

# A tragedy caused by capitalism: Two Detroit children freeze to death in homeless family's vehicle

Jerry White  
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In a shocking tragedy in Detroit, two small children on Monday froze to death inside a van at a casino parking lot, where the homeless family was sheltering from the cold. The event has evoked an outpouring of sympathy for the victims and indignation over the brutal realities of American capitalism.

Tateona Williams, a 29-year-old unemployed medical assistant, her mother and their five children have reportedly been homeless for three months. They regularly parked the van in various casino garages because it was safer than the streets and afforded them access to casino bathrooms.

On Monday, at 1:00 in the morning, police say Williams parked the van on the ninth floor of the Hollywood Casino Hotel parking structure in downtown Detroit. While they slept, the vehicle ran out of gas or malfunctioned, leaving the seven occupants without heat as outside temperatures were as low as 12 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 11 degrees Celsius).

When the young mother tried to wake her children up for school, she found her oldest child unresponsive. A friend, who had come to assist Williams with her disabled car, rushed the mother and her child to the hospital. En route, they learned that Williams' youngest child had stopped breathing. The two children, Darnell, 9, and Amillah, 2, were pronounced dead from apparent hypothermia.

On Tuesday, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan called a press conference largely to deflect any responsibility from his administration. The Democratic mayor insisted the city provided ample resources for the homeless but claimed poor residents did not know how to access them. Williams, the mayor admitted, had reached out to the city's homeless response team at least three times, including as late as November 2024. "For whatever

reason it was not deemed an emergency," Duggan said. He added accusingly, "The family never called back for service."

At the press conference, the police chief told reporters the results of his investigation would be turned over to the Wayne County Prosecutor's office. In cases like these, he said, the prosecutor might issue charges "not necessarily criminal, [but] sometimes negligence."

In interviews with local news on Tuesday, the distraught but resolute mother rejected efforts to paint her as an irresponsible parent. "I gave my kids everything they needed. The only thing they didn't have was a house."

City authorities have a sordid history of scapegoating victims for tragedies caused by chronic poverty and official indifference. They might still do so, but large numbers of workers identify with the mother because they know they are one or two paychecks from a similar catastrophe.

By Wednesday, the story fell off the front pages of the Detroit media and few, if any, national outlets even reported it.

A major factor in this is that the homeless crisis cuts across the myth about Detroit's supposed turnaround since the city's bankruptcy restructuring in 2013-14.

Duggan and other city leaders have claimed that new development projects in the downtown area and selective neighborhoods would raise property values and living standards for the city's residents. The problem is Detroit remains one of the poorest large cities in America, with a median household income of \$27,838 and an official poverty rate of 37.9 percent.

The vast majority of the working class population are working in low-wage jobs or unemployed like Tateona Williams and have largely been priced out of the housing market.

Between 2020 and 2024, there has been a 72 percent increase in housing values. Homes in the Detroit metropolitan area are now 40.79 percent overvalued compared to their long-term pricing trends, according to data on the Top 100 US Housing Markets by Florida Atlantic University.

This has been a boondoggle for investor and real estate developer Dan Gilbert (net worth \$27.4 billion), the Illitch family, the owners of Little Caesar's Pizza and Detroit's professional baseball and hockey franchises, and other investors.

Gilbert's 49-story skyscraper on the site of the demolished old Hudson's Department store includes *The Residences at the Detroit Edition*, where pricing will range from \$550,000 to \$3 million and beyond. Rents in the new upscale housing units range from \$1,600 to \$4,775 a month.

Any examination of the Motor City is impossible outside of discussing the collapse of the US auto industry and the official labor movement. As the result of the militant struggle of autoworkers in the first half of the last century, Detroit residents had the highest per capita income in 1960.

But the ruling class never reconciled itself to this and over the next decades waged a relentless war to destroy jobs and living standards. The United Auto Workers bureaucracy colluded in this historic reversal in the social position of the working class, which was overseen by the Democratic Party and the corrupt black political establishment that has dominated the city for decades.

The homeless crisis goes far beyond Detroit. According to the latest report from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 771,480 individuals experienced homelessness in the United States in 2024, up 18 percent from the previous year. This included nearly 150,000 children under 18, the age group which experienced the largest increase (33 percent) between 2023 and 2024.

Because of its prevalence, officials have coined the term "vehicular homelessness," with HUD estimating as many as 113,000 people are living in their cars, vans and RVs on any given night. In rural areas of Michigan and other states, social workers say homelessness is drastically underestimated because those living in the woods and rental storage facilities are not counted.

This is American capitalism in the 21st century. Billionaires like Musk, Bezos and Gilbert on one side and tens of millions of people living on the edge of disaster on the other. Homelessness shot up under Biden, and Democratic California Governor Gavin

Newsom bulldozed homeless encampments. Vice President JD Vance scapegoats immigrants for high housing costs, while Trump and Musk prepare to axe Medicaid, housing, education and other essential programs that will result in the murder of many more victims.

In his pleas for social reform in the 1890s, Jacob Riis photographed New York City's "army of homeless boys," who "made their nest" on steam pipes and old boilers to keep warm. Today, the oligarchy is hellbent on destroying whatever is left of past reforms to boost their unfathomable fortunes and their imperialist wars.

The working class in the United States and around the world are being reminded why the Russian Revolution and the great upheavals of the past occurred in the first place.

If future tragedies are to be prevented, workers in the factories, hospitals, schools and other workplaces must build a powerful rank-and-file movement, free from the trade union bureaucracies and the two capitalist parties, to mobilize their collective strength through strikes and mass protests.

Workers must demand wages that stay ahead of the high cost of living, affordable housing and utilities, an end to crushing credit card, auto, student loan and other debt and free healthcare. This must be financed through the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the oligarchs, and the transformation of the auto industry and the giant real estate and financial firms into public utilities.

But such life-saving measures can only be implemented through a political struggle, uniting workers of all races and ethnic backgrounds, to defeat Trump's plans to establish a presidential dictatorship and replace the rule of the oligarchy with the democratic rule of the working class and socialism.



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