattle, under a Democratic mayor, governor and president, only further underscores the urgency of this task.



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