

Homelessness in the US exploded before the pandemic

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A new “point-in-time” report from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) shows that homelessness increased significantly during the Trump administration. The report includes a detailed snapshot of the state of homelessness in the US in January of 2020—just before the COVID-19 pandemic set in—and compares it to figures from previous years.

It stands as an indictment of the Trump administration and begs the question of exactly how many more people have become homeless over the last year as millions lost their jobs and fell behind on their rent or mortgages.

The report found that essentially all major metrics of homelessness are on the rise. At the beginning of 2020, there were over 580,000 homeless people in the US, or just under one in 500. Last year was the fourth consecutive year of growth in the homeless population in the country.

While the homeless population under the Trump administration increased by some 30,000 people, or about five percent, the number of unsheltered homeless—those who lacked any sort of nighttime shelter at all, for example, a car—increased by 28 percent. Moreover, the number of chronically homeless people, those who have been homeless for over a year or who are consistently in and out of homelessness, increased by a massive 40 percent, reaching levels last seen only in the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis.

The growth in homelessness was distributed across both “red” and “blue” states, those traditionally controlled by the Republicans and Democrats respectively, though Democratic stronghold states tend to have much higher homelessness rates. California has the largest single state homeless count at 130,000, and percentage-wise is only behind Washington D.C., New York and Hawaii. In President Joe Biden’s home state

of Delaware, an infamous tax haven, homelessness increased by 26 percent between 2019 and 2020.

But the report only describes the prevailing conditions that existed before the pandemic.

From the beginning the *World Socialist Web Site* has characterized the COVID-19 pandemic as a “trigger event.” That is to say, the pandemic has not created a nightmare out of a good situation, but that the preexisting social setup laid the foundation for—if not the pandemic itself—its fallout, including mass deaths and economic destitution.

The HUD will not release a similar report for January 2021 until early 2022. But until then, a study of some key events of 2020 allows for an informed guess as to how these figures have risen still further over the course of the pandemic. While the pandemic changed everyday life in many ways, it did not change either the basic policies of the ruling class or its attitude towards the working class.

Almost immediately after the stock market crash in March 2020, unemployment in the country skyrocketed to over 15 percent. While it has since fallen back down, the current official figure of six percent is still higher than in previous years and is an underestimation of the real level.

When lockdowns were first instituted in March of last year, some 22 million jobs were lost. There has not been one week in the last year in which combined state and federal jobless claims did not total more than one million.

In September of last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) under Trump implemented a freeze on evictions as an emergency measure to fight the pandemic. From the beginning, however, the moratorium was laced with conditions that were stacked in favor of landlords. Residents had

to prove that they were impacted by the pandemic, that their income was below a certain threshold and that they had lost income in order to be protected.

Under Biden, the CDC has since adopted decidedly antiscientific policies. Most recently it has recommended reducing social distancing from six feet to three feet as a means to help the ruling class reopen schools. As CDC Director Rochelle Walensky put it, “Science evolves.” In other words, the CDC’s policy is to be subordinated to the prerogatives of the ruling class. One can expect the ban on evictions to “evolve” along similar lines.

When Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in 2017 and left 50,000 people displaced, Trump made a spectacle of tossing paper towels to the audience at a press conference on the island. Biden’s response to the victims of the Texas catastrophe last month was different only in that it was better stage-managed. The federal aid given to Texas was equally threadbare as that given to Puerto Rico, and little is being done to help those bankrupted by five-figure electric bills after the storm.

The CARES Act eclipsed the 2008 bailout of the banks by making trillions of dollars of virtually free money available to the financial elite. In the same year that the wealth of the world’s billionaires grew to new heights, with figures like Bezos, Musk, Gates and Zuckerberg seeing their net worth surpass \$100 billion, the working class lost their jobs, housing and quite frequently their lives.

The much-touted “American Recovery Act” will provide limited and temporary aid to millions of workers in desperate need. Called the “most progressive” bill since the New Deal, it establishes no new social programs, implements no taxes on the rich and all of its provisions will expire before the end of the year.

Democratic Senator Chris Murphy summed it up well, “Almost everything in this bill is simply an extension of the programs that Republicans were wildly enthusiastic about back when they were in charge of the White House and the Senate.”

Although Trump is out of office, the Biden administration is continuing his most important policies. His administration is continuing and even accelerating the aggressive maneuvers against China and is carrying out the same xenophobic attacks on

immigrants.

One can be sure that on the question of housing, Biden will adopt the same manner of anti-working class policies as his predecessor, and that the horrific rise reported on conditions during the Trump administration will continue under Biden’s. Combating this requires a decisive break with both parties of capitalism and the fight for socialism to reorganize society to meet the needs of humanity.



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