

The Homelessness Crisis Deepens Across North America

By [John Clarke](#)

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As an organizer with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) in Toronto, I am only too aware of how much worse the homeless crisis has become in this city over the last three years. As a result of community pressure, City Hall issues a daily shelter [census](#). In a whole series of ways, the official process understates the problem but the picture that emerges is, nonetheless, quite dreadful. In the largest and wealthiest city in Canada, the homeless shelters are [bursting at the seams](#).

For years, the official city policy has called for a maximum occupancy level of 90% to be maintained but the figures that are released make a mockery of this. In fact, homeless people, advocates and service providers know very well that obtaining a bed for the night is massively time consuming and uncertain. One local solicitor even told me that she has clients in one of the Ontario jails who can't be released because their bail conditions demand they have somewhere to stay and she can't find available shelter beds for them.

The 'Monthly Shelter Occupancy' section of the daily census shows how the crisis has spun out of control since 2016. However, it is necessary to also consider the 'overnight services' that are in operation. These were established as 'winter respite' facilities but many of them are now being kept open all year round. They are, essentially, a sub-standard back up network that those unable to access the official shelters are forced to turn to. In these places, people often sleep on mats, on the bare floor or even sitting up in chairs. Showers and adequate toilet facilities are often lacking.

OCAP and others have exerted ongoing major pressure to address this crisis. We have protested, occupied city offices, brought mass delegations to shut down meetings of the City Council and forced them to open more space. However, it is clear that our work is taking place in the context of a worsening epidemic of homelessness, in the U.S. and Canada, and that the gains we have made have been insufficient to keep up with the growing problem.

Across the USA and Canada

The U.S. states and Canadian provinces, along with the municipal governments within them, have operated for years under a prevailing climate of austerity. However, the process has been extremely uneven and so it is not possible to link the growth of homelessness here to a uniform and clear-cut intensification of an austerity agenda [as in the UK](#).

What seems to have occurred over the last few years, however, is that the accumulating impact of social cutbacks, coupled with upscale urban redevelopment and soaring rental costs, have reached a tipping point that has sent the homeless situation spinning out of control in both the [U.S.](#) and [Canada](#).

A look at the major urban centres provides a startling picture of rampant destitution. The number of people forced to turn to the homeless shelters in New York City [exceeds 60,000](#). On the U.S. west coast, the situation is dire. Los Angeles lays claim to '[the sorriest urban scene anywhere in America](#)' while San Francisco has produced a homeless crisis that has prompted [comparisons](#) to the conditions prevailing in some of the poorest cities on earth. In Vancouver, with a rampant housing crisis but a climate that is exceptionally mild by Canadian standards, the number of homeless people in the city is said to be increasing by 26% [every year](#).

While a liberal discourse on the quest for 'solutions' to the homeless crisis is given considerable play, in reality the response of those in power, whether they are overtly reactionary or cultivate progressive pretensions, is focused on criminalizing the homeless and driving them from view as much as possible.

Over a hundred U.S. cities have [enacted laws](#) that target the activities homeless people must engage in from sleeping outside to brushing their teeth in public. Those running Toronto City Hall would not want to boast of their social cleansing activities yet, in 2016, the city carried out 160 clearances of homeless encampments even as it failed to provide an adequate shelter space that people could access. As the lack of housing options and the austerity attack worsen, with impending economic downturn threatening to compound the problem, it is only to be supposed that, far from improving, the homeless crisis and brutal measures to push the homeless from view will only get worse.

Challenging the Homelessness Crisis

Writing for *Counterfire* last year, Kevin Ovenden [pointed to](#) Rosa Luxemburg's powerful response to the tragic death of scores of homeless people in Berlin in 1912. In exposing and challenging this appalling loss of life, Luxemburg insisted that the plight of the homeless must be viewed as an issue of pressing concern to the entire working class movement and not as some apolitical 'social affairs' issue. 'Down with the obscene social system that creates such horror!' was her message. Unions, social movements and political parties based on the working class need to take this to heart in the context of the North American homeless crisis of today.

The neoliberal era has created ever greater levels of poverty and growing homelessness is the sharpest expression of this. To allow such conditions to spread and consolidate themselves is to tolerate conditions of despair for a major portion of the working-class population. Defensive struggles that seek to compel city governments to provide basic shelter are vital and necessary but we must go well beyond this.

No serious challenge to the neoliberal order can fail to demand housing for all as a matter of right. The entire movement must vigorously press for the expansion of social housing and challenge profit driven urban redevelopment. The struggle for decent wages and workers' rights must grow so as to ensure that low waged workers are constantly threatened with the loss of their housing. Social benefits must be raised substantially so that people living on them don't have to sacrifice an adequate diet in order to pay their rent. The struggle for the right to housing for all has to be a key part of a rejuvenated working-class movement that defends its gains but leaves no one behind.

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John Clarke is a writer and leading organizer for the [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty \(OCAP\)](#). Frequent contributor to *Global Research*.

Featured image: Homeless camp in East Vancouver, September 2017. Photo: Kenny McDonald via Flickr

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