

“It’s just getting harder and harder to live”

Homeless in San Diego, “America’s Finest City”

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The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reported last week that 567,715 people across the nation experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2019, an increase of 14,885 people compared with the same time period in 2018.

The homeless population in the US increased 2.7 percent this year largely due to a surge of chronically homeless individuals in California. The HUD estimate found that California’s increase in homelessness was “higher than all other states combined.”

Despite the fact that California’s median household income is just above the national median of \$63,179, nearly a third of its workers make less than \$15 an hour, compounding the difficulty to survive in many cities which possess some of the highest costs of living in the nation.

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) created a California Poverty Measure to convey real poverty which is based on the high costs of living in the state. It found the share of that state’s population living in poverty is 17.8 percent. The PPIC also calculates the number who are “near-poverty” and found that an additional 18.5 percent of Californians fall into that category. Therefore, more than 35 percent of Californians, some 15 million people, live in severe economic distress.

The cities and counties at the epicenter of the poverty, housing and homelessness crisis in the state of California are Los Angeles, San Diego and San Jose & Santa Clara County which possesses the first, fourth and fifth largest homeless population in the country respectively.

San Diego has the fourth-highest number of homeless residents in the country. Based on a HUD “Point-in-time” (PIT) count, the report estimated that over 8,500 residents were homeless in what tourism boosters claim is “America’s Finest City.”

The San Diego city’s Regional Task Force on the Homeless (RTFH) acknowledged in its 2019 annual report that the PIT count is more of a single night snapshot. The reality, however, is far worse. Even with the Report’s conservative estimate, the actual number of homeless residents in San Diego was over 20,000 last year.

Responding to public concern for the welfare of the homeless, the city administration has been forced to take limited action. San Diego’s Republican mayor Kevin Faulconer has made much of his “Connect. Support. House.” program that he proclaimed would “end the cycle of homelessness” in the city. His “dramatic actions,” his office boasts, serve “to move homeless individuals off the streets, offer them a chance for a better life, and restore pride to our communities.”

The city, Faulconer has reiterated time and again, “must reduce homelessness, not enable it; end suffering, not condone it; punish the criminals who hide and prey upon the homelessness, not ignore it.” San Diego, the Mayor has promised, “will not allow unsafe and unsanitary outdoor living conditions, nor will it tolerate the use of a sidewalk, a riverbed or a tarp as a home.” So far, it appears as though only that last

part of the promise has been fulfilled, with the city escalating the brutality meted out against those forced to live on the streets.

In the past year, the City Council has overseen the creation of “Bridge Shelters,” a Housing Navigation Center presented as “one stop shop for homeless services,” and even unanimously passed a \$1.9 billion plan that will supposedly get “half the city’s homeless off the streets in the next three years and find permanent homes for thousands more in the next 10 years.” This claim remains akin to a promise written in water.

The four bridge shelters offer 150 beds or less per night, while the one-stop shop remains shrouded in mystery for many forced to survive on the streets. The beds are but a drop in the bucket to help the 20,000 and growing in need, and no funding plans have been created for the city council’s plan. For a significant section of San Diego’s population, homelessness remains a nightmare with no end in sight.

San Diego remains one of the most unaffordable cities. According to a May 2019 report published by the California Housing Partnership, the median asking rent per month in San Diego is \$2,005. In order to be able to afford this amount, renters in San Diego county need to earn \$38.05 an hour, more than three times the current minimum wage. Since 2008, cuts in federal and state funding have reduced investment in affordable housing in San Diego County by more than \$134 million annually, a 76 percent reduction.

What this has meant is that families barely getting by on minimum wage income have had to commit more than half of their income to rent. Given the steady increase in rents and the absence of affordable housing, combined with stagnant wages and the increasing casualization of the job market, those already in a precarious situation can at any moment find themselves without a roof above their heads.

A WSWS reporting team recently visited downtown San Diego to speak to residents who have been dealing with homelessness. The area is the location for several shelters run by Catholic Charities, as well as a Bridge Shelter run by the Alpha project. The neighborhood is characterized by the stark contrasts of tent-like shelters constructed in the shadows of shiny new condominiums.

Maria, who is in her mid-40s, used to earn a living cleaning houses in the city. She told us that she had become homeless five years ago as a result of a car accident that led her to lose everything. Since then, she had to deal with a heart condition that required open-heart bypass surgery, making it almost impossible for her to get a job that would allow her to find a place of her own: “Everything is worse when you are homeless and have health problems—you don’t eat right, you don’t rest enough, you cannot sleep well because it is not safe on the streets. There are so many people with mental health problems, drugs, people get into fights over small things and it can become very bad... I do not wish this on anyone. This is a terrible, terrible way to live.”

Many of those who spoke to our reporters reiterated the fact that it had become incredibly hard to get into shelters, let alone try to transition from homelessness to finding a place. Dale Pickett, who had experienced homelessness once before in the 1990s, highlighted the deterioration of the assistance programs:

“Back [in 1996], it was easy to get into a shelter. Now, I don’t even know how to get in. At the Joan Kroc center, they put you on a waiting list; at the Alpha tent city, they don’t even tell you how you can get in. All around us, you can see these new buildings come up, and they all seem to have lots of rooms that are just empty. But nobody tells us what they are for, and nobody tells us how we can move on from here...”

