

Deaths continue to mount amid freezing temperatures across much of the US

Trévon Austin
4 January 2018

The death toll from cold-related fatalities continues to rise as below freezing temperatures persist across much of the United States. Freezing temperatures were reported Tuesday night in every state of the continental US Tuesday night.

At least three more lives have been claimed since Monday when the death toll stood at nine. The deep freeze reached even the deep south, forcing cities to open warming centers.

In Houston, Texas, police said two homeless people died from exposure to freezing cold temperatures. Tuesday night was Houston's coldest of the season, reaching temperatures in the low 20s Fahrenheit.

A 75-year-old woman was found dead, along with her three dogs, in her home in Clemmons, North Carolina. Her home caught fire, and firefighters found her deceased while fighting the flames. According to the *Winston-Salem Journal*, the elderly woman had various health issues and needed an oxygen tank.

In Hutchinson, Kansas, a family's home was set ablaze after an attempt to thaw out frozen pipes with an open flame. The entire family was able to escape their home, but firefighters stated the cause of the fire is common when temperatures drop below freezing.

The rising number of deaths from cold at the beginning of this year has exposed the severity of the affordable housing crisis in the United States, the wealthiest country in the world.

As the market value of homes in the US reached a record high of \$31.8 trillion by the end of 2017 the number of homeless people increased for the first time since the Great Recession, with more than 553,000 people recorded as homeless.

Economists point to rising home prices, economic growth, and a drop in national poverty levels to indicate a recovery from the 2008 housing crisis, but these

“official” figures only obscure reality. In 2016, 13.5 percent of Americans were living in poverty—a rate similar to pre-2008 recession levels—but even the high official rate is not representative of the actual conditions confronted by millions of workers.

According to *Vox*, the way poverty is measured in the United States is sorely out of date. Poverty levels are based on the “subsistence food budget” for a family. The measure was developed in 1961 using family food consumption data from 1955. In no way does it capture the needs of a household in 2017.

Much of the rise in homelessness is connected to the ever rising cost of housing while real wages have stagnated. The median wage in the United States has remained virtually unchanged since the 1970s, only rising by 0.2 percent per year when adjusted for inflation.

According to the *Guardian*, the hourly wage needed to afford housing in New York City is \$27.29, and \$22.78 in Los Angeles, but the median US wage is just \$17.86. The reality is similar in other cities across the nation, meaning millions of Americans cannot afford housing.

The tax reform bill signed into law late last year by President Donald Trump is already threatening to exacerbate the affordable housing crisis. According to a report by the NHP Foundation, the tax law is expected to eliminate 300,000 affordable housing units over 10 years, primarily because it will reduce the value of banks' low-income tax credits, which finance half of all affordable housing units.

The need for affordable housing in the US is quite pressing. According to Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, the number of renter households in the US has been steadily rising, but more than a quarter of the growth is represented by

households living on less than \$15,000 a year. For these Americans, a missed paycheck or loss of a job could mean homelessness.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact