

Escalating homelessness crisis in Los Angeles as deaths reach new records

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A newly-released report by Los Angeles County officials details a dramatic rise in unhoused people dying in the United States' most populous county, reaching a record high of 2,201 homeless deaths in 2021.

This increase in homeless deaths of 70 percent between 2019 and 2021 is detailed in a report entitled "Mortality Rates and Causes of Death Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County: 2014-2021."

The increase in homeless deaths comes amid a significant increase in homelessness generally.

Most recently, the city of Los Angeles surpassed New York City as having the largest homeless population in the country with 69,000 people officially classified as homeless. This number, however, is likely an undercount as the homeless population is notoriously difficult to estimate.

Even according to the official counts, however, this figure represents a 56 percent increase from 2015 until 2022. It's also estimated that for every 207 individuals exiting homelessness each day in Los Angeles, 227 more enter, meaning that the total number of Angelenos who have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives likely runs well into the hundreds of thousands.

The increase of 20 people on average each day means that 7,300 individuals are added to the total homeless population each year. If current trends were to continue, the current homeless population would double by 2031.

The cost of living in Los Angeles is one of the highest in the country, with the median price of a house at \$820,000, making owning a home unaffordable for most residents.

In addition to the official homeless count, 600,000 Los Angeles households are at risk of homelessness in Los Angeles due to severe rent burdens. This staggering figure represents around 43 percent of all households in the second largest city in the country. With an average household size of 2.96 people, more than 1.7 million

people in the city are considered at risk for homelessness. Moreover, Los Angeles has the highest number of overcrowded households of any city in the country.

The rate of overcrowded households, meaning those that have more than one person per room, stands at 11 percent. In some areas, the figure is far higher, with the Pico-Union neighborhood, as one example, having an overcrowded household rate of 40 percent.

The chronic growth in the number of unhoused has assumed crisis dimensions in the city, so much so that newly-elected Los Angeles mayor Karen Bass called a citywide emergency soon after assuming office to deal with the issue, with the declaration recently renewed and with Bass also recently visiting the state capital of Sacramento to procure additional funding from the state.

The funds allocated under the emergency declaration have thus far only provided a modest amount of affordable housing and care, far less than the actual need. With the city poised to host the 2028 Olympic games and 2026 FIFA World Cup, the proliferation of homelessness has become a major embarrassment for city officials. To the extent that homelessness cannot be eliminated, draconian measures are being planned and implemented to remove the homeless from public view.

The Los Angeles Police Department has initiated crackdowns on a number of homeless encampments, while in 2022, the Los Angeles City Council initiated multiple prohibitions on where such encampments can be located. This year, members of the Democratic Socialists of America hold three seats on the council and will be a critical component of this process.

Largely missing from city and state measures to address homelessness are any regulations to address skyrocketing rents and overall inflation, which is the root cause of much of the existing housing insecurity. According to rent.com, the average Los Angeles studio apartment rents for \$2,332 per month, while the average two-bedroom

apartment rents for \$3,687 a month, both unaffordable for all but the wealthiest layers of the population. Additionally, the website found that only 5 percent of rental properties cost between \$1,000 and \$1,500 each month and 15 percent cost between \$1,500 and \$2,100 each month. The remaining 80 percent were in excess of \$2,100 a month.

A recent Rand Corporation report, cited in the *Los Angeles Times*, found that even homeless services workers, those tasked with assisting homeless individuals in finding housing and other services, were at severe risk of becoming homeless themselves, and in some cases, were already unhoused.

While the state of California has implemented a rent control law, the provisions of the law allow for annual rent increases of the lower of 10 percent per year or 5 percent per year plus inflation, which has allowed landlords to increase their rental earnings above inflation while workers themselves have gotten wage increases, if at all, well below the rate of inflation.

Additionally, there are no rent control provisions in units built within the past 15 years. Furthermore, even within the rent-controlled units, landlords often circumvent the controls by evicting tenants under flimsy pretexts and then significantly increasing rates for their replacements.

These conditions, along with rising prices and increasing consumer debt, inevitably lead to increased homelessness and attendant death and debilitation among a highly vulnerable section of the population.

Will Nicholas, director of the Center for Health Impact Evaluation at the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, in an interview with LAist explained, “There’s a tragedy happening in L.A., and it’s happening on a daily basis. This is the first time that we’ve broken the 2,000 [annual death] mark, so I hope people take notice. Hopefully this is not a new normal.”

Compared to the general population, people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County in 2020 and 2021 were:

- 38 times more likely to die from a drug overdose
- 20 times more likely to die from a transportation-related injury
- 15 times more likely to die from homicide
- 8 times more likely to die from suicide
- 4 times more likely to die from coronary heart disease
- 1.8 times more likely to die from COVID-19

The report illustrates that drug overdoses, which have increased significantly with the proliferation of fentanyl, a

dangerously potent synthetic opioid—along with surges in homicides and road traffic fatalities—were the main factors that contributed to a 55 percent increase in the crude mortality rate from 2,056 per 100,000 in 2019 to 3,183 per 100,000 in 2021.

COVID-19 was also responsible for a significant number of deaths among the homeless population but was not among the top three causes. “People experiencing homelessness died of COVID at almost twice the rate of the general population,” Nicholas said. “It’s not that COVID was not an issue, it certainly was. It’s just that it’s dwarfed by some of the other causes of death.”

Nicholas said Public Health’s team of people focused specifically on identifying and controlling COVID outbreaks in homeless shelters and among people experiencing homelessness may have played a part in preventing that gap from widening.

What is needed to fully address the homeless crisis and the attendant public health issues in Los Angeles and beyond, is a massive public works initiative involving the construction of affordable public housing, mental health and drug treatment services, along with the provision of good paying jobs for the population as a whole, all of which are impossible under the capitalist profit system.

As of the 2022 US Census, just over 14 percent, or 1.4 million Los Angeles residents reside below the official poverty line. At the same time, 50 Los Angeles residents are billionaires, joining the 735 US billionaires who collectively own \$4.18 trillion in wealth while thousands die on the streets.



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