

As winter sets in Portland's homeless face exposure to the cold, lack of beds and COVID-19

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There are currently more than 14,500 people living in Portland, Oregon who are homeless or confront housing insecurity, and they face an unprecedented situation as winter weather approaches.

Portland's severe weather shelters do not have enough beds to shelter the growing number suffering from homelessness even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, fueling the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. The demand for shelter is already immense and a surge is expected in the winter months. Experts estimate that as many as 150,000 households across Oregon will be unable to pay their rent in January, putting them at risk of homelessness after a statewide moratorium on evictions expires on December 31.

The number of chronically homeless people in Portland grew to 1,770 in 2019, a 37 percent increase since 2017. Marc Jolin, the director of the Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services (JOHS), noted in the agencies latest point-in-time count of the homeless that the assessment revealed a terrible reality: "Half reported having a mental illness. Half reported a substance abuse disorder. A little less than one-third reported both."

The 2019 JOHS report noted: "This year the Count identified 2,037 people who were unsheltered, 1,459 people sleeping in emergency shelter and 519 people in transitional housing. In all, the Count found 4,015 people who met HUD's definition of homelessness." Then there is an additional population of about 12,480 people who lacked stable housing at some point in 2019, perhaps facing eviction, seeking housing assistance, sleeping on couches or in basements, or "doubling up" to live in tight quarters with someone

else. Thus, prior to the economic devastation of the pandemic there were already roughly 14,500 people who were homeless or face housing insecurity.

Multnomah County, where Portland is located, will only have half of the 300 beds available that are intended to shelter homeless people when temperatures drop below freezing. Restrictions aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19 have rendered many shelters unusable, and no new shelter locations have been established, despite the fact that 80 people in the region died of exposure to the cold in 2019.

"As it stands right now, because of COVID-19, we cannot guarantee that everyone who needs it will have a shelter on the worst nights of the year," Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury told the *Oregonian* at the end of October.

That no new locations have been established to shelter those suffering from the cold is a criminal outrage, considering that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the emptying of many buildings in downtown Portland. The Oregon Convention Center is unable to serve as a shelter because, according to one spokesperson, the site is still under contract for several different events. These events can only be canceled by the clients. The situation is no different with the Veteran's Memorial Coliseum. The prioritization of profits over human life is on display in brutal fashion.

Local Democratic Party politicians have emphasized that homelessness has been a chronic problem in Portland for decades. Portland mayor Ted Wheeler has openly acknowledged the fact that the state of Oregon has "defunded our mental health infrastructure" and has done so "over a period of decades." The mayor openly acknowledges the problem, but Wheeler himself

has played a central role in overseeing police sweeps of homeless tent camps, defending the financial interests of real estate and private housing, and doing nothing to expand health and housing infrastructure to meet urgent needs.

The Oregon Department of Housing and Community Services reported in August that “the state needs at least another 5,800 shelter beds.” However, as of today, the city of Portland has resorted to urgently asking the general public for help in locating structures that can shelter the homeless from the cold while protecting them from COVID-19.

The homelessness crisis is not merely Portland’s problem; it has engulfed the whole country. The WSWS reported in May that “a January 2020 Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) counted roughly 568,000 people experiencing homelessness in the United States. However, there is every reason to believe this count is a large underestimate. The National Center for Homeless Education reported that 1.5 million students surveyed said they experienced homelessness during the 2017-18 school year, with California at the forefront with 263,000 such students.” An enormous 37 percent of those suffering from housing insecurity are, according to HUD, “in unsheltered locations such as on the street, in abandoned buildings, or in other places not suitable for human habitation.”

Nearly 67 million Americans have filed for unemployment since mid-March. Millions who have been unable to meet their rent are on the brink of losing their homes as local and state moratoriums on evictions lapse. A nationwide halt to evictions issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ends on December 31. Neither president elect Joe Biden nor the Trump administration show any indication that they will provide any emergency relief.

There are currently at least 60,000 homeless people in New York City, according to David Jones, president of New York’s Community Service Society (CSS). The city is on the brink of a housing disaster. CSS housing analyst Samuel Stein noted that “as low-income tenants are suffering through this economic and public health crisis, major investors are gathering billions of dollars to buy up buildings and extract maximum profits.”

According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services

Authority there are 18,395 sheltered and 48,041 unsheltered homeless people in Los Angeles County, a 13 percent increase from 2019. There was a 23 percent increase in homeless deaths in the first seven months of 2020 when compared to the same period last year.

It is clear that this national crisis will not be solved within the confines of capitalism, a social system that subordinates human needs to private profits. The expanding housing crisis in Oregon, across the US and internationally cannot be solved without rational, scientific, planning directed democratically by the working class. It is not possible for housing to become a guaranteed social right until there is a massive redistribution of wealth, expropriating the banks and large corporations. This enormous redistribution can only be carried out by the working class on the basis of conscious socialist program.



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