

# Cold temperatures expose crisis of homelessness and hunger in Missouri

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Evictions are contributing to homelessness in Missouri, where there was no state-level pandemic moratorium. According to *Evictionlab.org*, since mid-March 2020, there have been 42,796 evictions filed in the state of Missouri. Of those, more than 13,000 were filed in St. Louis and more than 7,900 in Kansas City in that period. Most took place outside the largest cities. Charities attempt to fill the gap left by limited social assistance but cannot compensate for the lack of state funding to tackle poverty, homelessness and food insecurity.

A cold snap that hit the state on January 19 exposed the desperate conditions that confront the most vulnerable sections of the population.

Local news station KMOV reported on the measures taken to provide warming for homeless adults and children in the St. Louis area. A warming bus near 13th Street and Chestnut Street in St. Louis City was used by over 50 men, women and children the night of January 19. Volunteer Jason Coker told KMOV, “They’re in a big hurry to get down there because they know if they don’t get down there in time, they’re going to miss a ride to the shelter which could potentially be the end of their life.” Warming shelters generally are for overnights only and make people leave in the morning.

Kansas City opened overflow warming shelters for the nights of January 20 and 21. The usual area shelters cannot handle the additional demand for beds in very cold weather. Rev. Randy Fikki of Unity Southeast Church told KMBC, “Yes, we get a lot of people that come into the shelter because they have frostbite, but we also have a lot of people coming into the shelter with burns because they’ve gotten too close to the fire or they’ve gotten too close to the propane tank.”

Fikki is the lead overflow coordinator during extreme temperatures for Kansas City, which buses homeless people to his church as needed. He made a moving plea for compassion for this most vulnerable population: “Lives are valuable. They are more valuable than buildings. They are more valuable than shelters. They are more valuable than red tape and they are more valuable than opinions. Let’s focus on lives first.”

A fire that broke out January 13 at a Kansas City homeless encampment beneath an Interstate 70 overpass killed 28-year-old Elizabeth “Izzy” Lindsey. At the time of her death, Lindsey had been living in her car, which did not run. She was enrolled

in school to be a Certified Nursing Assistant. She was mother to a young son. The local homeless population and homeless advocates expressed outrage and blamed the deadly fire on the lack of shelter. Lindsey’s friend, Jennifer McCartney of KC Heroes, said on a Fox 4 KC report, “There’s just not enough beds – period, that’s it. That’s the story. So the city needs to just continue to work more with all of these groups.” Lindsey was not the first unhoused person that McCartney knew who has died. “I don’t want to lose any more friends. I’m really sick of it,” she said.

The *Columbia Daily Tribune*, newspaper for Boone County in central Missouri, published a story on Gary and Jacqlyn Burgener and their two adult children, who were evicted from their home in August. The family fell behind on rent when their Social Security checks arrived late. They have lived mainly outdoors since then with the occasional reprieve when they were able to acquire hotel vouchers. Gary filled out an application for State Assistance for Housing Relief during the federal eviction moratorium but their landlord refused to sign it. “He wouldn’t work with us,” Gary said. Jacqlyn said. “We lived there five years. We thought we were good tenants.” The family lives in their 2007 Kia Spectra, parking it in out-of-the-way areas to avoid police harassment.

Cold temperatures are extremely dangerous, even for those who shelter in their vehicles. “We’re worried,” Jacqlyn told the *Daily Tribune*. “Even wearing three or four layers of clothes, with blankets and sleeping bags, it’s not warm enough.”

When the family can secure spots at an area warming center, high noise levels make it so they only get a couple hours of sleep at the most. They rely on community churches and soup kitchens for food.

Darin Preis, director of Central Missouri Community Action (CMCA), told the *Daily Tribune*, “That’s not an uncommon story.” He went on to explain that uncooperative landlords or inability to provide documentation are common reasons for individuals and families to be evicted. “We are seeing an increase in evictions. A lot of folks put off their rent payments.”

