

Over 200 homeless deaths recorded during 2021 in Toronto

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Recently released data from Toronto Public Health (TPH) revealed that 216 people experiencing homelessness died in the city of Toronto in 2021. The annual death toll among the city's homeless has more than doubled within the past five years.

The data is based on information supplied by around 250 health and social agencies supporting people experiencing homelessness. In each of the five years of data collection, from 2017 to 2021, the largest number of deaths was among those aged 40 to 59 years. Males have consistently made up approximately three-quarters of all deaths.

Drug toxicity is the largest single cause of death, rising from 32 percent of all recorded homeless deaths in 2017 to 55 percent in 2021. Other major causes of death include hypothermia, suicide, homicide, accidents, pneumonia, cancer and cardiovascular disease. In 2021, 132 of the 216 deaths occurred in shelters, almost four times the 35 deaths recorded in shelters in 2017.

Doug Johnson Hatlem, a street pastor at Sanctuary Ministries of Toronto, said that Mayor John Tory, city councillors and the Shelter Support and Housing Administration should all be held to account for their failure to tackle homelessness. "The problem will not just go away until people are housed. And so, we saw a 50 percent increase in deaths, and it's an enormous number that somebody has to take account for. It's not an acceptable number. I think a great number of these deaths were preventable," he said.

A.J. Withers, a steering committee member of the Shelter and Housing Justice Network and adjunct faculty in critical disability studies at York University, said some of the deaths happened when the shelter system was more than 99 percent full. The absence of safer indoor shelter space, the dismantling of encampments and the toxicity of street drugs were "deeply concerning," Withers said. "The lack of safe supply, the lack of access to overdose prevention sites and lack of access to appropriate harm reduction really means that people die," he insisted.

"As the city does things like criminalize people in encampments, people get pushed further and further away from support systems and people die." Withers added that the real death toll among Toronto's homeless population is probably far higher because hospitals and emergency rooms do not report

deaths of unhoused people to TPH.

Dr. Andrew Boozary, a primary care physician and executive director of the Gattuso Centre for Social Medicine at the University Health Network, said Toronto cannot "go back to normal" because homelessness was already a public health crisis before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic itself has affected unhoused people disproportionately, he added.

"The solution to homelessness is housing. Shelters or encampments are not solutions to homelessness, it is housing. And so, we really need to ensure that every level of government is committed to housing as the solution. And if we don't see that concerted effort, these rates will only continue to increase," warned Dr. Boozary. "And that's on us as a society, because these rates are increasing, not because of individual failures, but because of our failure on delivering housing as a human right."

Toronto's 24-month housing and homelessness plan aims to create more than 3,000 new affordable housing opportunities by the end of the year, including 2,000 with social supports, according to the city. In February 2022, Toronto councillors approved an accelerated housing plan to provide an additional 300 "housing opportunities" through partnerships with housing providers and private market landlords.

Yet even if these targets are met, which is very much an open question given the miserable record of all levels of government in funding homeless prevention projects, it would mean that less than half of the more than 7,000 people officially experiencing homelessness in the city would receive assistance. In 2021, it was estimated that there were 7,347 homeless people in Toronto. Specific groups that were overrepresented included indigenous people, racialized people, people who first experienced homelessness as children, people who experienced foster care and people who identify as 2SLGBTQ+.

Both the provincial and federal governments have abdicated their responsibility to ensure one of the most basic social needs, housing, for the population. Every aspect of life, including the right to a roof over one's head, has been subordinated to the predatory demands of the banks and financial oligarchy. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported earlier this year:

Decades of public policy decisions aimed at slashing

budgets and making billions available to big business and the super-rich have created a situation where every year over 235,000 Canadians are homeless at some point. Another 1.7 million working people live in precarious housing, which in simple terms means they are one pay cheque, one accident, or one illness away from sleeping on the street. All of the established political parties, from the New Democrats on the “left” to the right-wing Tories, are responsible for this state of affairs. They abolished social housing programs in the late 1980s and 1990s, enforced massive attacks on wages and working conditions and gutted social programs that helped keep low-income earners off the street.

The supply of housing and its pricing have been left to rapacious property developers and institutional real estate investment corporations. While the cost of housing declined somewhat in 2020 as people stayed put due to the pandemic, the numbers began to climb again last year. In November 2021 the average rent for all property types in the Greater Toronto Area was \$2,167 a month, a 4.3 percent increase from the year before. Average home prices increased \$200,000 to \$1.3 million in the one-year period to March 2022.

A single person working full-time for the \$15.50 an hour minimum wage would barely be able to meet the average cost of a rental unit, which is to say that nearly 100 percent of his or her income would be required for housing alone.

None of the established political parties has any intention of changing this miserable state of affairs. On the contrary, governments at all levels are slashing funding for basic services as the federal government enforces multibillion-dollar spending increases for the military to ensure that Canadian imperialism can continue to wage war around the world.

In March, Toronto city authorities indicated that five homeless shelter sites set up during the COVID-19 pandemic would be decommissioned over the coming year. Two of these, the Better Living Center on Princes’ Boulevard and the former Days Inn on Queen Street, are to close by May 15.

At the federal level, the Liberal government has refused to commit the necessary resources to meet its demagogic pledge in 2017 to make housing a human right.

The latest federal budget, presented by Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland earlier this month, included more than \$8 billion in additional military spending, including a pledge to provide Ukraine with \$500 million worth of additional weaponry this year. The \$8 billion increase is over and on top of the increases already built into the Defence Department budget under the Trudeau government’s 2017 commitment to raise military spending by more than 70 percent to \$32.7 billion per year by 2026.

Moreover, the government has pledged that further increases

are in the pipeline to ensure Canada is ready to wage “strategic conflict” with Russia and China, just as soon as it and the Canadian Armed Forces can determine how the additional funding best be spent.

In her budget speech, Freeland called housing the ‘most pressing economic and social issue in Canada today.’ But very little of the new funding the government announced for housing is directed at the homeless and at reducing housing costs and improving the quality of housing for those with low incomes. Much of it was in the form of increased tax credits and tax-free savings accounts for those buying homes, and virtually all the additional money Ottawa is providing for building new homes is to flow through for-profit construction projects.

‘There’s a lot of smoke and mirrors here,’ David Hulchanski, a housing and community development professor at the University of Toronto, told CBC.

The corporate media, including columnists for the neo-conservative *National Post*, has praised Freeland for reining in government spending, i.e., tightening the screws on social programs to pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars funneled to the banks and big business during the pandemic. The budget’s passage in parliament was secured with the votes of the NDP. With the full-throated backing of the trade unions, the NDP has agreed to prop up the Liberals in parliament until 2025 under a “confidence-and-supply” agreement, thereby providing “stability” to a government committed to austerity at home and waging imperialist war in league with Washington abroad.

In evaluating the federal budget, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness stated, “(T)he government still lacks a clear strategy to achieve the goal of ending chronic homelessness and the budget most disappointingly did not go far enough to create an Urban, Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy.”

Last year, the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario concluded that it was unlikely that the province would achieve its goal of ending chronic homelessness by 2025. It found that more families were using shelters and that individuals were living in shelters for a greater length of time. The province’s 2020-2025 Poverty Reduction Strategy does not commit to any additional homelessness program spending.



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