“There are so many homeless people, and I don’t see a lot of people moving on. I have tried to get help from all kinds of programs, but they are all limited and only allow a certain number of days before you are kicked out. I often look at job postings but many of those jobs are far off, they require transportation and bus passes which cost a lot. Some of them want you to have experience, which many of us don’t have and can’t get now when we have to worry about having shelter.”

These problems are magnified for single parents, as 26-year-old Stephanie explained. A mother of two young children under the age of 2, Stephanie had moved from Daytona, Florida, to San Diego along with her boyfriend. A series of personal setbacks and tragedies, including the death of her mother and the discovery that her children’s father was suffering from addiction, led to her being homeless. Since then, despite having worked for many years at the front desk of a Daytona hotel, Stephanie has been unable to find employment in San Diego mainly because of her inability to find a safe and affordable daycare for her children.

As Stephanie put it, “being a mother is incredibly stressful and challenging when you’re homeless. I’m alone and barely get any help providing for my kids. The closest I have to assistance are the diaper banks and food banks, which are generally once a month, and the food stamps. Even the shelters are cruel to us. They always assume the worst out of everyone. I’m currently staying at a shelter with my kids, but we’re on the third floor and the only empty room they have on the first floor is for the disabled and they say I can’t use it. I have to carry my kids and the stroller up to the third floor as a result. It’s miserable living like this. People waiting for housing turn to drugs from depression because it’s just getting harder and harder to live.”

The WSWs spoke to another young mother also named Stephanie, who outlined the trauma of having to watch her son develop a high fever, while knowing she did not have the resources to take him to the hospital. Her story like many others highlighted the dangers of living on the street with her family.

“Down here in San Diego the cost of living makes it impossible to find a place to live and it takes 5–10 years to find housing cheap enough to live in. Then, when you’re struggling and living in a car, you get fined and kicked to the street. Some people called the police on us once while we were sleeping in the car and they gave us a ticket for it. We can’t afford a ticket; we barely make any money already. There’s nowhere we can live without getting a ticket, and recently the front tires on our car got locked up, so we can’t even sleep in there. Without the car we’re trapped here on the streets and we have no place to go. When the rains were coming through we had to rely on others to help us. People would run to us and bring us emergency blankets to help us get through the rains and if there were no places with open beds we’d have to sleep in the lobby to get out of the weather.”

The struggles faced by the homeless are not lost on the volunteers who themselves have faced hardship. Suzie, a volunteer with the Hope WorldWide charity, told our reporters that it was her husband’s VA assistance that allowed them to barely make their rent. Even then, they were always aware of the perilousness of their lives—a simple issue with their car could force them into poverty and potential homelessness.

Another woman working in one of the volunteer tents informed our reporters that she lives across the US/Mexico border in Tijuana, Mexico, where rent was four to five times cheaper. “Live over there or be homeless here,” she said.

Sonia, who was also at one time homeless, added that she was fortunate to have a job. Most of the people that she dealt with were not so lucky: “I had opportunity, but they haven’t.”

She described that the cruelties of living on the street forced people to crime in order to find food and survive; many were driven to addiction because of the sheer stress. And once that happens, finding a job is nearly impossible when a background check is run. “No job means no credit, which means no housing.”

While the nightmare continues to worsen for half a million unsheltered poor throughout the country and the millions more who live on the edge, the ruling elite are beginning to point fingers in the run up to November 2020 and shedding crocodile tears for the homeless.

This week President Donald Trump cynically blamed California Governor Gavin Newsom and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, both Democrats, for the homeless crisis in the state, tweeting, “Nancy Pelosi’s District in California has rapidly become one of the worst anywhere in the U.S. when it come [sic] to the homeless & crime. It has gotten so bad, so fast—she has lost total control and, along with her equally incompetent governor, Gavin Newsom, it is a very sad sight!”

While there is no question of the culpability of the Democrats who control every aspect of political and social life in the state, the Republicans and the Trump administration are equally to blame for the horrific conditions which plunge large numbers of workers into poverty and desperation.

Trump recently announced massive cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food stamp program, which provides critical federal assistance to over 36 million Americans. Beginning in April 2020, the Urban Institute estimates the Trump administration’s rule changes will cut 3.6 million people from SNAP benefits per month, reduce monthly benefits for millions more, and lead to 982,000 students losing access to reduced-cost or free school meals.

Trump also proclaimed earlier this year that he would bring in federal resources to deal with homelessness in the state, “Governor Gavin N has done a really bad job on taking care of the homeless population in California,” Trump wrote on Twitter. “If he can’t fix the problem, the Federal Govt. will get involved!”

The president’s reported plan to “fix the problem” is a pending executive order which would funnel money into operations which target and tear down homeless encampments, empowering police departments to rip through encampments at a faster rate and potentially strip cities of housing funds if they do not wage a brutal enough attack on the unsheltered poor.

The cynical tweets from the upper echelons of society about the need to “address” and “fix” homelessness, which in reality neither party will do anything to end, point to the fact that the issue will be used as a pawn in the 2020 election and that escalated attacks on the working class as a whole are being prepared. Both parties of the ruling elite represent the housing, land and commercial development interests who benefit from the astronomical rents which have forced hundreds of thousands of workers into absolute destitution and keep millions more on the brink of ruin.



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