

# Freezing temperatures spell misery and danger to America's poor

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20 February 2015

Record low temperatures and wind chills across the eastern United States have caused at least a hundred deaths so far this winter, particularly among the most vulnerable sections of society, including the extremely poor and the elderly. For the millions of homeless men, women, and children in America, each day is a struggle for survival.

Three recent deaths have brought the number of cold-related fatalities in Cook County, Illinois, where Chicago is located, to at least 21 this winter. During the 2013-14 winter season, there were 32 cold-related fatalities in Cook County alone.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with homeless people in Chicago this week.

“Winter is an everyday struggle,” said Matt, who has been homeless for over a year. “The temperatures and wind chills below zero are really, really bad for people in my situation,” he said. “Sometimes it gets to the point where your hands and your feet—they burn, and they hurt. I got frostbite on my toe last year because I was sleeping, and overnight, my foot ended up outside my blanket, and one of my toes turned black.”

For over six years, he had worked as a floor hand on oil rigs in North Dakota, Wyoming, Montana and Colorado, as well as the Gulf of Mexico. Last September, he moved to Chicago as his mother was dying of cancer, and began drinking upon her passing away. He entered rehab, which cost him his entire life savings, so that he left “with nothing but my sobriety—no money. I’ve been living on the street, staying away from drinking, but trying to get enough money for food and shelter.”

He spends mornings at O’Hare International Airport, where yesterday the normal and wind chill temperatures were at their absolute lowest this winter (-8 degrees, -20 with wind chill). From 5 a.m. to 7 a.m.

he made a mere \$6 while soliciting travelers.

“Everyday I’m trying to get the \$15 for a room at a men’s only hotel nearby. It’s a cheap room; a little cubicle with drywall and the ceiling is chicken wire. The big shelter—Pacific Garden Mission—is ridiculous. They force religion on you, you can’t eat unless you go to church. There is theft, fights, body lice, and bed bugs. Sometimes it is so overcrowded that you have to sleep on the floor,” he said.

“I’ve done job training, and temp services, but nothing’s come out of it. This block—with the Chicago Board of Trade—has big money. But the guys in the \$3,000 suits will only hand you a dollar. I get helped more by lower middle class people than well-off people.”

Ronda and Dan are married, and live in a tent outside. On cold nights, their only respite comes from piling up layers of blankets. Dan said that “The worst part is getting up and leaving.”

Like many, they find the city’s homeless shelters overcrowded, dangerous, and unhealthy. For warmth during the day, they go to the libraries, and on bitter cold nights they occasionally ride the trains all night. Dan noted that the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) has placed signs at the end of each line prohibiting riders from re-boarding trains going the opposite direction, unless they exit and pay to reenter. A significant number of homeless people in Chicago ride the 24-hour Red and Blue Lines to stay warm.

Thursday was the coldest morning in Chicago in 79 years, and temperatures are expected to continue at record lows. The first week of February brought Winter Storm Linus, which was the third heaviest snowstorm on record in Detroit and the fifth heaviest on record in Chicago.

The National Weather Service has issued wind chill

warnings across the entire Midwest and Northeast regions, extending as far south as Tennessee and Georgia.

A state of emergency was declared in Tennessee Monday due to extreme cold weather, with sub-zero temperatures and snowfall across the state, and icy conditions on many roads. There have been ten confirmed deaths in the state attributable to the cold weather, including five from hypothermia and four due to motor vehicle accidents on icy roads.

The tenth death this week in Tennessee was a male dialysis patient who was unable to receive treatment in Hickman County. There were over 15,000 residents without power throughout Tennessee Thursday afternoon, down from 33,000 on Wednesday. With continued mass power outages amid the ongoing storm, the weather-related death toll is expected to rise significantly in Tennessee and throughout the country.

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