

# 6 deaths a day: Homeless mortality exposes social catastrophe in Los Angeles

Marc Wells  
17 March 2026

In Los Angeles County, more than six homeless people die every day, a staggering toll that reveals the social reality concealed behind the image of prosperity promoted by politicians and the corporate media. In 2024 alone, 2,208 people experiencing homelessness were found dead, after a modest decline from the previous year. The mortality rate for unhoused people is more than four times higher than that of the general population.

These deaths occur in a region that is home to 54 billionaires and 516 centimillionaires. California itself, with an economy larger than most countries, is one of the richest territories on the planet. Yet for tens of thousands of people forced to live on sidewalks, in tents, vehicles and makeshift encampments, life expectancy collapses under the weight of poverty and neglect.

Behind each statistic lies a largely invisible process carried out daily at the Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner, whose personnel collect the bodies of the dead from streets, parking lots and encampments throughout the metropolitan area.

The causes of death among unhoused people reflect the inhumane conditions imposed by life on the streets.

Drug and alcohol overdoses remain the leading cause of death, accounting for roughly 40 percent of all fatalities among the homeless population. Hundreds die every year from overdoses involving fentanyl, methamphetamine and other substances.

But substance use alone does not explain the full picture. Homeless mortality is driven by a complex interaction of untreated illness, physical danger and chronic deprivation.

According to county health data:

- Coronary heart disease is the second leading cause of death, responsible for about 14 percent of fatalities.
- Transportation-related injuries (people struck by vehicles while walking along roads or sleeping near traffic) are the third leading cause, with a homeless person

killed by a vehicle roughly every other day.

- Homicide ranks among the top causes, reflecting the violence faced by people living without shelter.
- Suicide remains a persistent cause of death, particularly among younger homeless individuals.

Many deaths are classified broadly as “natural,” including heart failure, liver disease and complications from chronic illness that have gone untreated for years due to lack of healthcare. Many bodies are discovered in tents, at abandoned lots, bus stops, sidewalks, vehicles or parks, locations that reveal the reality of daily survival outside the shelter system.

The process that follows the death of a person on the street in Los Angeles is both highly bureaucratic and revealing of the scale of the crisis. Police officers, firefighters or paramedics typically respond first. If death is confirmed, investigators from the Medical Examiner-Coroner’s office are dispatched to document the circumstances of death, collect evidence and arrange transport of the body to county facilities.

These teams operate across a sprawling metropolitan region where tens of thousands of people live unsheltered. Coroner investigators regularly visit encampments, alleyways, freeway underpasses and public parks, locations that have effectively become the last homes of many of the deceased.

The bodies are transported to the county morgue, where autopsies and toxicology tests are performed to determine the cause of death. Because of backlogs in forensic testing, especially toxicology screening for drugs, official determinations can take months. Identification is often difficult due to the lack of documents, long lost or stolen during life on the streets.

Authorities attempt to contact next of kin through fingerprints, missing-person records and other databases. But in many cases families are located only after prolonged investigation, or not at all. Some of the dead

remain unidentified for months or years. The grim reality is that large numbers of the deceased are estranged from family or have lost contact with them long before their deaths.

The discovery of homeless deaths is itself shaped by a broader political campaign directed from City Hall. Under successive administrations, the city has intensified what officials call “encampment resolution” operations. These sweeps involve sanitation workers, police, outreach personnel and private contractors clearing homeless encampments from sidewalks, parks and freeway underpasses.

During such operations workers frequently encounter individuals who have died in tents or makeshift shelters. The sweeps are carried out under directives that prioritize the removal of encampments near schools, parks and high-profile commercial districts.

City officials routinely describe these operations as humanitarian interventions, but in practice they often displace people from one neighborhood to another without providing permanent housing. For many individuals, displacement deepens the instability that contributes to illness, addiction, exposure to violence and, too often, death.

While thousands die on the streets each year, the official response to homelessness in Los Angeles has increasingly been shaped by financial and political interests.

Central to the city’s homelessness apparatus is the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), a joint city-county agency responsible for distributing billions of dollars in public funds intended to address the crisis.

In recent years, however, political leaders have advanced plans to restructure the system as part of a broader drive toward privatization. Officials in the Los Angeles City Council, including four Democratic Socialists of America councilmembers, and county government have promoted proposals to reorganize LAHSA’s responsibilities and shift significant functions to private contractors, nonprofit intermediaries and development firms.

Under the banner of efficiency and accountability, these initiatives would further embed profit-making enterprises in the management of homelessness. Even death management would inevitably become a lucrative line of business.

Construction companies, real estate developers, consulting firms and investment groups already play a significant role in the homelessness industry. Billions of dollars have been spent on temporary shelters, modular

housing projects and service contracts.

Yet despite this massive expenditure, homelessness has remained entrenched. Many projects involve extraordinarily high construction costs and lucrative contracts for private firms, while permanent affordable housing remains scarce.

The transformation of homelessness into a quasi-market sector, funded by public money but administered through private intermediaries, has created powerful financial incentives that have no connection to solving the crisis.

The tragedy unfolding on the streets of Los Angeles cannot be understood simply as a failure of policy or administration. It is the direct product of California Democrats’ policies, which have reinforced a social system of war and repression that concentrates immense wealth in the hands of a tiny elite while denying basic necessities—housing, healthcare and stable employment—to millions.

Housing costs in California have soared over decades as real estate speculation transformed housing into a financial asset rather than a social right. At the same time, public housing, social services and mental health infrastructure have been dismantled.

The result is a society where luxury towers rise beside sprawling encampments and billionaires amass vast fortunes while thousands struggle to survive outdoors. The daily removal of bodies from the streets is the predictable outcome of a system organized around private profit. While political leaders frame homelessness as a technical issue, the deaths expose the profound inequality of American capitalism and the need for a socialist reorganization of social priorities.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**