

London police confiscate sleeping bags and food parcels from homeless people

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Metropolitan Police officers raided three sites in Ilford, east London, last month where homeless people were sleeping. In the course of the raid, police officers reportedly not only evicted the rough sleepers, they also took away their sleeping bags and food parcels they had been given.

The raids took place on May 15. Eight men found sleeping at a former public swimming baths were evicted. One of the homeless men, Adam Jaskowiak, told the local paper, the *Ilford Recorder*, that the police officers had bundled their sleeping bags and other possessions into a police car. These possessions included food parcels given them by local charities. Jaskowiak asked an officer if he could have back his food parcel and the sleeping bag, which had been given to him by the local Salvation Army after he became homeless following the death of a friend. The officer refused.

The following day, the evicted men went to a local charity, the Refugee and Migrant Forum of East London (Ramfel), for help. The chief executive of Ramfel, Rita Chadha, told the *Ilford Recorder* that she contacted the local police and local council to discover what happened. It took two days before she received any response, which came in the form of a message from the police that they would get back to her.

The following Tuesday, she went to Ilford police station with a local Salvation Army officer, John Clifton. Ms. Chadha said, “We informed them that we wanted the sleeping bags back and we were told the officer in charge was unavailable and nobody else knew what was going on.”

The *Ilford Recorder* also contacted the police in an attempt to get their account of the evictions. It took officers a further three days to issue a brief statement, which did not directly address the allegations that they

had confiscated the sleeping bags and food of the homeless people.

The statement, by Chief Inspector John Fish, declared, “The public rely on police to reduce the negative impact of rough sleepers; this includes the need for us to assist in the removal of temporary structures, tents, and bedding from public spaces and other inappropriate locations.”

Not only did the police not deny the confiscations, they argued that such actions were justified on the grounds of protecting the public from the “negative impact” of homeless people.

Homelessness in London is rising three times as fast as across the rest of the country, according to government statistics from the Department of Communities and Local Government. In autumn 2012, before the housing benefit cap came into effect, government figures showed a 6 percent rise in rough sleeping nationally against the previous year. London accounts for around a quarter of this figure, but the actual figures cited (557 people sleeping rough in the capital on any night) are likely to under-report the problem.

The *Ilford Recorder* published its first article a week after the events. There was an immediate public reaction. In an editorial comment, the paper later discussed the “unprecedented and astonishing” response on Facebook and Twitter. Such was the deluge of hostile comment that neighbouring Essex police felt compelled to distance themselves from the action, noting that the Metropolitan Police have jurisdiction over Ilford even though it is in the county of Essex.

Faced with this response, the police were no longer able to maintain their casual indifference to the charges that they had deprived homeless men of their sleeping

bags and food. One day later, the borough commander, Detective Chief Superintendent Sue Williams, issued a much longer statement denying that the police had taken the possessions of the homeless.

Williams nevertheless justified the raids, asserting, “Homeless people and street drinkers are often raised as a significant cause of concern by local residents, schools, businesses and local politicians. These are about health risks from dirty items left in public areas, anti-social behaviour, shouting and swearing, drunkenness and drug misuse. We carried out an operation on May 15 to tackle some of these issues.”

She ended her statement: “I am committed to Partnership [sic] working to tackle the problem of homelessness and street drinking in [the London Borough of] Redbridge. But at the same time police will deal with anti-social behaviour and criminal offences that make the public feel unsafe.”

Rita Chadha replied, “I have no reason to doubt the credibility of those who told me and I find it disheartening and grossly unfair that the Met Police chose to perpetuate a stereotype of the homeless as dangerous and unwanted individuals locally.”

Regarding the confiscation claims, Clifton added, “There’s no reason for them to make it up. What are they going to get out of it?”

Williams’s statement had implied, as the *Iford Recorder* noted with irritation, that the paper “had reported the story incorrectly.”

Williams arranged a meeting with the paper’s editor and two journalists. She was accompanied by the two officers, John Fish and Sergeant Jake Sutton, who led the raids. The paper said that the version of events now presented by the police “ironed out some misunderstandings” and provided evidence that the police “take the issue of rough sleepers seriously and humanely.”

According to Sutton, the decision to raid the disused public baths was taken as a result of pressure from a nearby academy school, the Isaac Newton Academy, and local Labour MP Mike Gapes. Redbridge Council issued a statement that it had “no powers to remove or confiscate property from the homeless and has not done so. The Council’s Cleansing Officers responded to a police request to clean up following their operation to tackle crime and anti-social behavior.... We are sympathetic to those who find themselves homeless but

we also understand the Police’s responsibility to ensure that any negative impact of rough sleepers is reduced.”

Williams said that, “in hindsight”, representatives of the charities should have been asked to attend, and communication should have been better. Chadha was unimpressed: “We thank the police for their communication even if it is via the media. We stand by what our clients told us and we have no reason to disbelieve them.”

The police are pushing the view that homelessness is a public nuisance problem, portraying the homeless as being guilty, in Williams’s words, of “anti-social behaviour and criminal offences which make the public feel unsafe.”

The reality is that the anti-social behaviour of governments and the often criminal behaviour of the financial institutions threaten the public far more than the sight of their hapless victims forced to sleep in doorways. They are attacking the living standards of the vast majority, creating mass unemployment and destroying public services so that a tiny minority can live in ever-increasing luxury. The true feelings of ordinary people on these matters were made abundantly clear by the overwhelming response to the *Iford Recorder*’s report of this symptomatic incident.



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