

# America's poor and homeless freeze in winter storm

By Kate Randall  
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Heavy snow, strong winds and bitter cold battered the US East Coast on Thursday, as a powerful system that had dropped ice, sleet and snow on the South roared up the Eastern Seaboard and pummeled the Northeast. Snow was on the ground in every state from Florida to Maine by Thursday morning.

The storm was the latest cruel volley in a cold snap that has gripped nearly every state in the Continental US in recent days. States of emergency were declared, schools and businesses shuttered, air flights and trains canceled as the authorities and the public at large dealt with blizzard conditions, coastal flooding, power outages and dangerously snowy and icy roads. State and local governments are for the most part ill prepared to deal with these conditions.

Although the federal government does not track weather-related deaths nationally, NBC News reports that the sustained period of brutally cold weather has claimed the lives of at least 20 people in the US since December 26.

The cold wave has taken at least 11 lives in the past 24 hours, according to CNN, including five in Wisconsin, four in Texas, and one each in North Dakota and Missouri. Safety officials said that three people have died as a result of the storm in North Carolina, where widespread icy road conditions and accidents have been reported across the state.

As in all such weather-related disasters—hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, heat waves—society's most vulnerable are the worst affected, and in the current cold snap it is no different. The poor and homeless bear the brunt of the crisis, while authorities attempt to explain away the ensuing chaos, ineptitude and suffering as the result of a "natural disaster" that no one could have predicted.

Meteorologists described Thursday's storm as a "bombogenesis" or "bomb cyclone," which happens when a weather system undergoes a rapid drop in atmospheric pressure and quickly intensifies with blizzard-like conditions and hurricane-force winds. Although the media has generally portrayed this as a "once-in-a-lifetime" occurrence, such storms are not an unknown or infrequent phenomenon.

The storm is expected to be followed by a deep freeze. The worst of the cold will be in the Northeast Friday morning, when wind chills are forecast to hit the minus 40s Fahrenheit in New

England. Dozens of major cities across New England, eastern New York and the Mid-Atlantic states will have record low temperatures by Sunday morning, according to the National Weather Service. About 115 million Americans are under wind chill warnings, advisories or watches.

States of emergency had been declared in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia on Wednesday, and governors and local leaders declared emergencies and blizzard warnings in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Maine by Thursday.

Since Wednesday night, power outages have affected more than 12,400 Georgia Power customers, 10,200 Florida Power & Light customers and 2,700 South Carolina Electric & Gas customers.

Major streets along Boston's waterfront were completely underwater Thursday, with the worst flooding occurring at high tide at 12:40 p.m., hitting 15.1 feet and tying the all-time record from the Blizzard of 1978. Record coastal flooding hit towns and cities on Massachusetts' North and South shores and Cape Cod, with the storm surge crashing over seawalls. More than 24,000 customers experienced power outages.

## School closures

The storm shut down schools in Boston; Providence, Rhode Island; New York; Philadelphia; Virginia; and Washington, DC, among others. Some school districts in the South, including in Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina, were closed in anticipation of the bitter cold to come.

In Baltimore, Maryland, children huddled in frigid classrooms Wednesday, prompting outrage from parents and teachers who asked why classes had not been canceled.

Aaron Maybin, a Baltimore native, former NFL player and elementary school teacher, said a thermometer showed it was 40 degrees in his classroom on Wednesday. Baltimore Public Schools CEO Dr. Sonja Santelises said that one-third of the school system, or about 60 schools, reported heating issues during the day.

A system-wide shutdown of the city's public schools was only called after photos spread on social media showing children bundled in coats, hats and gloves in an effort to keep warm when heating was not keeping up with the plunging

temperatures.

Maybin told CNN, “When I spoke to the principal, I was told it was due to nobody being there during the holidays to make sure the heat stayed on and pipes didn’t freeze.” As with other districts nationwide, public schools are being starved for funds, resulting in crumbling infrastructure that places students’ health and safety at risk.

