

# Cold wave, house fires prove lethal for US homeless, poor

Patrick Martin  
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A record cold wave extending from the Upper Midwest through the Great Lakes and into New England contributed to numerous deaths across the United States Christmas week. Homeless people and the elderly were particularly at risk, but the greater stress imposed by severe weather has yet again laid bare the social crisis affecting all sections of the working class.

Deaths due to hypothermia (exposure to extreme cold) were reported in Chicago; Cincinnati, Ohio; Rapid City, South Dakota; and Ogden, Utah over the Christmas holiday period.

The victim in Chicago was a 62-year-old man, whose name has not been released, found unresponsive in his car the day after Christmas. His was the fourth death in Chicago attributed to exposure since the current cold season began in late October. The other victims were all men suffering from multiple health problems aggravated by alcoholism.

The man found dead Tuesday at a bus stop in downtown Cincinnati, 55-year-old Kenneth Martin, was homeless. In Rapid City, Alan Jack, aged 69, was found dead outdoors early Christmas morning. The 79-year-old woman, Verna Marriott, found dead the morning of December 23 in Ogden was suffering from dementia and had wandered from the home she shared with her daughter's family in the middle of the night.

An even greater death toll comes from the rising number of house fires, frequently triggered by space heaters or other precarious methods of keeping warm in severe weather. These fires for the most part represent the intersection of the cold wave with the bad housing conditions endured by impoverished layers of the working class.

Twelve people died Thursday night, including a one-year-old child, as the result of a fire which ripped

through an apartment building in the Bronx, New York City's poorest borough. While a cause of the fire has yet to be officially determined, initial reports indicate that the fire may have been triggered by a small child playing with a stove. The fire comes less than two weeks after a house fire in Brooklyn killed a mother and her three children.

Two fires in eastern Iowa over the weekend killed nine people, including four children, bringing the total number of fire deaths in 2017 in Iowa to 51, the highest level in more than a decade.

Four members of one family died in a house fire early Christmas Day in Blue Grass, just west of Davenport. One of the four residents escaped but later died in the hospital. The other three died inside their home.

A second fire in a Davenport mobile home December 21 killed a mother and her four children. The mobile home had no working smoke detectors and, because it was owner-occupied, was not subject to fire department inspection.

Kelsey Clain, 23, and two of her children, Jayden Smead, five, and Carson Smead, two, died at the scene. Isabella Smead, nine months, died in hospital December 24, and Skylar Smead, four, died similarly on Tuesday, December 26.

In the neighboring state of Minnesota, a house fire Tuesday in Hibbing killed four people, including two grandparents, Steven and Patricia Gillitzer, and two grandsons, Todd Gillitzer, nine, and Anteus Adams, three. A third grandson, Jonathan Gillitzer, eight, was rescued by his grandfather and survived, but Steven, a retired firefighter, died trying to save other members of his family.

Firefighters from five departments fought the blaze in temperatures of around 20 below zero Fahrenheit, with wind chills as low as 35 below. The house had smoke

detectors which were sounding when firefighters arrived at the scene. There were two other fire deaths in Minnesota since Christmas Day, bringing the total for the year to 63, the most since 2002.

Two children were killed in a house fire in East Franklin, Pennsylvania, northeast of Pittsburgh, on Thursday morning, December 28. The 13-year-old girl and 10-year-old boy were caught by a fast-moving fire, but five other residents—the children’s mother, her boyfriend, and three siblings escaped by jumping out second-floor windows. The day before, a 16-year-old boy was killed in a house fire in nearby South Bend, Pennsylvania.

Cold weather stretching into the southern portion of the Plains states created treacherous driving conditions. Four women—two teenagers, a 20-year-old and a 47-year-old—died Tuesday in a car crash near Abilene, Kansas caused by icy roads. The car hit a guardrail on a bridge and went over, landing 25 feet below on its roof, according to the state highway patrol.

The cold shattered records throughout the affected area, home to half the population of the United States. International Falls, Minnesota, proverbially the coldest spot in the continental US, set a record low of minus 36 degrees Fahrenheit Wednesday morning, four degrees below the 1924 record. Detroit tied its previous record of minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit the same day.

The National Weather Service issued extreme-cold advisories for New England, the Northeast, the Midwest and parts of the West. The forecast for New Year’s Eve in New York City was a wind chill in negative numbers, some 40 degrees colder than normal. City officials said that emergency shelter space was being opened for thousands of homeless people who might otherwise be on the streets this week.

As the cold wave set in, city after city across the United States has reported record annual death tolls among the homeless. Memorial services were held in several hundred cities on December 21—the shortest day and longest night of the year—to mark these tragic events.

The cities involved include many that might not be thought of as centers of homelessness and premature death—Charlotte, North Carolina, with 28 deaths, triple the previous high; Nashville, Tennessee, with 118 deaths; Denver, Colorado, with 232 deaths.

These grim totals were dwarfed by the figure from

Los Angeles, a staggering 805 deaths among the homeless, up from 719 in 2016. The city is the center of US homelessness, and particularly of those living on the streets rather than in shelters or doubled-up with relatives and friends.

By one estimate, documented in a three-minute clip posted on Instagram on Christmas Day, there are 20,000 people living on the streets in downtown LA’s Skid Row alone. The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty visited this area as part of his recent tour of high-poverty areas in the United States, and cited it as part of his report, which concluded that for many millions of people, “The American Dream is the American Illusion.”



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