

Record cold has devastating effect on US homeless

By Matthew MacEgan
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The polar vortex which swept across North America earlier this week has thrown a greater spotlight onto the most economically vulnerable people living in the United States; the homeless. Subzero temperatures were reached in many parts of the country, conditions which have the capacity to cause frostbite and hypothermia among those who lack adequate shelter.

The death toll as a result of the vortex has risen to at least 21, and record lows have been set in many locations across the country, including Hawaii. New York City reached -15 degrees Celsius (5 degrees Fahrenheit), breaking a record set in 1896, and Charlotte, North Carolina got to -14 degrees Celsius (7 Fahrenheit), the lowest temperature since 1884. Pensacola, in Florida, experienced a low temperature of -8 degrees Celsius (18 Fahrenheit).

News reports and videos are surfacing that show homeless people sitting out in falling snow with cardboard signs, begging for help from passersby.

In New York City it has been reported that some homeless people have resorted to warming themselves over steam grates in order to survive the freezing weather conditions. The *New York Times* reported that a “Code Blue” has been issued, calling greater numbers of unpaid volunteer workers into the streets to help people find suitable shelter. There has been inadequate planning set in place to help the most destitute people of the city in the face of imminent danger to their health.

In Chicago, shelters have begun handing out transport passes from the government that allow “vulnerable” people to travel for free to a location where the icy weather is less harmful. This “protection” is in reality a way of the city unburdening itself of an “undesirable” population, which will more than likely never have the means to return to the very meager survival they have

carved out for themselves.

37 people in Ohio were rushed to the emergency room due to cold-related problems. A doctor in Milwaukee has reported a slew of weather-related injuries in his emergency room, including frostbite. Reports from Baltimore, with a homeless population of at least 3,000, state that a special advisory was issued for homeless people at the beginning of the week, preparing the way for emergency services and shelters to be provided to those in need.

Adam Schneider, Director of Community Relations and Health Care for the Homeless in Baltimore, told *The Real News Network* in an interview that this is only an effective response to the current storm, not a solution to address homelessness in the long run.

“An effective response to homeless[ness] is to ensure that adequate housing is available for people, to ensure that people’s incomes are livable, to ensure that there are supportive services, health services, the things that all of us need in order to maintain ourselves into housing,” Schneider explained. “But that’s the discussion that we need to have had yesterday.”

Schneider was also asked to address recent cuts to food stamps and unemployment, which have further exacerbated the situation. He stated, “I think that in this, the wealthiest country in the history of the world, the fact that we would cut food subsidies for people who are poor, for poor kids, many of them, is really beyond the pale. I mean, it makes us—we should be thinking, who are we, when we’re allowing—when our leaders are making these sorts of decisions.”

The cold snap is also taking a drastic toll on the energy market of the United States. Energy consumption has skyrocketed all across the country, sending the demand for natural gas to record-breaking levels. The Tennessee Valley Authority reported on

Tuesday morning that power demand had reached its second highest peak since the Great Depression.

The author also recommends:

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