

Homelessness and sleeping in the street on the rise in the UK

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Figures published by the *Homelessness Monitor*, a five year joint project between York University and Herriot Watt University Edinburgh, show that more people are becoming homeless and sleeping rough (on the streets) in England.

Across the UK, significant numbers of local authorities saw rough sleeping increase by 100 percent. In a national count of people sleeping rough carried out across the UK between autumn 2010 and 2011, an increase of 23 percent was recorded. In London the rise in rough sleeping was 43 percent above the previous year. This increase is greater than anything seen since the early 1990s and the trend is set to get much worse as council budgets are slashed and services to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping are cut.

Since some eastern European countries joined the European Union, there has been an increase in the numbers of people from these countries found sleeping rough on the streets of London. In the borough of Southwark, east European nationals make up to 40 to 50 percent of the rough sleeping population.

A recent story highlighted the tragedy associated with rough sleeping when 42-year-old Michael Gething was found dead outside a local Methodist church in the town of Totnes in Devon, England. Michael was wearing soaking clothes, and his sleeping bag was also sodden. That night the temperature went down to -2 degrees Celsius. Michael was the fourth homeless person to die in the town since 2010. The number of people considered as statutory homeless has increased by 34 percent since 2009. There has been an increase in the use of bed-and-breakfast temporary accommodation to house homeless people. Figures published by the National Housing Federation show that between 2011 and 2012 there was an increase of 44 percent. Between January and March 2011 there were 2,750 families

forced to live in temporary accommodation. The numbers of families in the same period for 2012 had risen to 3,960. Rising numbers of households with children in B&B hotel placements have been even more concerning, up from 630 in March 2010 to 1,660 in March 2012.

In April 2011, the government imposed a national cap on Housing Benefit payments for private rented accommodation. This limited the weekly payments available to tenants to help pay their rent to £250 for a one-bedroom property, £290 for a two-bedroom property, £340 for a three-bedroom property and £400 for a four-bedroom property. At present the Housing Benefit caps have not applied to those living in temporary accommodation, but from April 2013 they are likely to.

The changes already implemented via caps to Housing Benefit will precede major changes to be brought in with the introduction of Universal Credit. This is the governments' new flagship benefit that will limit the social security benefit paid to a household (including couples with children) to £500 a week. Included in this maximum amount of £500 is money paid towards rent costs. It is likely that this amount will also apply to Housing Benefit paid towards rent for people living in temporary accommodation. This poses the immediate prospect for many families and single people of eviction. The rents in parts of the UK, particularly London, already exceed the £500 ceiling that will be payable. For example, in Newham, east London the council puts the cost at a minimum of £525 a week.

There has been a marked increase since 2003 in the numbers of families and single people living in overcrowded accommodation—from 2.4 percent to 3.0 percent—with 670,000 households now considered

overcrowded.

There are regional disparities with the south and London being hit the hardest. Evidence suggests that the impact of these social security cuts and the drastic reduction in people's incomes is having a detrimental impact on those most vulnerable to rent fluctuations and housing benefit caps. The homelessness charity, Shelter, reported that there are thousands of families across London at risk of losing their homes due to difficulties with falling behind with rents or mortgage payments. In the 12 months to September 2012, 198,470 households in England were threatened with eviction or repossession, 71 percent of these being made on behalf of landlords. This means one in every 115 households now at risk of homelessness.

Campbell Rob, chief executive of Shelter, said, "It's truly shocking how many people in this country are living with the threat of becoming homeless. In some areas, the risk of being evicted or repossessed is so high that one home in every street could be affected."

The top 15 "eviction hotspots" include all the London boroughs—double the national average, with 1 in 62 homes at risk. The London Borough of Dagenham and Barking has three times as many repossession claims than the rest of the country. Outside London, regions with the highest rate of eviction are the North West with 1 in 112 homes at risk and the West Midlands with 1 in 114. The top hotspots outside the capital include large urban areas such as Manchester, Slough and Wolverhampton.

There has been a marked increase in the numbers of those who are defined as the "hidden homeless"—those who live in overcrowded, sharing households. There were an estimated 1.54 million "concealed" households involving single people in England in 2012, as well as 214,000 concealed couples and lone parents.

The provision of social welfare is being drastically reduced with cuts to services, benefit entitlement, and the right to housing. This leaves millions of people in the UK with the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads, with families desperately trying to make ends meet with limited or no resources. Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick, who led the research for the *Homelessness Monitor*, commented, "As the buffers that have traditionally saved people from homelessness are dismantled we expect to see this increase accelerate—particularly with families and younger

people who are being hardest hit."



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