CMCA’s funding from the City of Columbia is running low. “It’s getting harder and harder to negotiate with landlords,”

Preis added. Roger Dyer, an attorney with Mid-Missouri Legal Services, reported, “I would say I had a pretty big increase. Over the past five or six months, it’s been busier, starting around August.” The pandemic prevented a 2021 count of Boone County’s homeless population. In 2020 the count was 230 homeless persons, 189 sheltered and 49 unsheltered.

As need grows, shelters and warming areas also struggle with pandemic capacity restrictions. Salvation Army’s Family Haven in St. Louis cut its 48-bed capacity in half for social distancing.

The *St. Louis American* published a story on evictions in St. Louis City and St. Louis County. Evictions have resumed in both jurisdictions after a brief pause over the holidays. Even through the temporary pause from December 22 to January 5, 44 evictions were performed in St. Louis County—six of which involved people being physically removed from their homes. Forty-five evictions were approved for St. Louis City between January 3 and January 10. The city executed 621 evictions for the year 2021.

Clarice Lipsey, of the Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council, told the *St. Louis American*, “Evictions are few and far between but they are happening.” She said that cold weather “complicates everything,” adding that “We’re at that point where we don’t know where the funding is quite yet to provide rental assistance or relocation assistance for individuals facing eviction. You have families who...have to leave and have no resources.” More than 1,700 St. Louis City residents received housing assistance through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP-1) between April and December 2021, but the program is currently paused. The program provided on average \$4,900 to recipients. About 2,930 St. Louis City and County residents are on a waiting list for the next round of assistance, ERAP-2.

Evictions are an issue in smaller Missouri cities, too. Central Missouri Community Action (CMCA) and several other organizations hosted two “Eviction Events” for Cole County residents the week of January 10. Cole County is where the state’s capital, Jefferson City, lies. Kate Amick, a benevolence coordinator at Common Ground, told KOMU that the events helped people navigate the assistance application process. “[The assistance form] needs to be completed online and a lot of individuals do not have access to computers or they might not be computer savvy,” she said.

A woman who came in for assistance and chose to remain anonymous said, “I had my daughter a year ago and I have been struggling with her since I am in school too, so I have been trying to balance out going to school and taking care of her as a single mom. This event is really going to impact both of our lives so I can be a good mom to her.” The woman had lost her job because of the pandemic. Amick said that pandemic job losses are a main reason families need help to pay their back rent.

Food is becoming harder to afford across the board. The US

Department of Labor estimates that overall food prices have increased 6.8 percent since November 2020 and the pandemic has caused increased hunger in the state. An estimated 8 percent of Missouri households are food insecure, with the number rising to 10 percent for households with children.

“We did see an increase in people who were using food bank services for the first time throughout the pandemic,” Katie Adkins, director of communication and marketing at the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri, told the Missouri News Service. “There were a lot of people who might have only needed help once, but we did see new folks or different folks coming in to get help from our partner agencies.” The Food Bank serves all demographics, from providing “buddy packs” for schoolchildren to food boxes for seniors.

The Southeast Missouri Food Bank reported that food insecurity rates in southeast Missouri are 17 percent overall and 21 percent for households with children. Throughout 2021, the Southeast Missouri Food Bank distributed 15 million pounds of food, serving an average of 70,000 people a month. Food Bank Chief Advancement Officer Lisa Church explained to KRCU how inflation is affecting the organization’s ability to purchase and distribute food. “We spent three times as much buying food as we did pre-pandemic, that’s due to higher need, freight costs for loads we buy doubled in some cases, and because of supply chain issues we didn’t receive the same level of donations from retailers and manufacturers.” Church further explained that the region, largely rural, has some of the worst hunger rates in the state. “On the one hand, we’re probably serving a few more people because people have a harder time making ends meet, and a lot of our counties are very, very rural, and in those very rural counties, there’s not a lot of job opportunities sometimes,” she said.

On top of daily food insecurity, schoolchildren are at additional risk of going hungry when classes are canceled due to staffing issues. About 1,300 meals were distributed to 341 students of the St. Joseph School District when classes were canceled January 20 and 21.



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