

Berlin homeless man killed during emptying of waste bin he slept in

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Last Monday, a shocking accident occurred in Berlin, Germany, which once again highlighted the inhumane living conditions of the homeless of the city.

A 33-year-old man, apparently seeking refuge from the freezing temperatures, was sleeping between layers of paper and cardboard in a waste bin when it was emptied in the early hours of the morning.

Workers running the waste truck only noticed the man when he became trapped in the opening and desperately called for help. The container could not be lowered without triggering the waste compactor. Despite immediately alerting the fire department, who cut holes in the vehicle and the compactor, the man could not be rescued. The two waste workers, suffering under shock, were treated in hospital.

The fatal accident is ultimately the consequence of the capitalist system placing the needs of the majority of the population below the profit interests of a small, obscenely rich elite.

While the super-rich increase their wealth and the German government transfers billions from social programs into militarization and armament, the poverty figures are skyrocketing to a record highs, reaching around 17.5 million people.

Affordable housing and subsidized social housing is in short supply. In Berlin around 90,000 social housing units are available with more than one million people entitled to social housing, and the ratio is worsening.

“Housing is increasingly becoming a driver of poverty,” warned Joachim Rock, Managing Director of the charity Paritätischer Gesamtverband with regard to a nationwide study called “Housing Makes You Poor.” Job loss, illness or separation exacerbate the consequences of poverty.

Those who are unable to pay rent, or back-rent, are at risk of losing their home. Nationwide in Germany there were more than 30,000 evictions in 2023. In Berlin, more than 2,000 evictions have been carried out every year since 2021, 21 percent of them due debt from rent and energy costs.

Instead of providing affordable housing, expanding accommodation options and the network of food banks, the employment of social workers on the streets and the provision of free healthcare for those in need, services are being cut and no-go zones for the homeless are being set up.

There is far too little accommodation for the up to 10,000 homeless people in Berlin. According to the Senate Social Welfare Department under Cansel Kiziltepe (Social Democratic Party,

SPD), there are only around 1,170 emergency accommodation places available on any given day from October to April.

Homeless people are only taken in by the emergency shelters until the early evening. Anyone who is not there in time has to spend the night on the street. Only one shelter accepts people seeking help until four in the morning.

Those left on the streets seek shelter from the wet and cold in tents or layers of sleeping bags, blankets and newspaper under viaducts, in house passageways and niches—constantly on guard against police and security agents.

The consequences of the daily struggle for mere survival and social exclusion are reflected in serious physical and mental illnesses and increased mortality rates.

A local resident told reporters from *berlin-live.de*: “There is a young homeless man in front of the Edeka supermarket in Moabit. I spoke to him, bought him food and gave him clothes that I no longer needed. He was crying, he was so exhausted. He told me that being homeless is torture.”

The poorest of the poor—homeless people and refugees—are systematically marginalized by the various government coalitions, whether led by the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) or the Social Democrats, and driven out of the public eye like vermin.

The expulsion of homeless people from weather-protected niches and warm subway stations can be seen in Berlin on a daily basis. The same applies to the stations of the Deutsche Bahn, the German rail company.

For years, all subway stations not in use at night have been closed by the Berlin public transport company, BVG. The BVG’s justification that “train stations are not a suitable place for humane accommodation” (BVG spokesman Markus Falkner) and represent a “concrete mortal danger” due to passing trains and the high-current rails, is insulting in view of the danger in which homeless people permanently find themselves.

Four Berlin “cold buses,” a homeless aid project financed exclusively by donations, drive roughly 30,000 kilometers through the city every year (in 2013 it was 15,000) and try to find places to sleep for those in need. They often fail to do so and can only distribute tea, sleeping bags and blankets.

On November 8, the *MOZ* reported that the “cold bus” workers had to leave three people in wheelchairs behind because there was no barrier-free emergency accommodation. According to City Mission spokesperson Barbara Breuer, there are always homeless people who “walk with crutches, lean on walkers or rely on a

wheelchair.” These people “stay on the streets for too long and become destitute.”

In May 2023, the Neukölln district office drew up a cynically named “Homelessness Guide” to chase off the homeless, primarily aiming to clear homeless camps and introduce no-go zones for homeless people.

Last year, some boroughs stepped up their efforts to expunge homeless camps, including in the Berlin-Pankow neighbourhood, where, according to the city council, 30 “priority operations” to clear camps on public streets and a further 10 in parks and green spaces were carried out last summer.

The Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf neighbourhood removed the camps on the underpass at Charlottenburg S-Bahn station with unannounced clearances. The responsible district councillor Oliver Schruoffeneger (Green Party) told *rbb* last September: “We have had fixed rules for years, which mean that you can have a mattress and small items in winter, but not in summer.”

The homeless often lose the last remnants of their possessions in clearing operations, but the city council is uninterested. This “change of strategy,” which can also be seen in other districts, represents an “enormous burden” for those affected “because there is no alternative for them,” noted Timo Grossmann (Berlin City Mission) on *rbb*.

The plan to fence off the well-known Görlitzer Park (“Görli”) has not yet been implemented with a new year-round emergency overnight accommodation, the Ohlauer 365 Project, with over 80 spots in seven-bed rooms not meeting demand.

“Berlin is bursting at the seams,” Ina Zimmermann, advisor for poverty reduction, homeless assistance and social services at the Diakonisches Werk Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz, told the newspaper *nd*.

Regarding the more than 50,000 homeless people in Berlin, including refugees granted asylum, she warned that Berlin has “reached a dramatic peak” with 47,000 homeless people housed in emergency shelters, just over 6,000 people without accommodation (official estimate) and around 2,400 people in concealed homelessness.

The use of “defensive architecture”—a particularly perfidious way of evicting homeless people—is intended to eradicate the homeless from the public eye, especially from popular or prestigious tourist areas.

Benches such as those at the Rotes Rathaus subway station or armrests or metal bars that divide the seating area make it impossible to lie down. This includes sloping or recessed seating areas on seating elements in public spaces. Spiked pads under bridges or the cross struts above the ventilation shaft at the Berlin TV Tower are designed to prevent people from resting or warming up for long periods.

Paid toilets, which can only be used without cash, or colour-changing light installations, such as in the underpass at Savignyplatz in Berlin-Charlottenburg, serve to drive homeless people away. “The light spectacle is certainly chic for passers-by, but it drives away homeless people who want to find shelter here at night in the rain,” street social worker Andreas Abel told *taz*.

Spending the night on the street is not only dangerous because of the weather. There are repeated attacks on homeless people. Betti,

the manager of “Unterschlopf,” a day shelter for women, told *taz* that “the nights are especially dangerous” for women. That’s why many do not sleep at all and “come here in the morning.”

Last year, the government registered a total of 506 violent crimes against homeless people (455 in 2023), including 166 cases of dangerous or grievous bodily harm, three of which were fatal.

Accommodation in emergency shelters is not a solution. In most cases, visitors are only allowed to stay overnight, and only in very few facilities (especially those for women) is this possible for time periods exceeding a month.

Emergency accommodation is not a real alternative for homeless people and refugees. While this is touted as a “short, temporary solution,” many have to stay in so-called ASOGs for months or even years without any protection or privacy. Some of the sanitary facilities are in an unacceptable state. At the same time, they live in constant fear of losing their place and ending up on the streets.

According to the Federal Statistical Office (January 2025), around 440,000 people across Germany are “accommodated homeless,” i.e., in public facilities for homeless people or in collective accommodation. The largest number live in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, with over 105,000, followed by the state of Baden-Württemberg with 92,700 and Berlin with 47,300 people (official counts).

Young people are particularly affected (40 percent under the age of 25), since 150,100 of the homeless housed by the state are families with children (34 percent) and single parents (17 percent). A further 139,000 (32 percent) are single, and around 5 percent are older than 65.

A look at their origins reveals the brutal migration policy of Germany’s federal and state governments, which is not aimed at integration but at harsh deterrence.

A total of 377,900 of the housed homeless have non-German citizenship (61,500 have a German passport). Almost a third come from Ukraine (around 136,900), where they fled war and forced military service. However, only those have been granted asylum are recorded in the statistics in the refugee shelters.

“Berlin has a real human dignity problem,” said Dr. Ursula Schoen, Director of Diakonie, summing up the situation last September. And Caritas Director Ulrike Kostka explained: “It is quite obvious: the key is the lack of housing.”

“The fight against homelessness has long been a matter of symbolic politics,” Stefan Schneider, spokesman for the Homeless Foundation remarked.

The cuts that the CDU-SPD-led Berlin state government under Kai Wegner (CDU) is making to the social budget will further exacerbate the untenable conditions for homeless people. The social welfare department is being cut by 66 million euro next year, leaving it with only 1.8 billion euro at its disposal.



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