

Homeless family of four found dead in van in Orange County, California

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A homeless family of four was found dead in their van at a Garden Grove, California shopping center parking lot on Thursday evening less than five miles from the Disneyland theme park in neighboring Anaheim. The tragic incident further exposes the housing crisis in Orange County, California where police have recently been working to clear out hundreds of people from homeless encampments.

The grim scene, about 30 miles southeast of Los Angeles, was discovered after a homeless woman noticed a strange odor emanating from a white Honda van and reported it to the police. On Friday afternoon, the coroner's office confirmed that bodies found in the van were 41-year-old Phunyouphone Kanyavong, his still unnamed girlfriend who was in her 20s, along with their nine-month-old son and two-year-old daughter. Both children were found in their pajamas and still in diapers. Relatives reported that the family was from Garden Grove and had been homeless for some time.

Police reported the probable cause was carbon monoxide poisoning and that the family had likely been dead for two or three days before their bodies were found. The van was parked next to a grass median, which probably blocked the exhaust system and caused the deadly fumes to enter the van. The family appeared to be sleeping in the back of the van when they died with the windows covered by blankets and a sunscreen. Police reported no signs of trauma or foul play and were waiting for results of toxicology tests as of this writing.

Dan Walbon, 64, himself homeless until recently, told the *Orange County Register* that he had known the family and that they had been living in their van for about six months. The family would go between the CVS parking lot in the shopping mall and a nearby park, where they collected empty bottles and aluminum

cans to be recycled for cash. Often, he would give them food. "The kids kind of looked like they were undernourished... They didn't have a chance at life," Walbon explained.

Currently there are at least 450 families in the county who are waiting for some sort of housing, according to Elizabeth Andrade, director of Family Solutions Collaborative, 11 agencies providing services to homeless families. "Who knows how many haven't come forward, haven't been assessed, are back and forth with friends and family, or are paying for their own motels?" Many parents often do not seek help because they worry that their children will be removed from their custody. Also, in light of stepped up ICE raids, many who may not have proper documentation are afraid of being detained and deported.

Throughout California, as well as Oregon and Washington, homelessness is on the rise at the same time that housing costs are soaring. Last month, authorities dismantled Orange County's largest homeless encampment along the Santa Ana River. Up to 1,500 people had been living along the river bank, some for over a decade. In a six-day blitz, sheriffs and Anaheim police removed almost 1,000 people, some of whom were temporarily relocated to motels and homeless shelters.

Orange County's homeless population has increased by 13 percent since 2013, with 4,792 people recorded as homeless during last year bi-annual point-in-time survey. More than half were found to be sleeping outside, in their vehicles or in other areas not intended for human habitation. Last year was the second deadliest year on record for the homeless population in Orange County, with 193 recorded deaths, just behind 2016 when 203 homeless people died. Homeless deaths have spiked since 2005 when 54 deaths were recorded.

The county is divided up among exclusive beach communities and small elite enclaves and predominantly immigrant and working-class suburbs like Garden Grove and Anaheim. Luxury mansions and homeless encampments sit within a just a few miles of each other. Millions of tourists stream through Anaheim's Disneyland theme park every year while just a few blocks away thousands of people sleep rough on the street.

According to the latest Census data, Garden Grove has a very diverse population of 175,000, which is 39.1 percent Asian, 36.8 percent Hispanic, and 20.8 percent white. In 2016 median household income was \$60,522, near parity with the national figure but placing it in the bottom tier of cities in Orange County.

The average monthly cost for a rental unit in the city is nearly \$1,600 per month, eating up nearly a third of median household income. A worker laboring full time at the state's minimum wage of \$11 an hour would have to give up 70 percent of their income just to stay in the average studio apartment.

What is particularly striking about the latest tragedy is the fact this homeless family was Asian, underscoring the reality that homelessness is a class issue, affecting the working class regardless of ethnicity or race.

There are 600,000 Asian Americans living in Orange County, a complex and diverse section of the population, depending on generational and migration differences. Vietnamese, Koreans, and Filipino Americans are the first, second and third largest ethnic subgroups. Immigrant workers from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos face higher rates of mental illness because of the trauma from war and displacement as refugees.

While 12 percent of Asian Americans in Orange County live in poverty—lower than the 13 percent for the general population—certain ethnic groups face higher rates. 20 percent of Thais, 16 percent of Vietnamese, and 15 percent of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders live below the poverty line.



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