

Record cold in US Northeast exposes deepening cracks in social infrastructure

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The Northeast US was hit with the coldest temperatures seen in decades over the weekend as an arctic air mass passed over the region. The polar vortex was accompanied by powerful winds, driving wind chills to dangerous levels.

Temperatures broke records over a century old early Saturday in Boston, where real temperatures hit 710 Fahrenheit, and in Providence, Rhode Island, which plunged to 79 degrees Fahrenheit (both about 723 Celsius), according to the National Weather Service (NWS). Temperatures dropped to 4 degrees in New York City, 76 in Hartford, Connecticut and 715 in Concord, New Hampshire, with strong winds making it feel much colder everywhere.

The summit of Mount Washington in New Hampshire, the region's highest elevation at 6,288 feet, plummeted to a low of 747 degrees (744 Celsius) early Saturday morning, tying the previous record set in 1934. Wind chills atop the mountain approached 7110 degrees (779 Celsius). The NWS in Caribou, Maine, tweeted on Friday that it had received reports of "frostquakes," tremors in the earth similar to earthquakes, caused by sudden cracks in the frozen ground.

According to poweroutage.us, 18,000 customers in Maine and New York state were without electricity Saturday morning; power had been restored to all but 5,000 customers by afternoon.

The frigid weather followed the month of January that saw record high temperatures in many areas of the region. While the cold snap might appear to contradict the growing evidence of global warming, many meteorologists argue that such wild gyrations in temperatures are actually an indication of climate change. Some scientists say the rapid warming in the Arctic may be increasing the likelihood that frigid polar

air can dive southward.

In New York City, a Code Blue was in effect, meaning that no one seeking shelter should be denied. A cold emergency was declared through Sunday by Mayor Michelle Wu in Boston, where city and agency workers visited outside areas which many homeless people regularly frequent. Boston authorities reported that only 10 people chose to remain outdoors Friday night in the city's largest tent encampment.

Massachusetts Governor Maura Healy ordered Boston's South Station to remain open to the homeless to sleep after the private property manager of the train station had recently illegally locked them out by tying the doors shut with trash bags. Dozens of people slept on benches and up against walls in the station Friday night.

In late December, state housing officials sent a letter to the Massachusetts legislature warning that within months the state may run out of space and not be able to place homeless families in the state's emergency shelter system unless action was taken.

Mike Kennealy, state housing and economic development secretary, and Jennifer Maddox, undersecretary for the state Department of Housing and Community Development, cited "decreased exits" from the shelter system and increased entries into it as reasons for the emergency housing shortage. They said the state would not be able to expand funding and operation of the existing network of 3,500 shelter units, meaning those seeking housing might be turned away.

Winter temperatures in colder regions of the country mean that many homeless individuals and families who have been sleeping in cars, emergency rooms, campgrounds, state forests and other places not fit for human habitation seek emergency shelter. As of mid-December, 294 homeless families were living in motels

or temporary shelters instead of in more traditional shelter units.

Last year, Massachusetts had the third-highest number of homeless families in the country. The state also has a right-to-shelter law that requires the state government to immediately house certain families that apply for help. However, such laws are next to useless under conditions where the funding does not exist to meet the increased need.

Freezing temperatures only add to the crisis that exists due to exploding home and rental prices and under conditions where increasing numbers of people have been pushed into homelessness due to unemployment, low wages and the skyrocketing cost of living. The pandemic has only exacerbated this crisis.

In addition, thousands of immigrants have come to New England and New York after being sent there in provocations by the fascistic governors of Texas and Florida. In September, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis ordered two planeloads of migrants flown to the Massachusetts offshore island of Martha's Vineyard, where they were abandoned with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

The record-breaking cold weather has also exposed the deteriorating state of Massachusetts' hospital system. On Saturday night, a pipe burst in the Boston Medical Center's emergency department, flooding it and forcing it to be closed until Tuesday. Ambulances will be diverted to other hospitals until it can reopen.

This latest crisis comes as median ambulance response times in Boston for life-threatening emergencies such as cardiac arrest, arterial bleeds or unconsciousness have grown significantly over the past year, rising from just over 7 minutes to 7.7 minutes in December, according to Boston EMS records.

Response times citywide are the slowest since at least 2014. In some Boston neighborhoods, response times are even worse, hitting nearly 11 minutes in Hyde Park and 9.5 minutes in West Roxbury for urgent calls. In such emergencies, seconds can mean the difference between life and death.

According to a recent analysis by the *Boston Globe*, the delays are due not only to high call volumes and short-staffing of health care workers, who have left the profession due to deteriorating conditions, low pay and burnout during the pandemic. A central cause is hospital overcrowding, due to hospitals' inability to

quickly discharge patients to understaffed nursing homes and rehabilitation centers.

This hospital capacity crisis is slowing ambulance service by forcing EMS workers to stand in line until hospital teams can take over their patients' care. EMTs call this "holding the wall," according to Cataldo Ambulance Service, one of the busiest ambulance companies in Eastern Massachusetts.

David Franklin, a paramedic with Cataldo, told the *Globe*, "Sometimes ambulances are backed up at a hospital 12 deep, waiting for the hospital triage nurse to speak to others ahead of them in line." Ambulance crews were forced to wait for up to two hours on some days in December at Massachusetts General Hospital, according to the *Globe*.



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