

Homelessness in US has doubled under Biden

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The number of homeless people living in shelters or on the streets topped 770,000 this year, according to the annual report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development released Friday, a rise of 18 percent over 2023. That is more homeless people than the population of Seattle, Detroit, Boston or Atlanta. Homeless Americans outnumber the inhabitants of Washington DC, the capital city of the richest country in the world.

The estimate is also a gross underestimate of the real scale of homelessness in America. It is based on a one-day “point-in-time” survey conducted every January in cities throughout the country. That methodology ensures a low count, since it is conducted during the coldest period of the year, when very few people can live unsheltered in northern cities, many of which bar evictions and utility shutoffs during the winter for that reason.

Moreover, the survey took place in January 2024, 11 months ago, so it does not include the tens of thousands driven from their homes by natural disasters like Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton. Nor does it reflect the deepening social crisis, in which rising interest rates, soaring rents, and shrinking real wages have made it increasingly difficult for working class families to pay their most important expense, housing.

It is thus quite likely that the homeless population is well past one million, and that the number of people who experience homelessness for some part of the year is millions higher than that.

The perfunctory press accounts that followed the HUD report did not take note of the starkest finding, one that HUD itself did not highlight, for obvious reasons: **Official US homelessness has doubled since Joe Biden entered the White House.** The homeless count in January 2021 was 381,000, due to the freeze on evictions imposed as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lifting of this moratorium resulted in the homeless figure skyrocketing to 580,000 in January 2022, to 650,000 in January 2023, and then to 772,000 in January 2024 (see graph).

These figures explain more about why Democrat

Kamala Harris lost the US presidential election than all the millions of words written, and endless hours of television time devoted to the sweatings and head-scratching of media pundits and Democratic Party politicians searching for the cause of the Democratic debacle. The Democratic Party and the capitalist two-party system as a whole are completely indifferent to the rapid growth of poverty and social deprivation confronting working people in the United States. Naturally, there was no mention of the homelessness report on any of the Sunday morning television talk shows.

Donald Trump, who profited politically from the social crisis, has no solution to homelessness, unless a Hitler-type “solution” is to be imposed. Trump’s top adviser, billionaire Elon Musk, the world’s richest man, fulminated this month that there was no such thing as genuine homelessness. “In most cases, the word ‘homeless’ is a lie,” he claimed. “It’s usually a propaganda word for violent drug addicts with severe mental illness.”

Speaking on the podcast of fascist Tucker Carlson in October, Musk declared, “Homeless is a misnomer. It implies that someone got a little bit behind on their mortgage, and if you just gave them a job, they’d be back on their feet ... What you actually have are violent drug zombies with dead eyes, and needles and human feces on the street.”

Trump, Musk and Vice President-elect JD Vance demonstrated their attitude to the homeless on December 14, when they feted New York subway strangler Daniel Penny at their skybox viewing the Army-Navy football game. Penny, an ex-Marine, killed a homeless man who was acting erratically—but threatening no one but himself—by applying a chokehold on his neck for a full eight minutes. He was acquitted in early December of all charges after the judge dismissed the most serious charge, manslaughter.

As for the Democrats, their rhetoric may be less vile, but their policies are no less dictated by the interests of

big business. In California, the largest US state with a GDP of \$3.23 trillion, there are more than 181,000 people homeless, while Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has spearheaded sweeps of homeless encampments that have actually reduced the homeless street-count in Los Angeles—not by providing shelter, but by driving the homeless out, into other locations.

The causes of homelessness are easily described: People are homeless because they lack the income to purchase or rent a home. Rent is too high, wages are too low and interest rate rises over the past two years have made this disparity far, far worse. Young people—and here the age might be extended to 40 or beyond—cannot afford a down payment, except with hefty assistance from parents or other family, and then struggle to pay the monthly mortgage.

As for Musk's reactionary and ignorant slurs about mental illness and drug addiction, the fastest rising categories among the homeless are children, up 33 percent, and families, up 40 percent. Family homelessness more than doubled in Denver, Chicago and New York City, fueled in part by the illegal shipping of busloads of migrants from the state of Texas at the orders of Governor Greg Abbott.

According to HUD, 150,000 children experienced homelessness on "count night" in January 2024. This figure is again a lowball estimate: there are more than 100,000 homeless children enrolled in the New York City public school system alone.

One of the most savage responses to growing homelessness came this year from the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court. In a case involving the town of Grant's Pass, Oregon, the court ruled by 6-3 that local governments had the right to make sleeping in cars or on the streets illegal, even though, as one dissenting justice observed, sleeping was not a crime, but a "biological necessity."

Since this decision, handed down in June, at least 100 cities, towns and counties have passed local ordinances against the homeless, in some cases criminalizing them outright. In one Republican-controlled county in California, the ordinance requires anyone living on the street to walk at least 300 feet every hour, on pain of arrest.

The HUD report on homelessness cited a series of small-bore measures adopted by the Biden administration, and hailed the reduction in veteran homelessness, which has been a special target of emergency spending, as a demonstration that progress can be made.

This, however, only begs the question. If homelessness among veterans can be reduced by 50 percent over the past two decades, why cannot the same thing be done for the rising tide of homelessness among all other sections of the population?

Veteran homelessness was becoming something of a public relations black eye for successive administrations, Democratic and Republican, which have faced increasing popular reluctance to volunteer for military service. The shattered bodies and psyches of soldiers who survived imperialism's wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries, displayed on the streets of most American cities, were bad for recruitment.

There is no such ruling class concern in relation to the vast majority of homeless people who are not veterans. They are just bad for the tourist business, bad for business generally, and need to be kept out of sight and out of mind. The Trump administration plans to build huge detention centers for migrant families arrested and held for deportation. These would certainly provide a tempting place to dispose of the homeless, either after or during the mass round-ups and deportations.

None of the infrequent media commentaries on homelessness takes note of the obvious and overriding fact about the homeless crisis: **There is no shortage of housing in America.** There are ample supplies of homes and apartments, and millions more could be built in short order. The problem is one of distribution, and the economic organization of society. Millions of homes are owned as second, third and fourth homes by the wealthy, or as speculative investments by hedge funds and private equity firms confident that the real estate market always goes up.

A government genuinely devoted to the interests of the working class would have no difficulty matching up those without homes and the homes currently unoccupied or deliberately left vacant in order to drive up prices and rents. But that would require the building of a political movement in the working class to fight for a socialist solution to the housing crisis, one that starts from the needs of the working people, not the profit interests of the billionaires and speculators.



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