

# Health care volunteers document one death every 10 days among homeless people in Hamilton, a mid-sized Canadian city

Steve Hill, Omar Ali  
5 June 2024

Dissatisfied with the information available to assess the impact of homelessness in Hamilton, Ontario, a group of local healthcare providers began collecting data on their own initiative in June 2021. Their recently released report documents 91 deaths among the city's homeless in less than two-and-a-half years, a rate of one death every 10 days.

The Hamilton Homeless Mortality Data Project is comprised of a family physician and Assistant Clinical Professor, several resident physicians, and a research student at McMaster University. Also involved in the project are an experienced Social Worker and an emergency medicine physician who works primarily with people experiencing homelessness. Working with homeless shelters, community agencies, Hamilton Health Sciences and St Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, and with the approval of the Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board, the Mortality Data Project's April 30 report gives a snapshot of the miserable social conditions imposed on society's most vulnerable members by Canadian capitalism and its political representatives.

In the six months between June and November 2023 at least 21 homeless people died. Their average age was 46—well below the life expectancy of 81 years for housed residents in the city. Several of the people in this group were dislodged from a shelter, released from jail, discharged from hospital or seen in an emergency room within 30 days of their death. Overdose was listed as a cause of death for 52 percent of them.

A year before the Hamilton Homeless Mortality Data Project began its work, a particularly tragic episode concluded for one individual in a very public manner. Attila Csanyi was just 28 years old in May 2020 when he overdosed on a combination of fentanyl and methamphetamine and died on the roof of the Jackson Square shopping mall in downtown Hamilton. His twin brother Richard detailed how Attila had been diagnosed with schizophrenia after a tumultuous childhood. He also

described how Attila was only offered stopgap interventions for his condition over four years in Toronto, Mississauga and Brampton. He was released from hospital without a diagnosis, treatment plan or follow-up. Attila died less than two months after being evicted from a residential care facility while ostensibly receiving treatment at St. Joseph's Healthcare in Hamilton.

The fact that a voluntary group of healthcare providers has to assume the responsibility of tracking deaths among the homeless shows how little significance the issue is given by those who claim to govern in the best interests of society. What the Mortality Data Project group has documented is tragic, but not overly surprising, in a society where millions of workers recognize that the ruling class prioritizes the accumulation of private wealth and the squandering of billions of dollars on wars of plunder.

Hamilton is a rapidly growing city with a population above 700,000. During much of the post-war period, the city was very much a working-class town that was heavily reliant on the steel and manufacturing industries. However, the decimation of industrial jobs in Hamilton and across Ontario over the past three decades, carried out with the complicity of the United Steelworkers and other unions, has resulted in the disappearance of many of these relatively better-paying jobs. In recent years Hamilton has come to be seen as something of a more affordable alternative for those wishing to escape much larger cities like nearby Toronto, where financial speculation and the decades-long ruling class assault on social housing have driven house prices and rents figuratively through the roof.

In the post-war period, the federal and provincial governments developed a public housing program that provided at least some access to affordable housing for Canada's growing population. But those days are long gone. A major turning point came in the early 1990s, when Ontario's first and only-ever New Democratic Party government under Premier Bob Rae gutted the public

housing budget as part of its sweeping cost-cutting program. This was followed by the imposition by the Chrétien-Martin federal Liberal government of the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history in percentage terms. Public housing construction ground to a halt.

A lack of new housing, rising property prices driven by an orgy of speculation on the part of the financial oligarchy, and skyrocketing rents have created a crisis in both housing supply and affordability. Facing mounting popular anger, the trade union-backed Trudeau Liberal government has announced some recent high-profile home building programs, but these are conceived above all as massive subsidies to benefit private housing developers and construction firms. For the working class and the most vulnerable in society, the housing crisis has continued unabated and outright homelessness has risen dramatically.

In light of this record, it is safe to assume that the data from Hamilton is fairly representative of dozens of other cities across Canada. In Vancouver, British Columbia, local authorities estimate that a homeless person died on average every eight days between December 2023 and January 2024. A total of 43 deaths among homeless people were recorded during 2023.

Among the deaths reported by the Hamilton Homeless Mortality Data Project, a significant number were of people who had been unsheltered for more than a year. According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, “unsheltered” includes “people who lack housing and are not accessing emergency shelters or accommodation, except during extreme weather conditions. In most cases, people are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation.”

The rapid growth of homeless encampments across Canada illustrates this point. In February, the Federal Housing Advocate of the Canadian Human Rights Commission released a report on homeless encampments in the country. It stated that between 20 and 25 percent of Canada’s unhoused population now lives in encampments, which are no longer confined to the major cities. Although no comprehensive national data is collected on the number of unhoused people in Canada, York University researchers estimate that around 35,000 people are unhoused at any given time, suggesting that somewhere between 7,000 and 9,000 could be living in encampments at any given time.

Due to exposure, the threat of fire, and drug overdoses, the situation for those living in encampments is precarious. The camps lack clean water and bathrooms, and provide inadequate protection from the elements.

The main response by the political establishment to the rise of encampments has been the criminalization of homelessness. The money spigots have been turned on for

police departments, with the Toronto police budget now well over \$1 billion. Emboldened, the police have increasingly resorted to brutal, military-style sweeps of large encampments, such as the clearance of a downtown Toronto encampment in the summer of 2021, which led to dozens of arrests when residents and supporters attempted to resist.

Police in Calgary, Alberta, forcibly dismantled an encampment in March. They cited public safety claims and gave the encampment residents just a month’s notice before calling in heavy equipment to dispose of their few belongings. Similar clearing operations have been conducted in recent months in Edmonton and Halifax.

Spiraling housing costs threaten to push more Canadians on to the streets. The average cost of a home is now more than \$700,000, making it approximately 140 percent greater than what a family earning the median income can afford. In cities like Toronto and Vancouver, the average home is valued at well over \$1 million.

Rents similarly have skyrocketed, with average national rates above \$2,193 per month in February, a 21 percent increase since 2022. Surveys indicate that nearly two-thirds of Canadians are rent-burdened, defined as spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing.

Attempts by different levels of government to pass the blame on to one another are thoroughly fraudulent. All are responsible for the unceasing austerity that has been imposed on workers and have worked to funnel wealth upwards. The ruling class, which eagerly supports the imperialist war in Ukraine and backs Israel’s genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, has no interest in diverting resources to address the needs of the most impoverished sections of the population at home.

The right to an affordable home, like all social rights of the working class, is incompatible with the capitalist profit system. The securing of basic social rights for all is possible only through the development of a mass socialist movement in the working class fighting to reorganize economic life from top to bottom under a workers’ government so that society’s resources can be deployed to overcome the desperate social crisis.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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