

Homeless deaths surged across the US in 2022 due to extreme weather, economic hardship

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Numerous states throughout the US witnessed a sharp rise in the number of homeless and deaths of people experiencing homelessness in 2022.

Due to the lifting of eviction moratoriums put in place at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the soaring prices in the cost of living, the ranks of the homeless and those living in precarious conditions are swelling, putting tens of thousands at risk of a premature death. According to the Becker Friedman Institute at the University of Chicago, 500,000 to 600,000 people in the US experience homelessness on any given night; approximately one-third of them sleep on the streets.

Strong winter storms over the last two weeks and extreme weather throughout the year made environmental conditions deadly for those living unsheltered and in substandard housing.

The recent storms that battered the eastern half of the US have claimed the lives of nearly 60 people, some of whom were homeless and found in snow banks or in vehicles. One of the homeless victims, 57-year-old Charles Wilson Ligon Jr., was attempting to make it home to his family in Tennessee from Louisiana on foot. He was found by hunters in southern Mississippi last Monday morning frozen to death.

Many homeless shelters saw a sharp rise in the number of people they served in December due to the harsh winter conditions.

“It’s very worrisome. We know people die in these conditions,” Burke Patten, communications manager for Night Ministry, a Chicago nonprofit that shelters nearly 6,000 people experiencing homelessness, told *The Guardian*.

Warming shelters have become places of refuge for the homeless, but many of them do not open their doors until the temperature drops to 32-30 degrees Fahrenheit, already dangerous considering that hypothermia and frostbite can set in at 50 degrees. The National Weather

Service warned that last week’s cold front could see temperature drops of 20 degrees or more in just a few hours.

Kyle Knutson, the Social Services Director at The Salvation Army in Corpus Christi, Texas, told local news station KIII that nearly half of the 43 official homeless deaths in the city this year were the result of cold weather.

However, the winter weather this year was only one of a number of causes of death for the homeless. In many states, the death count was higher than in previous years. Causes of death in addition to exposure to the elements include overdose due to substance use, homicide and treatable health conditions.

December 21 is recognized annually as National Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day, a tribute to those who have died while experiencing homelessness and whose lives and passing might otherwise have gone unrecognized. Vigils were set up around the country in communities large and small to remember those who lost their lives this year.

On the West Coast and throughout the Midwest, records were set in the numbers of deaths of the homeless population.

In Seattle and King County, Washington, more than 270 people died this year, the highest number recorded in 20 years, ranging in age from 2 to 80 years old.

While making up 12 percent of the country’s population, California now accounts for 30 percent of the homeless population, with the US Department of Housing and Community Development estimating that over 172,000 residents experienced homelessness this year alone. California also saw the country’s largest increase in its homeless population over any other state.

In Southern California, recorded deaths among the homeless population in San Diego County increased over 7 percent from 2021 to a total of 574 deaths, up from 536 last year and 357 the year before. Ventura County,

northwest of Los Angeles, saw 158 homeless residents die last year while Santa Barbara on the central coast lost 38 in the last two years.

In San Francisco, over 200 people died in 2022, many from accidental drug overdoses. Last April, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health found that nearly 2,000 homeless people died between April 2020 and March 2021, marking a 56 percent increase in deaths compared to the previous year before the pandemic began.

In Maricopa County, Arizona, the death toll has also risen for people who experienced homelessness. The more than 700 people who died without permanent shelter in 2022 represented a 42 percent increase over 2021. Another 450 people could be added to that figure, although local law enforcement has not determined whether those people were homeless.

Lisa Glow of Central Arizona Shelter Services told 12 News, “We really are at a crisis... The lack of shelter is leading to those increased street deaths. We’ve even had babies die in the streets, a lot of seniors dying on the streets.”

The number of deaths of homeless people increased in the Denver, Colorado metro area as well, with 263 total recorded last year; however, local agencies state that these figures are incomplete due to incomplete record keeping. Other cities in Colorado also saw increased numbers of deaths, mostly due to sub-zero conditions, although some were the victims of violent attacks. Many of them were in their 40s. Others died due to opioid use, specifically from the use of fentanyl.

The nation’s capital, Washington D.C., recorded 77 homeless deaths last year, but this figure does not account for additional autopsies that remain to be completed by the medical examiner’s office, which has a 90-day delay in reporting. According to the *Washington Post*, D.C. appears to be on track to exceed the 100-deaths mark, after recording 180 deaths in 2020 and 138 in 2021.

A study conducted by *The Guardian* and the University of Washington found that from 2016 to 2020, the deaths of people experiencing homelessness in the US rose by 77 percent, representing at least 18,000 deaths.

Regardless of the location of death, a clear fact remains: The life of the average American is seen by the capitalist ruling elite as dispensable, expendable, and holds no value except when it can be exploited for profit.

The explosion in the rise of homelessness itself has been caused by a multitude of factors. Millions of Americans have been pushed to the brink of or directly into the path of impoverishment and ruin by the bipartisan attack on

living standards and social programs over the past 40 years; successive bailouts of corporations and banks overseen by both Democratic and Republican administrations, of which the burden of paying for them has been placed on the backs of the working class; the countless sellouts and betrayals by rotten corporatist union bureaucracies; trillions of dollars spent to build up the military and wage endless wars which have given way to the US-NATO proxy war against Russian in Ukraine.

The ruling class’s disregard for human life is most naked in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Where Trump openly threw caution to the wind in terms of a policy to fight against and contain the spread of the virus, Biden rode in on a wave of popular optimism that he would “follow the science” if he were elected president.

As the last few years have proved, the Biden administration has done anything but keep this promise, declaring the pandemic over while eliminating public health measures such as enforcing lockdowns, requiring the wearing of masks, social distancing and quarantining those who are sick or exposed. The consequences have been the official deaths of over one million people in the US and over 20 million worldwide, and even such ghastly figures are widely known to be vastly undercounted.

The fight for socialism is bound up with a fight for access to social rights which include housing, employment, education, health care and basic necessities. This must be waged as part of a larger fight against militarism, war, and capitalism—the source of all inequality and want.



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