

Nashville, Tennessee: Homelessness at record levels despite pledges from politicians and business leaders

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Despite pledges by Nashville city officials to reduce homelessness, the number of homeless rises every year, and so do their deaths. But that's not how the city's former mayor and now Democratic candidate for governor of Tennessee would like you to think of it.

In a 2013 puff piece titled "Why Nashville's Solution to Homelessness is a Model for other cities." in Mic.com, then Nashville mayor Karl Dean touted a public/private program he pledged would reduce homelessness.

"This effort truly shows how government, nonprofits, and the business community can work together to make progress on reducing homelessness," Dean said at the time.

The Mic.Com reporter dutifully gushed, "Nashville's story is one of hope forged by collaboration between government and the private sector. It is also a story where human compassion shines through byzantine layers of bureaucratic institutions."

But there is little compassion here for the homeless and Dean's proposed foul partnership with profit accomplished nothing.

On an average night in January 2015, there were 2,365 homeless in Nashville, with 1,124 in emergency shelters, 560 in transitional housing and 470 living on the street, according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors' 2015 Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness.

That marked an almost 5 percent increase compared to 2014-2015, putting Nashville in the top 10 cities with growing homeless populations, the *Tennessean* newspaper reported earlier this year.

"The numbers illustrate a homeless struggle in Nashville that has worsened even as the city prospers economically on many fronts. Rising housing and rent

prices in Nashville have made housing affordability more elusive than ever, forcing more people to the streets, homeless advocates say," the newspaper stated.

But those figures represent the homeless who stay alive in a city that a 2015 Brookings Institution report concluded ranked sixth in the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the country in income inequality.

There are not only more homeless in Tennessee's capital, but they are dying in increasing numbers.

In 2017 to date, 116 homeless men and women have died, an increase of 20 over 2016, according to Open Table Nashville, which tracks the deaths of the homeless. The organization reported that it was the largest number of deaths the group had ever seen.

"There were several months in there it seems like we were just losing folks left and right," said Lauren Plummer, the group's housing and outreach coordinator.

Some died of what is being described as "natural causes." But for every homeless person facing freezing nights huddled over a steam vent or in cardboard boxes and cars, succumbing to pneumonia or trying to cross busy roads with not even basic crosswalks, there is nothing "natural" about their deaths.

Open Table also listed frostbite, being hit by vehicles and stabbings as causes of death.

Many of those deaths could have been prevented, Plummer told the *Tennessean*. She said that research shows that the lifespans of people who experience chronic homelessness get shortened by 25 years. The group held a memorial service recently for the homeless who died this year.

Richard Schweid, author of *Invisible Nation: Homeless Families in America* and a former

Tennessean reporter, began his research for the book in Nashville.

“In addition to the high number of single men experiencing homelessness, thousands of children and their families are without a home, and the city does little to help them,” he commented in a previous WSWs article on Nashville’s rising homeless rates.

“Both children experiencing homelessness with their families, and chronically homeless individuals are more vulnerable to numerous illnesses than their housed counterparts,” Schweid commented after being told of the increased number of homeless deaths. “These include asthma and other respiratory illnesses; and skin conditions, ranging from eczema to head lice,” he said.

According to Jack Shonkoff, director of Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child, “In addition, being homeless can cause the production of certain stress hormones like cortisol and norepinephrine in youngsters, which can negatively affect their health for their entire lives.”

Putting a face on the great divide between the “It” city’s prosperous residents and its homeless is the case of Katie Quackenbush, 27, and Gerald Melton, 54.

Quackenbush, an aspiring musician and daughter of a prominent Texas attorney, was charged with attempted murder in the August 26 shooting of Melton, a homeless man.

The shooting occurred in the early morning hours when Melton complained that Quackenbush had parked her Porsche SUV near where he slept, and he complained that the exhaust fumes were bothering him. The two argued before Quackenbush, who was with a friend who remained in the car, took a pistol, loaded it and shot Melton twice in the stomach.

In recent grand jury testimony, Melton testified that Quackenbush asked him if he “wanted to die tonight,” the *Tennessean* reported.

In other testimony, it was revealed that Melton survived the shooting, but no thanks to Quackenbush. After the shooting, Quackenbush and her friend left Melton gravely wounded on the sidewalk and went to a Taco Bell restaurant.

In Portland, Oregon, the WSWs reported on the results of the failure of the Democratic Party-dominated City Council to anticipate and make plans for the “readily predictable disaster” when in the first 10 days of this year one newborn and four homeless adults

froze to death.

Another recent WSWs piece told of a homeless man who died of suffocation when he became stuck in a clothes donation bin in San Diego. Police speculated that he may have been trying to stay warm.

Back in Nashville, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Karl Dean and his wife saw a rise in their income along with the rise in the homeless.

As the *Tennessean* reported December 20, “The vast majority of the \$19.2 million Dean and his wife earned between 2013 and 2016 came through capital gains. In total, they earned \$15.3 million from capital gains during that period.” As governor, Dean would offer no more hope to the homeless than he did as Nashville’s mayor.



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