

Cold-related deaths in Wisconsin expose abysmal social conditions

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The number of recorded cold-related deaths in Wisconsin spiked amidst the onset of extreme freezing temperatures beginning Tuesday, December 26. Since New Year's Eve, three people in Milwaukee County, the state's most populous and poorest area, have died as a result of exposure to freezing temperatures, with six additional cold-related deaths throughout the state of Wisconsin.

Reports obtained from the Milwaukee Medical Examiner's office and local media coverage expose the broader social problems which contributed to these unnecessary deaths among the most vulnerable layers of American society, including lack of access to adequate and affordable healthcare, housing, and basic social supports.

Mark Henderson, 34, an unemployed African American man, was found dead and "frozen solid," lying between a shed and wooden fence on December 31. Henderson was found by his girlfriend and the homeowner whose shed his body was found lying near.

Henderson had been involved in a car accident the previous evening and fled the scene to hide in a nearby residential area, attempting to evade law enforcement. Henderson had been on parole for involvement in a fatal 2012 car accident and likely made a desperate attempt to hide from the police, fearing additional prison time.

Statements from his family members revealed that Henderson did not have a home of his own and would stay with different family members and relatives. Henderson also had asthma and did not have a primary medical doctor, resorting to getting his inhalers from other people and through emergency room visits.

Dolores Marrari, 88, was found dead in her garage on January 3 improperly dressed in freezing weather. When she was found by family members after not

answering her phone she was wearing only a nightgown and an adult diaper and did not have any shoes on. Marriari was widowed and lived alone, and was reliant on Meals-on-Wheels and a visiting nurse for basic living support.

John Boehm, a 51-year-old construction worker from Milwaukee, was found dead in the back of a van parked in an alleyway the same day. Boehm's body was found partially nude, suggesting paradoxical undressing by victims of hypothermia shortly before death. Boehm's partner told police that Boehm had been intoxicated and had left their apartment the previous night after an argument over his drinking to smoke a cigarette and did not return inside. His partner assumed that he had left to stay with a friend after he didn't return inside.

Approximately two hours north of Milwaukee in Green Bay, a 60-year-old woman died the evening of January 2. She was found outside of her home after returning in a cab from a night out drinking. Investigators suspected that she had fallen while trying to retrieve her house keys and hit her head and died from the cold overnight.

In Fond Du Lac, 27-year-old Lindsey Klima, a CNA nurse, was found dead outside near the lakeshore of Lake Winnebago, 15 hours after going missing from a New Year's Eve party at an ice shanty. She had been last seen alive stepping out of the shanty to smoke a cigarette while only wearing jeans and a light jacket.

Deaths were also clustered in and around Madison, the state's capital and second-largest city.

Alice McGaw, 84, was found dead in a suburb of Madison on the morning of December 29 outside the Memory Care assisted living facility she resided at, with the Sun Prairie medical examiner's office citing hypothermia as a likely factor in her death. The assisted living facility she lived at and died outside has been

previously cited by the Wisconsin Department of Health Service for 10 violations since 2016.

A Madison man, 60-year-old Jeffrey Bracey, was found outside on the morning of December 29 with extremely low body temperatures and wearing clothing unsuitable for the freezing temperatures. He lost pulse in the ambulance transporting him and was declared dead at the hospital.

Vance Perry, a 57-year-old veteran, was found dead in the State Capitol parking ramp by an employee on December 31. The previous day, Perry had left William S. Middleton Memorial Hospital, where he received routine treatment for paranoid schizophrenia. After going to the hospital for his regular appointment, he was admitted for mental instability. When he voluntarily discharged himself, Perry was allowed to leave the hospital without an arranged ride home and was wearing clothes inappropriate for the freezing temperatures outside.

Perry's daughter told local news station WMTV that on account of her father's mental illness he was known by his family and his health care providers to have a history of wandering outside during cold weather. A community relations spokesman for the hospital stated that the hospital had no grounds to prevent Perry from discharging himself or making sure that he left with transportation back to his home and weather-appropriate clothes despite the freezing temperatures and history of mental illness.

Prior to going missing, Joseph Moen, 49 of Barron County in the state's rural Northwoods had been last seen December 24 when he was dropped off at the side of the road with no jacket or weather-appropriate clothing. He was reported missing three days after he missed required daily sobriety tests at the Chetek Police Department. On January 3, Moen was found dead from hypothermia in a wooded area in a makeshift shelter of branches and leaves and underdressed.

At least one cold-related death could be directly attributed to the cruel decision to close homeless shelters and cut back social services. Darryl "Joe" Peddicord, 49, was found dead in a used car lot in late November in Kenosha, apparently attempting to seek shelter during cold temperatures at night. Kenosha County's only low-barrier non-restricted shelter, which Peddicord and other homeless in the city had relied on, closed in May 2017.

The elderly are particularly vulnerable to cold temperatures due to the prevalence of inadequate indoor heating, exacerbating health conditions, and inadequate access to social assistance and healthcare. The ability for the body to regulate internal temperature often decreases in older age. It can also be affected by health conditions such as heart disease and the prevalence of physical overexertion due to additional work required during winter weather. Those suffering from dementia without proper care and assistance are also at particular risk of wandering outside during the cold and exposing themselves to deadly environmental conditions.

Among the working class, impoverished, and the homeless, those who struggle with alcoholism are particularly at risk of cold-related deaths, as alcohol consumption increases the sensation of bodily warmth, while the actual loss of heat to the body's vital organs occurs as a result of lowered ability to regulate internal temperature. This results in impairment to the body being able to shiver to generate heat, lowers awareness of environmental conditions, and increases the risk of falls. Holiday and New Year's parties involving heavy drinking during freezing temperatures outside can inadvertently produce dangerous and life-threatening situations.

Above all, the cold-related deaths reported in Wisconsin and those yet to come this winter in the Midwest and across the United States are socially produced killings. They are the unnecessary outcome of an economic and political system in which millions of the most vulnerable sections of society including the elderly, the homeless, the physically and mentally disabled, and those struggling with substance abuse are left to die in isolation and without access to shelter, healthcare, emergency assistance and other basic social rights.



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