

2 Detroit children freeze to death as homeless family shelters in vehicle

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In a horrific tragedy, two young children—a girl aged two and a boy aged nine—froze to death early Monday morning as they slept with members of their homeless family inside a van parked at a downtown Detroit casino garage. The mother of the children, who has been identified as 29-year-old Tateona Williams, an unemployed medical assistant, has been living in the van with her five children and her own mother for three months.

Police said Williams parked the van on the ninth floor of the Hollywood Casino Hotel garage at around 1:00 a.m. Monday morning, a time when outside temperatures were 12 degrees Fahrenheit. At some point, the van ran out of gas, leaving the family with no heat. Police Chief Todd Bettison said the family had been parking their van at various casino lots over the last three months, allowing the mother and children access to public restrooms.

On Monday, the mother tried to wake up her children for school and noticed that her nine-year-old was not moving. She called a friend who rushed the mother and her child to Children's Hospital. During this time, Williams' mother called to inform her that the two-year-old had also stopped breathing. Both children, Darnell, 9, and Amillah, 2, were pronounced dead from apparent hypothermia.

The shocking events provoked outrage throughout the city as the news spread. To deflect public anger, Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan called a press conference Tuesday at noon, largely to claim that the city had ample services to help homeless families, adding callously that the family “should have asked for help.”

Duggan, however, acknowledged that the mother had repeatedly reached out for help over the last two years, including as recently as November 24, 2024. It was later revealed that this included to the city's homeless and housing service, known as Coordinated Assessment Model, or CAM, but her pleas were either ignored or deemed non-emergency.

On Tuesday evening, the young mother, distraught and visibly shaking, gave an interview to the local ABC-TV affiliate. “I asked everybody for help,” she said. “I called

out of state, I called cities I didn't know, I called cities people asked me to call. I even asked Detroit—I've been on CAM list for the longest.”

Williams continued: “Everybody now wants to help after I lost two kids? I've been asking for help. ... It took my two kids to die for ya'll to help me? It's too late, I lost two kids. The one that made me a mother. And the one that's only two. She never got to live her life ... She lost her life because I had to sleep in a car.”

Williams said that she was scheduled to start a new job this week. “Everybody got this picture when I know in my heart, everybody who's around me knows, I loved those kids more than I loved myself. ... They had everything they wanted. The only thing they didn't have is a house.”

This tragedy exposes the truth behind the supposed “rebirth” of Detroit, more than a decade since the bankruptcy restructuring of the city by both political parties on behalf of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

Duggan, the former CEO of the Detroit Medical Center, who is now running for governor as an independent, oversees a city plagued by staggering levels of social inequality. The site of the Hollywood Casino Hotel, where the tragic deaths occurred, was formerly owned by real estate vulture Dan Gilbert (net worth \$27.4 billion), who sold it to Penn National Gaming for \$1 billion in 2018.

The federal, state and local governments have shoveled billions of dollars in grants and tax abatements to the auto companies, including for GM's new downtown headquarters (in a Gilbert-owned building) and for upscale housing developments in the city center.

At the same time, Detroit remains one of the poorest urban areas in the country after decades of deindustrialization and the lowering of wages overseen by the bureaucrats who head the United Auto Workers and other unions. The average wage Tateona Williams would make as a Certified Nursing Assistant in Michigan is only \$18.72 an hour.

Across Detroit, thousands of residents are enduring similar hardships, with many suffering without heat or electricity in their homes. A recent report by Planet Detroit highlights

how DTE Energy, the city's major energy provider, has been disconnecting customers from power, disproportionately affecting low-income residents. In 2024, DTE shut off electric service to 150,000 customers for nonpayment, while paying \$607 million to shareholders.

A survey by the Detroit Housing and Revitalization Department reports that even with 1,300 shelter beds in Detroit, there were over 1,500 households seeking shelter at any given time. This is likely a severe undercount, as individuals and families with vehicles apparently are not included in the official count of the homeless population.

The shelters that exist are underfunded, overcrowded and reported to be infected with bed bugs, mold and vermin. Some reported shelters with 10 families in a room, with people sleeping on chairs. The Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries reported that their shelters were currently full. At one point, 162 people were squeezed into a shelter with an 80 person capacity, a fire code violation. Those that were turned away were directed to other shelters or slept in their cars. Many homeless residents avoid shelters for fear of violence.

Tens of thousands have posted angry and heartfelt comments on social media responding to the news reports. They are but a pale reflection of the anger and hostility to the Trump administration and the entire political establishment developing in the working class. That so many identify with the plight of this family is an indication of the already widespread conditions of financial distress facing millions.

Typical was one comment, "Same here, my job just up and moved out of the city and then I was out of a job, been calling for two and a half to 3 months for a job, can't pay rent, got kicked out and don't have nowhere to go or stay ... On the streets with a twelve and thirteen-year-old, so I could totally understand what she was going through with five children. It's hard as hell out here and people don't understand or even care to understand or have empathy for people."

The enormous transfer of wealth to the handful of oligarchs is not going unnoticed. "Meanwhile beautiful hotel rooms sit empty. ... This is heartbreaking. And unacceptable." Another said, "A situation like this should never happen in this country. Nobody should be homeless in the richest country in the world."

Many comments speak to the billions of dollars for war, the building of the concentration camp in Guantanamo Bay which will detain 30,000 immigrants, and the massive cuts to social programs. "Be prepared for more of these stories! The 1st felon (Trump) would rather cut programs that help children, spend \$20 million to go to the Super Bowl and spend millions for one flight to the new Nazi camp."

Another comment, "Sad times. I know seniors getting their power shut off in the middle of winter. Remember when corporate monopolies didn't do that, now we're all collateral damage to corporate greed and the politicians they buy."

The tragedy in Detroit sheds light on the immense social crisis in America. Nationally, the number of homeless people living in shelters or on the streets topped 770,000 in 2024, according to the annual report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, 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 D.C., the capital city of the richest country in the world.

The figure does not include the tens of thousands driven from their homes by natural disasters like Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton, and the recent wildfires in Southern California. It is thus quite likely that the homeless population is well past 1 million.

Many if not most Americans are already one emergency away from living on the streets. A 2025 Bankrate survey reported that 59 percent of Americans don't have enough savings to cover a \$1,000 emergency expense.

This was under the Biden administration. The situation will only worsen as Trump and Musk take the axe to Medicaid, housing, education, Social Security and other federal programs. The attitude of Trump and Musk towards the homeless was summed up by the world's richest man last December when he posted on X, "In most cases, the word 'homeless' is a lie. It's usually a propaganda word for violent drug addicts with severe mental illness."

He added, the "'save the homeless' NGOs are often paid according to how many homeless people are on the streets, thus creating a strong financial incentive for them to maximize the number of homeless people and never actually solve the problem!" As for Trump, he is expected to sign an executive order soon to clear homeless encampments from Washington D.C.



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