

Homeless deaths in Los Angeles reached record numbers in 2021

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During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, deaths among the homeless reached record numbers in California, with a large number occurring in plain view of the public.

There are other factors that have contributed to the increase in homeless deaths, including the increased availability of Fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that is around 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin. Fentanyl analogues such as carfentanil can be 10,000 times stronger than morphine.

Many homeless suffer from mental illness, and self-medicate with street drugs that have become increasingly like a deadly game of Russian roulette.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the homeless population especially hard, with many cities seeing mortality more than doubled, while medical care for the homeless has become even more difficult to access while public health services are strained to combat the pandemic.

While officials and homeless advocates have rung the alarm regarding homeless deaths around the nation, the crisis is especially acute in California, where nearly a quarter of the nation's homeless population reside.

California is composed of 58 counties, but only a handful of them counted homeless deaths. Based on an analysis of these numbers, experts conservatively estimated that there were at least 4,800 homeless deaths in 2021 alone.

In Los Angeles County, while the homeless population grew by 50 percent from 2015 through 2020, homeless deaths increased by nearly 200 percent. According to the Office of the County Coroner-Medical Examiner, in 2021 the County averaged five homeless deaths per day.

Of these almost 2,000 people, 287 were found on

sidewalks, 24 in alleys and 72 on other pavement, only a portion of the total homeless deaths that occur annually across the United States.

According to a study by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, when compared to the general public, homeless people are 35 times more likely to die of a drug or alcohol overdose, four times more likely to die of heart disease, 16 times more likely to die in a car crash, 14 times more likely to be murdered, and eight times more likely to die of suicide.

As a result, the median age of death for the homeless is 63, which is far below the average US life expectancy of 77.

The California state and local governments have responded to the calamitous situation with paltry amounts of money, including funds to build 42,000 new affordable housing units, a drop in the bucket of what is required to contain the growing crisis.

Los Angeles County raised its sales tax in 2017 to generate approximately \$3.5 billion more over 10 years for homelessness programs. Using these resources, the county government claims to house 207 people every day, but it is estimated that 227 people become homeless daily, so the total continues to rise.

The situation is dire across the rest of the state as well. Between 2018 and 2020, there were 809 homeless deaths in Alameda County. In Sacramento County, at least three homeless people froze to death in 2021.

In the City and County of San Francisco, which has a population of 875,000, there were 331 homeless deaths between March 2020 and March 2021, more than double the number of previous years. The most common cause of death was acute drug toxicity, with fentanyl being the most likely culprit. Traumatic injuries, including murder and suicide, were the second leading cause of death.

Across California, homeless men, especially older men, die at rates far disproportionate to their share of the general population. For example, in Los Angeles County, men make up 67 percent of the homeless population, but represent 83 percent of homeless deaths. In San Francisco, men in their 50s have the highest rates of overdose deaths.

Vivek Murthy, the US surgeon general, has identified a pattern of men too poorly equipped to handle “triggers” such as major illness, the death of a spouse, or loss of a job. He added, “As men get older they tend to be less good at building and maintaining relationships. When people do not have a safety net to catch them in the form of community and strong healthy relationships, it’s much more likely they end up struggling with substance use disorders, with mental illness and homelessness.”

What Murthy fails to mention is the pivotal role that capitalism and the obscene polarization of wealth plays in creating the crisis of homelessness, addiction, despair and death. Local governments may pay lip service to addressing homelessness, whose public display disturbs the comfortable lives of the privileged upper middle class and the rich, but they cannot address the fundamental conditions that gave rise to the crisis.

No solution to this growing problem can be found within the confines of the capitalist system. The end to mass homelessness requires the mobilization of the entire working class on the basis of a socialist program to address these problems on an international scale, not just in the United States, but around the world.



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