

US heat wave endangers lives of most vulnerable, especially growing homeless population

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Millions of Americans are experiencing the second severe heat wave in two weeks across the United States. Around 70 percent of the population is expected to see temperatures in the 90s Fahrenheit and 20 percent will experience temperatures in excess of 100 degrees.

The extreme heat will be most severe for the homeless, who have little access to protection from the scorching heat. Heat-related fatalities in the United States total more than hurricanes, flooding, and tornadoes combined, with extreme heat responsible for around 1,500 deaths every year. An estimated 50 percent of these deaths are those without shelter.

Phoenix, Arizona, the hottest city in the United States with highs that reached 118 degrees last year, bears a significant portion of these deaths. In 2021, there were 339 heat-related deaths in the city, of which 130 were homeless individuals.

This many deaths of homeless people in a single city is astonishing. “If 130 homeless people were dying in any other way, it would be considered a mass casualty event,” Kristie L. Ebi, a professor of global health at the University of Washington told the *Los Angeles Times*. Such high casualty rates are reflective of the fact that homeless individuals are 200 times more likely to die from heat-related issues than those with shelter.

Deaths this summer are only likely to increase after economic hardships during the pandemic destroyed livelihoods and the expiration of a federal moratorium on evictions expired last year, resulting in a massive increase in the number of people thrown out onto the street.

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, there are as many as one million people without shelter on any given night in the US. Cities like

Dallas, Seattle, and Portland have seen double-digit growth in homelessness over the past couple of years. For the first time ever since the Department of Housing and Urban Development began to conduct point-in-time counts, the number of homeless people sleeping on the street in 2021 exceeded the number of single homeless adults staying in shelters.

Worryingly, the demographics of homelessness are increasingly shifting towards an older population in retirement. With the rising cost of living and limited incomes, many elderly people are finding themselves priced out of their homes and lacking the ability to find new ones.

During the pandemic, rent prices have skyrocketed in major cities across the country. Nationally, the average rent price grew by 11 percent, while in many major cities prices surged even further into the double digits. The increase in prices and stagnation of wages resulted in precarious financial situations for millions of individuals and families. This was especially true for those in retirement, who only make an average of \$1,658 per month from Social Security. Seniors from minority and poor communities often make significantly less than that amount.

In May 2021, the LeadingAge LTSS Center at the University of Massachusetts Boston found that more than 100,000 people aged 65 or over and 450,000 people aged 55 to 64 reported they would likely be evicted within the next two months. More than 300,000 people ages 65 and older and one million people aged 55 to 64 reported that they were behind on rent.

A study by the University of Pennsylvania in 2019 predicted that the number of elderly homeless would triple from 40,000 to 106,000 by the year 2030.

Homelessness for older individuals during extreme heat events can be deadly. Older unsheltered individuals are more likely to have health complications that can be severely exasperated by the extreme heat, and mobility issues can make it difficult to find appropriate shelter. Homeless people with disabilities are also at heightened risk of health complications from extreme heat and are limited in their access to necessary supplies, support and medications.

Many cities and organizations have attempted to mitigate the heat problem with limited programs. Las Vegas has teams deliver bottled water to homeless encampments, some of which are located inside the city's network of storm drains. In Oregon last year, officials opened 24-hour cooling stations and volunteers handed out water and popsicles to homeless people around Portland. Other cities, like Boston, have developed heat control programs that include establishing cooling areas and planting more trees for shade.

Cities suffer from what is called the "heat island effect," which is when urban areas become hotter than the surrounding countryside because of the heat-absorbent materials that cities are constructed of, like asphalt and glass. Higher densities of vegetation can help offset this effect, but researchers have found that poor neighborhoods are less likely to have trees or similar vegetation and so often see average temperatures several degrees hotter than wealthier areas.

Mitigation measures like handing out water and planting trees can help, but ultimately the problem still remains and is likely to only worsen as millions of people struggle to afford to stay in their homes and capitalist-created climate change fuels more frequent extreme weather events.



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