

Seattle, Washington area homeless face police, coronavirus and lack of shelter

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Due to the complete lack of adequate assistance during the pandemic, millions of Americans face eviction and homelessness. Further, the already-homeless population confronts a dire situation, with reduced shelter capacity this winter.

In Seattle, Washington, 11,751 people were counted as homeless on a single night in January 2020. Of those counted, 47 percent were “unsheltered.” This number is expected to be even higher this year.

Many low-income families in a region which includes Boeing’s billion-dollar airplane manufacturing facilities and the headquarters of logistics and tech giant Amazon are facing the prospect of homelessness. Even those in the middle-income bracket are facing an enormously difficult situation, so much so that 40 percent of them say housing costs are a significant “burden.”

Anti-homeless legislation passed in Renton, Washington, imposes significant new requirements on those in need of shelter and those who seek to provide it. The restrictions in Renton limit the number of individuals that can be sheltered to 100 and requires that homeless shelters be at least two miles apart. This kind of anti-homeless legislation is expected to spread throughout Washington, even as the number of those in need of shelter grows.

Tacoma Housing Now, a homeless advocacy group, attempted to bring attention to the plight of the homeless living south of Seattle in the city of Fife by providing 43 homeless people 18 rooms in a motel last month. These 43 individuals had been exposed to the rain and cold in the difficult month of December. The advocacy group paid for the first night’s stay, but demanded that permanent housing be found. No solution was provided by the city, and after five days the local police evicted the 43 on January 1.

The advocacy group had demanded that Pierce County pay the rent for the 18 rooms, but this demand went totally unheard. While the working class endures the greatest transfer of wealth to the ruling elite in history, with trillions being funneled into the pockets of the rich, there is no money to pay for rooms for those suffering from homelessness during the cold winter months.

The Fife chief of police stated that the cause of the advocacy group was “worthy and noble.” However, he followed this by stating ominously that, “procedures have now been put in place to ensure that if something like this were to occur in the future, it would be met with swift and certain actions reaffirming the position that Fife is not a city that is welcoming to criminals or people engaging in criminal activity, no matter how noble or important the underlying cause.”

This is a serious warning to the broad masses of working people in Washington state and throughout the country. As evictions increase, and the housing crisis deepens, any attempt to occupy a room, even temporarily, will be “met with swift and certain actions” if they are unable to pay. The inability to locate homes for these 43 individuals, or offer any substantial economic assistance to them, must also serve as a serious warning. The homeless and those seeking to aid them were broadly labeled as “criminals.”

Cal Anderson Park in Seattle, Washington was the site of another confrontation between the police and protesters last month. Homeless people had been living in an encampment at the park since early summer. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that cities not sweep through and remove encampments during the COVID-19 pandemic, except under extreme circumstances, because of the great risk

of spreading the virus. But Seattle authorities ignored the CDC and decided to clear the encampment on December 16.

Over 100 protesters arrived at the park and encircled the encampment. The police did not attempt to clear the area. Seattle police returned on December 18 and successfully began clearing the area of tents, but only after having arrested 21 protesters.

Homeless advocates were outraged by the police action. Seattle officials claimed they tried to get those without homes into shelters, but Alison Eisinger, director of the Seattle-King County Coalition on Homelessness, told the *Seattle Times* that it was “frankly beyond outrageous” to portray shelters as easily available right now. The city of Seattle did not address providing mental health services to the many people without homes suffering from mental illness.

King County, where Seattle is located, and Pierce County, where Fife is located, are both counties with some of the highest rates of COVID-19 infection in Washington. Fife County has had 26,839 cases with an average of 269 daily new cases. King County has had 65,267 cases with an average of 653 daily new cases. The constantly increasing numbers of homeless in these areas and the refusal to allow those without homes to stay in one place has directly contradicted CDC guidelines and facilitated the spread of the virus. This is yet another example of profits being placed before human life.

These current conditions are a product of the housing crisis in Washington state, which has grown worse every year since the turn of the century and is tied to the broader rise of inequality and private urban development.

Washington was 225,000 homes short of meeting the state’s needs as of 2015. The facts are stark; of the families in need of public housing, only 26 percent are served. The average time families wait to be provided public housing is 3.5 years. The last lottery cycle saw 82,261 families apply for a public housing voucher. Only one half of those families were accepted, and they were given the opportunity to be put on another wait list. Even with a voucher, and a spot on the wait list, families have to wait on average another 2.8 years to receive public housing. The number of homeless children in the state has increased by over 24 percent since 2013.

Rent in Washington state has gone up a remarkable 42 percent since 2014, while wages have remained nearly stagnant. Washington is the state with the fifth highest rate of homelessness in the US as of 2018.

The situation is bound to explode when Democratic Governor Jay Inslee’s eviction moratorium expires on March 31. The unemployment rate in Seattle peaked in April at 17.3 percent, with the total unemployed at 374,957. This unemployment rate is unprecedented in recent history. The unemployment rate never moved beyond approximately 10 percent in the last 25 years, even after the 2008 financial crash.

While city officials posture as progressive by not enforcing most sweeps the past year and “decriminalizing” the homeless population, they do not offer improved social conditions, jobs or decent housing that will ultimately provide the homeless with the necessary means to get off the streets.

Makeshift street dwellings and tent cities have become permanent features of the Seattle city landscape, with their inhabitants forced to live in unsanitary conditions, confront mental illness and addiction without proper medical care, and endure the cold, rainy climate. This is the reality for thousands of people under a city and state government that is entirely dominated by Democrats.

The vast sums of wealth that could be utilized to provide every person with their basic needs is instead hoarded at the top of society by the corporate and financial oligarchy. The year 2020 saw the world’s richest 500 people increase their wealth by a staggering \$1.8 trillion, to a total of \$7.6 trillion. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has seen his wealth rise by over \$70 billion in 2020 alone.



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