

In Hamburg, five homeless people die in the first week of 2021

Elisabeth Zimmermann**28 January 2021**

The homeless, the poorest section of the population, are also seriously affected by the coronavirus crisis. The current coronavirus-related restrictions in Germany, combined with a lack of aid from federal, state and local governments, amount to a death sentence for many homeless people in midwinter. In Hamburg alone, five homeless people died in the first eight days of 2021. In the last six weeks, there have been a total of eight fatalities in the city.

The Hamburg street paper *Hinz&Kunzt* reports that a 48-year-old homeless man died near the Landungsbrücken bridge on New Year's Eve. The next day, walkers found a 59-year-old dead on his sleeping mat in Schanzenpark. A little later, a 65-year-old died as a result of the harsh living conditions on the street. On the night of January 4, a 45-year-old man was found dead after seeking shelter under the roof of an apartment building.

On the morning of January 8, a passerby found the fifth victim, a 66-year-old man, lifeless on the city's central Reeperbahn. "The deaths on Hamburg's streets continue. It is yet another preventable death that leaves one speechless," *Hinz&Kunzt* commented.

Advocates for the homeless have demanded that the Senate, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, open up hotels that have been closed due to the coronavirus crisis and thereby provide safe accommodation in single rooms. The Senate has refused to do so, declaring that the city's three emergency shelters are sufficient.

Many homeless people do not feel safe in these shelters. The rooms with up to six beds provide no adequate protection against infection with COVID-19 nor any privacy. Many homeless people therefore avoid them and try to find an alternative on the streets, often with fatal consequences under the current, dangerous

conditions.

Hamburg is one of the German cities with the highest proportion of rich and super-rich individuals. In 2017, 42,000 millionaires lived in the city. Some 2,000 earned more than €1 million [US\$1.2 million] a year. According to the Federal Statistical Office, Hamburg is the German city with the most millionaires.

On the other hand, at least 50,000 children subsist on miserable Hartz IV welfare payments and homeless people are left to die on the streets. In March 2018, a census concluded that 2,000 Hamburg residents were homeless, almost twice as many as 10 years earlier. Since then this number has undoubtedly increased further due to high rents, rising unemployment and short-time work.

Homeless people have also died in many other cities this winter. In Augsburg, a 54-year-old homeless man died in the city centre in the first week of January. A man froze to death on a park bench in Wolfsburg, and in December, a 72-year-old homeless woman was found dead near the university hospital in Mainz. According to a police report, she had also frozen to death. In November, a 58-year-old woman died of hypothermia in the city of Freiburg.

Last weekend, a homeless man was found dead by a passerby on the Mauritiuswall in Cologne. He is also likely to have been a victim of the winter cold. The man reportedly came from Ukraine and had been officially registered in the city in 2019. In 2020, this was no longer the case. It could be that the victim avoided further contact with city officials due to the threat of deportation. This is often one reason why homeless people avoid all contact with officials, including even street workers.

By last spring and summer it was already clear that the situation for the approximately 678,000 people

officially considered homeless in Germany had worsened considerably. Many emergency overnight shelters, soup kitchens and facilities offering access to basic medical care were closed down or only in emergency mode due to the coronavirus. Long lines formed at the few food banks still open, and frequently not all those seeking help could be fed, as the *World Socialist Web Site* reported.

With the second COVID-19 wave and the winter cold, the situation for the homeless has deteriorated once again. While the German government hands out billions of euros to large companies and banks, no provision has been made to protect the poorest of the poor from the pandemic and ensure their bare survival.

Many initiatives to support the homeless have expressed concern about the lives and health of the poor and homeless. The National Federation of Service Providers for the Homeless (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Wohnungslosenhilfe e.V., or BAG W) documents cold deaths nationwide using systematic press evaluations. However, many deaths are not reported and therefore not recorded because there is no nationwide recording system. This means that a high number of unreported cases is likely.

According to the statistics of the BAG W, at least 320 cold-related deaths have occurred in Germany since 1991. This figure does not include the victims from the last weeks and the BAG W fears that the number of victims will rise this winter to exceed last year's figure.



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