

Washington D.C. homelessness up by nearly one-fifth in one year

Pete Salmon
18 May 2023

The number of homeless people in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area has increased by 18 percent from last year's total, according to a new report published by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

Based on a point-in-time enumeration of the city's homeless population in a single night in January 2023, the number of homeless people in the area has increased to 8,944, up from 7,605 the year before.

All nine jurisdictions in the report—the District of Columbia; Montgomery, Prince George's and Frederick counties in Maryland; and the counties of Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William, adjacent independent cities within those counties and the independent city of Alexandria in Virginia—experienced increases, with the District of Columbia and Montgomery County experiencing the highest numerical increases. In D.C., the number of homeless rose to 4,922 people, up from 4,410 (11.6 percent) last year. In Arlington, Virginia, the report observed a 110 percent increase in unsheltered homelessness, and a 32 percent increase in emergency shelters for families.

The study totaled the number of unsheltered persons in the region along with how many people used winter shelters, year-round emergency shelters, safe havens, transitional housing and several other desperate housing solutions.

The report's executive summary concluded that, while the region's continuum of care (COC) policies had been “effective in preventing and ending homelessness,” the discontinuation of certain programs implemented since the beginning of the COVID-19 public health emergency—such as eviction moratoriums, unemployment assistance, expanded child income tax credit, and emergency housing assistance—has greatly increased the number of homeless people in the US

capital and its environs.

These programs were allowed to lapse by the Biden administration, cutting many families off from relief and subjecting the working class population to mass evictions and poverty.

Those reporting that they experienced homelessness for the first time increased by 37 percent from 2022. The study concluded that this was largely “due to the end of both pandemic related assistance and the eviction moratorium.”

In many parts of the country and around the world, working-class people are finding it harder to live in cities as rents continue to rise, leaving their livelihoods in grave doubt. The Washington D.C. area is no exception. The data, the report said, “confirms that one of the most persistent barriers to ending homelessness in our communities is the insufficient number of affordable and available permanent housing opportunities for the lowest income households.”

In a 2019 report by financial advice company Smart Asset, assuming a rent limit of 28 percent of income, a worker living in D.C. would have to make \$132,857 annually in order to afford a two-bedroom apartment with an average rent of \$3,100 per month. The median household income in the capital, according to the analysis, is \$82,372. Only San Francisco (\$196,843 for an average rent of \$4,593) and New York (\$162,857 for an average rent of \$3,800) ranked higher.

Spiraling housing costs mean that even those with jobs and other sources of income face increasing rates of homelessness.

In Alexandria, Virginia, wage earners and people on disability saw a vast increase from 2021, making up 49 of the 152 homeless people in the survey. Of the DC homeless, 12.9 percent of unaccompanied adults, and 41.8 percent of adults in families, were employed.

Another 81 percent of unaccompanied adults and 46.3 percent of adults in families relied on wages or disability as a primary income, with 51 percent of adults in families relying heavily on public assistance.

The homeless in America are frequently treated as criminals. On February 15, an encampment of at least 70 homeless people in McPherson Square was cleared out by the National Park Service, with their belongings destroyed. While city officials claimed to engage with residents of the encampment, this is not borne out by the evidence.

As one person cleared out of the encampment put it to WAMU, the raid happened “because you just want to hide the homelessness. You don't want it to be down here on K Street, which is a powerful street. You don't want it to be by the White House.” Two homeless people were arrested when they refused to leave.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact