

Britain: Winter cold kills over 22,000 elderly

Keith Lee
15 January 2002

Some 22,700 elderly people died last winter in Britain from illnesses directly related to cold weather, according to the charity *Help the Aged*.

The estimate, based on figures from the Office of National Statistics, was made by calculating the average number of deaths of people aged 65 and over during the summer and autumn months in 2000, and comparing these with the number of deaths in the same age group between December 2000 and March 2001.

The figures paint a grim picture of life in Britain for the elderly. *Help the Aged* head of public affairs, Mervyn Kohler, said: "This 'bulge' of winter deaths is a peculiarly British problem. When countries with much more severe winters than ours have much lower winter death rates, it becomes obvious that something is badly wrong. And behind these stark figures there must be an uncountable amount of extra illness, discomfort and sheer misery for our older population."

Poverty is the single biggest factor leading to these deaths. A *Help the Aged* press release states that, "Older people are more likely to be living on low incomes, are less likely to claim benefits to which they are entitled and are more likely to live in older homes with inefficient heating systems, poorer insulation and less draught proofing. Evidence is growing that fuel poverty creates the cold and damp conditions that aggravate the respiratory and circulatory illnesses that are the cause of most of these deaths".

According to the charity, 77 percent of single pensioners and 43 percent of elderly couples, where at least one is of pensionable age, are classed as "fuel poor", i.e. unable to finance adequate heating arrangements.

More than a quarter of the UK housing stock was built before 1914. Among lone householders over 75, nearly a quarter are in poor accommodation, lacking decent insulation and/or central heating. Pensioners occupy some 45 percent of energy inefficient homes.

As a consequence, the charity estimates that poor households spend £700-£800 per year less than they should to achieve adequate warmth.

The availability of local authority grants to some low-income households to improve energy efficiency and to help finance the installation of central heating varies across the UK. In Scotland, every elderly person living in a house without central heating qualifies automatically for free energy efficiency measures. In England, however, the elderly can only access energy efficiency schemes if they are receiving means tested benefits. In Wales a slightly higher maximum grant is available to the elderly, but again only if they are on welfare benefits.

The various central government schemes will do nothing to solve the problem, *Help the Aged* has warned. Labour's much publicised winter fuel payments have made little impact, as around 70,000 elderly women were denied the them last year because their sixtieth birthdays fell after the mid-September cut-off date for qualification.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact