

Seattle Is Dying: Hundreds of Homeless Dead Due to Failed Public Health Policy



By Alex Berezow — March 19, 2019



Imagine walking down a city sidewalk in winter. It's dark, wet, cold. You come across a man aged well beyond his years staggering along, grasping a wall so he doesn't fall down.

He's mumbling to himself. His pants are partially falling down. His hands and face are visibly dirty. Occasionally, he screams at no one in particular. You walk by, perhaps a little faster, but it doesn't faze you because you've seen this before, hundreds if not thousands of times. Nobody stops to help him -- not the police, not a social worker, not a doctor. Certainly not an elected politician. Nobody.

Later that night, he's dead. Maybe it was exposure. Maybe it was an untreated medical condition. Maybe it was a drug overdose. Few people know, and even fewer seem to care.

In what God-forsaken place are you? Damascus? Moscow? No, you're in Seattle, one of the wealthiest cities on Earth. Last year, [191 people lost their lives](#) ^[1] in circumstances similar to what I just described. And, for years, the response of local officials has been to do nothing, despite the fact that the number of homeless deaths continues to rise year after year.

Seattle's Public Health Policies Are Literally Killing Hundreds of People

That very well might change now. A devastating, jaw-dropping documentary titled "[Seattle Is Dying](#) ^[2]" by local ABC affiliate KOMO News revealed in shocking detail just how horribly the city's public health policy (to the extent there even is one) has failed. Reporter Eric Johnson captured Seattle's attitude perfectly: "Indifference masquerading as compassion."

This doesn't come as a surprise to anyone who lives in Seattle or just about anywhere on the West Coast. Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego are all facing similar issues.

The reason, ultimately, is the same everywhere: We no longer provide treatment to drug addicted or mentally ill people who cannot or will not care for themselves. Society has decided that it is more compassionate to allow these unfortunate souls to make their own choices, even if those choices are irrational, self-destructive, and dangerous to the community.

How Did We Get Here? Blame Deinstitutionalization

It's easy to blame the politicians you love to hate. Conservatives blame progressives, and progressives blame Ronald Reagan and rich people. But as is often the case, reality is far more complicated.

The problem really starts in 1955, when the United States began the process of [deinstitutionalization](#) [3]. Effective psychiatric medications meant that not every mentally ill person needed to be institutionalized. Today, millions of people with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or other serious mental illnesses can live somewhat normal lives if they take their medication and have support from friends and family. For these people, deinstitutionalization was a fine policy.

But for millions of others, it was a terrible policy. Those who for whatever reason do not take their medication or do not have a support network often end up on the street. Many become addicted to drugs. To make ends meet, they turn to petty crime, like shoplifting. They are often the victims (not just perpetrators) of violence, and many become sick with medieval diseases, like typhus. They enter into a vicious, downward cycle, which invariably has one end: An early, preventable death.

The solution, as the documentary suggested, is to reinstate mental health institutions. The goal is not to lock mentally ill patients or drug addicts up forever and throw away the key. Instead, the goal is to give them the support they need to live successfully on their own. The reporter highlighted a program in Providence, Rhode Island that appears to be working well.

I am hopeful that Seattle will see the error in its ways and begin to reverse course. However, I am not hopeful that it will happen with the current Mayor or City Council. When I approached my City Councilmember about involuntary institutionalization, [she called me a Nazi](#) [4].

The first step to solving the homelessness crisis -- in Seattle, anyway -- is to elect new councilmembers.

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Links

[1] <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/homeless-deaths-in-2018-appear-to-break-records-once-again/>

[2] <https://komonews.com/news/local/komo-news-special-seattle-is-dying>

[3] <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/asylums/special/excerpt.html>

[4] <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/after-14-years-ive-had-it-im-leaving-seattle/>