

Skyrocketing energy prices increase Britain's winter death rate

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An estimated 31,100 “excess” deaths occurred in Britain last winter according to the Office of National Statistics (ONS)—a rise of almost a third.

Excess winter deaths are the number of additional deaths occurring between December and March in comparison with the rest of the year. March 2013 was the coldest recorded since 1962, with an average monthly temperature of 2.6°C (36.7°F)

Most of the deaths, some 25,600, were of people over 75 years of age and largely the result of cold-related illnesses affecting the heart and respiratory systems.

The ONS figures show that there has been a tendency for excess winter deaths to increase since 2005, reversing a statistical decline over the previous 60 years.

Studies have shown that excess winter deaths are primarily the result of social and housing conditions. Both England and Wales witness a higher winter death rate compared to other European countries where weather conditions are much more severe.

A report by the World Health Organisation estimated that a third of excess winter deaths are due to people living in poorly heated homes. The skyrocketing cost of gas and electricity has been a big contributory factor.

Government guidance in Britain advises living rooms should be heated to at least 21°C (70°F) and bedrooms to 18°C (64°F). It warns that sustained lower temperatures cause physiological effects on the body that drastically increase the chance of death in people who are physically at risk.

Research has found that lower indoor temperatures cause increased blood pressure, thickening of the blood leading to clots (thrombosis), and increased risk of respiratory infections and flu due to lowering the body's immunity system, which can lead to more serious health issues such as bronchitis and pneumonia. Most telling of all, research has linked lower indoor temperatures to increased cardiovascular disease, which accounts for

almost half of all excess winter deaths.

The number of people becoming ill due to cold homes has also led to increased pressure on hospitals and contributed to the crisis that has engulfed the Accident and Emergency service. The *Herald* reported that hospital wards were so short of beds to treat patients that hundreds were forced to wait 12 hours for one to become available, further raising the chance of death.

The ONS report does not probe the link between cold homes and excess winter deaths. Over the last few years, there has been an ever-increasing rate of fuel poverty in Britain—from just under 1.5 million people in 2003 to 6 million today. It is expected that in the next three years, this will increase by another 3 million.

There is every reason to believe that this is a gross underestimation of the real situation. A recent survey by the Trussell Trust found that 37 percent of British families are forced to choose between eating or heating during the winter period.

At the same time, the energy industry regulator Ofgem reported that the “Big Six” energy suppliers saw their profits rise by 75 percent last year after raising prices by almost 20 percent. Prices have increased tenfold in the last four years.

The situation is compounded by the huge number of houses that lack adequate insulation and efficient heating. Ed Matthew of the Energy Bill Revolution organisation points out that in Germany 250,000 homes were insulated in just one year, whereas in the UK only 219 homes had been insulated through the government's “Green Deal,” despite collecting £1.5 billion a year from carbon taxes.

Calling the deaths “unnecessary”, “preventable” and “a damning indictment of our failure to address the scandal of cold homes in this country,” Age UK's charity director, Caroline Abrahams, blamed the deaths on “poor insulation and high energy costs”. She added that “those living in the coldest homes are three times more likely to

die a preventable death than those living in warmer ones.”

“The only sustainable solution to the scourge of fuel poverty and escalating energy prices is a major overhaul of our poorly insulated housing, to ensure that cold homes are a thing of the past. In 21st Century Britain, older people’s lives should not be at the mercy of the weather,” Abrahams concluded.

Abrahams’s pleas will fall on deaf ears. They are diametrically opposed to the programme being carried out by the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition. The dire situation facing an ever-increasing proportion of society is the direct outcome of the attacks on wages, jobs and welfare while the privatised energy sector is given a free hand to extort millions for private profit.

This situation is set to worsen. The government is clearing the way for the energy giants to increase their profits further by cutting Green levies on power companies and cutting taxes on fracking companies from 62 percent to 30 percent.

Fuel poverty campaigners also say that further savings for power companies will be achieved by rolling back demands on energy companies to install energy-efficient equipment. All this has been done under the fraudulent claim of tackling higher energy costs.

Clare Welton from Fuel Poverty Action said, “[Chancellor George] Osborne is axing insulation for tens of thousands of the poorest households, condemning thousands of families to cold and damp homes with unaffordable high bills for decades, whilst allowing the Big Six to continue their profiteering just a week after a huge rise of deaths from fuel poverty have been reported.”

While the Labour Party sheds crocodile tears over the winter deaths, it is just as responsible for the situation facing millions today. Notwithstanding its toothless call for energy price freezes at levels already unaffordable, it has made it clear it will be no less ruthless in its attacks on the working class.



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