“It’s really ridiculous the kind of environment we place our children into and expect them to get an education,” Maybin said in a tweet. “I got two classes in one room, kids are freezing. Lights are off. No computers. We’re doing our best but our kids don’t deserve this.”

In Lowell, Massachusetts, an impoverished former mill town, the high school was closed on Wednesday as temperatures in 20 percent of its classrooms were below the state minimum. Students shared photos of hands turned blue in the cold. The cold temperatures were attributed to failing heating systems and broken pipes brought on by the cold wave, aggravated by years of neglect. All schools were closed on Thursday.

### **Rising heating costs**

Residents nationwide are bracing for rises in heating costs in the coming months. The US Department of Energy is predicting that this winter’s energy costs will rise by 8 percent for electricity, 12 percent for natural gas, and 17 percent for home heating oil. The main reason for a hike in energy bills is due to the record cold temperatures.

A rise in energy costs will undoubtedly lead to an increase in house fires, as more households are unable to afford the energy bills and resort to the use of less safe, alternative heating methods such as space heaters. As of the end of 2017, 2,152 people had perished in house fires across the US. The victims were overwhelmingly poor and working-class.

In the midst of the current cold wave, 8,000 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) residents were without heat by midday Wednesday. Heating systems in five public housing developments were shut down completely, according to city records, with some residents having lived in these bone-chilling conditions for days.

At Redfern House in Far Rockaway, the heat has been off and on since December 28, and early Wednesday the entire system was shut down by frozen pipes. Resident Jazmin Figueroa told the *New York Times* she has turned on stove burners and wrapped her children in multiple layers to keep them warm. “They go to bed freezing. I gotta put them in long johns,” she said. “It’s not right, especially if you have kids.”

At the Reid Houses in East New York, 235 seniors have been without heat since Tuesday. At Harborview Terrace in Hell’s Kitchen the story was the same. More than 1,300 units were without heat Thursday at the Woodside Houses in Queens. NYCHA spokeswoman Jasmine Blake said the problem was due to frozen pipes and claimed heat would be addressed at all of the housing developments “as soon as possible.”

### **The homeless and affordable housing**

The homeless are the most susceptible to the winter cold. With a lack of affordable housing affecting all working families, homeless individuals are hard-pressed to find accommodation as funding for shelters is cut back and decent living spaces are few and far between. The rules and conditions at many shelters, with restrictions on drugs and pets, make them undesirable for some.

Many of those seeking housing are also caught up in the opioid crisis and are in need of treatment. But they find that treatment when they need it most is not available, due to a scarcity of affordable, effective treatment beds.

On Monday, the body of a 54-year-old homeless man was found inside a bin near an apartment complex in St. Louis, Missouri. The city’s most recent count of homeless residents, in January 2017, showed 1,336 people. Shelters in St. Louis typically house 150 to 200 people a night during extreme cold.

One shelter in the city, New Life Evangelistic Center, was forced to close last April by the city, citing chronic over-occupancy and building code violations, according to *US News & World Report*. Many former residents were forced onto the streets, including 56-year-old Grover Perry.

Perry was found dead inside a portable toilet near a construction site on December 20, when temperatures fell to 19 degrees Fahrenheit (-2 Celsius). Rev. Larry Rice, former operator of the New Life shelter, said Perry was mentally handicapped and had no place to go once the shelter shut down, so he started staying in the portable toilet. “I’m surprised there haven’t been more people die,” Rice said.

As the homelessness crisis worsens, state and federal government authorities have scant solutions. Donald Trump, who has touted his support for veterans, has presided over the first rise in the number of homeless veterans for the first time in seven years. The number of homeless vets increased by 1.5 percent from January 2016 to January 2017. According to a new report from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the homeless census on a night in January 2017 counted 40,056 veterans unsheltered.

On December 1, Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin announced he was gutting a \$460 million program dedicated to veteran homelessness, telling the *Military Times* that he did not believe it was practical to aim for zero veteran homelessness. Shulkin reversed his position a few days later after an outcry from veterans’ advocates.

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