

Sharp rise in people sleeping rough in UK

Dennis Moore
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The Communities and Local Government department (CLG) has reported a 20 percent increase in the numbers of people sleeping rough on the streets of the UK.

There have been increases in rough sleeping in eight out of nine regions. In autumn 2011 when the last count took place, there were 2,181 recorded as sleeping rough at any one night in England. The previous year was 1,768, making an increase of 23 percent.

The definition of a rough sleeper only includes those actually sleeping on the street or in a building not designed for habitation, such as a stairwell or car park. Anyone sheltering in a hostel or space “used for recreational purposes” is excluded from the count.

Charities working with homeless people have warned that the numbers sleeping rough is set to rocket nationwide, as spending cuts within local authorities affect housing support services and drastic cuts to housing benefit entitlement take effect.

There is a concentration of rough sleeping in London, the south east and the south west. However, the biggest year-on-year increases were seen in the North West (40 percent) and the East Midlands (55 percent).

Many rough sleepers are not recorded.

The number of young people registered as homeless has risen sharply, with up to 400 more young people a day facing life on the streets. A study by the *Sunday Mirror* found that 13,000 young people presented themselves at local authorities as homeless and were seeking advice in October 2011.

The survey of more than 500 charities and councils

across the country found that support workers were barely able to cope with the rise in youth homelessness. Half of the councils and charities surveyed said they had seen a rise in young people seeking help, with many having to turn people away because they did not have any beds. One in five councils admitted they may not be meeting their legal obligations towards vulnerable 16-17 year olds.

The report found that the main cause of family breakdown is linked to financial pressures, leading to many young people leaving home and becoming homeless. Ongoing deep cuts to the welfare benefits system and the rising costs of living are tearing families apart.

Paul Marriot, chief Executive of the Depaul Trust said, “We have seen a rise in rough sleeping among young people. We expect this to continue as more families buckle under the pressure of the current climate.”

The figures provided by the local councils to the government are a clear underestimation of the number of people forced to sleep in the street. Another survey, compiled by the Combined Homeless and Information Network database, run by the Broadway charity, recorded that 3,975 people were sleeping rough in London alone over 2010-11.

In Manchester, one charity, The Mustard Tree, which helps rough sleepers, reported last month that it has just experienced its busiest winter since 1994. The Barnabus charity, based in Manchester city centre, reported that 500 people are visiting its centre every week compared with 300 a year ago.

Homelessness has a catastrophic effect on health.

Interim research findings carried out at Sheffield University for the UK homeless charity Crisis in December 2011 found that the lifespan of homeless people, including those living on the streets, is dramatically reduced. “Homelessness: A silent killer”, found that homeless men are dying at an average age of 47 years old and women at 43 years. The average age of death in the general UK population stands at 77 years. The incidence of death because of infections and falls is increased and suicide is nine times more likely in someone who is homeless.

The limits being set on the amount of housing benefit that someone can claim is compounding a situation where affordable decent housing is already in short supply, leading to many people living in accommodation that is not suitable. In addition there is the relentless destruction of frontline services and increased attacks on funding for projects that work with people to prevent homelessness.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government has offered the tiny sum of £18.5 million to be shared by local authorities nationally to assist with rough sleeping. In response to the fact that more than half of those found sleeping in the streets of London were from overseas, Housing Minister Grant Shapp said cynically, “Anyone heading here with tales of Dick Whittington in their head needs to realise that the streets of London and our other cities aren’t paved with gold.”

The previous Labour government rolled out a raft of legislation which exacerbated the problem of homelessness. Labour’s prime concern regarding rough sleepers was that they would tarnish the image of cities, particularly London, and undermine efforts to “sell” localities as prime investment sites. Under Labour, the requirement of local authorities to house asylum seekers was abolished and reactionary legislation enacted so that single parents and expectant mothers no longer received priority housing.



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