

Surge in homelessness among young people across the UK

Dennis Moore
6 August 2015

The numbers of homeless young people depending on councils and charities to put a roof over their heads, is three times greater than those officially recorded by the British government.

According to a study by Cambridge University's Centre for Housing and Planning Research, 83,000 homeless young people had to rely on charities and councils for shelter in 2013-14—far exceeding the 26,852 recorded by the Department for Communities and Local Government. At any one time, around 35,000 young people live in homeless accommodation across the UK.

Most of the UK's homeless young people (63,976) were located in England. Of these, 17,711 are located in the largest city, London. In Wales 4,133 were reported, 12,107 in Scotland and 3,025 in Northern Ireland.

The study, commissioned by Centrepont, the homeless charity for young people, provides the most comprehensive picture of youth homelessness to date. It draws on official figures, data from 40 local authorities and a national survey of more than 2,000 16-to-25-year-olds. It shows how the availability of data on youth homelessness has dwindled since 2009.

The study examined homelessness over the course of a year, including those staying in hostels and rough sleeping. It also commissioned research consultants Comres to carry out the difficult task of assessing the extent of hidden homelessness, including those described as sofa surfing. A sample of 2,011 young people aged 16-25 were asked if they had had to stay in a list of places because they had nowhere else to stay.

The figures showed the following; 26 percent of young people reported that they had slept rough, or in unsafe places such as night buses, cars or on the streets because they had nowhere else to go, 17 percent had slept rough during the last year with 10 percent having

done so for more than one night. Some 20 percent had sofa surfed during the last year, with 16 percent having done so for more than one week, and 4 percent for over three months.

If the poll data is scaled up to reflect the wider population, it suggests an estimated 1.3 million young people aged 16 to 24 would have slept rough, or in an unsafe place, during the past year.

Those who had slept rough reported the most common location to sleep out was in a car (55 percent), in a tent (34 percent), on the streets (18 percent), in a car park (16 percent), or in a park or open space (15 percent). The study estimates that in any one night just under 300,000 young people are sleeping rough or out in an unsafe place.

Some 35 percent of young people who responded to the survey reported that they had sofa surfed at some point, which would suggest over a million nationally. The most common reason reported for sofa surfing were parents unable or unwilling to house the young person, or an unsafe home environment.

The report notes, "Young people who had rough slept within the last year were asked how long they had slept rough for. Of the 346 young people who had slept rough in the last year, 40 percent had done so for just one night, and a further 34 percent for between one night and a week. In contrast, seven people reported that they had slept rough for over six months."

Centrepont's summary of its findings states, "These findings show that the number of young people experiencing homelessness or failing to access the housing they need is much higher than official figures suggest."

The extent of homelessness amongst young people, which the new study reveals, is underestimated because official statistics are based on a narrow definition of

homelessness. Only young people that local authorities in England, Northern Ireland and Wales have a statutory duty to house, including those under 18, pregnant or who leave care, are included.

The official statistics only include those classified as newly homeless during the year, not those already homeless at the start of the year and exclude the many young people who have no contact with their local authority or are deemed to have made themselves intentionally homeless.

As a result, most homeless people over the age of 18 are being omitted from government statistics. This under-reporting of homelessness has a political purpose, as a wider definition would oblige councils to provide more young people with help.

Responding to the findings, Centrepoin policy director, Balbir Chatrik, said, “Successive governments have been making policy in the dark as they have failed to grasp the sheer scale of youth homelessness in the UK.

“We’re seeing the consequences of funding decisions based on this lack of knowledge which have placed extreme pressure on charities and local authorities, with the majority of hostels full or oversubscribed.

“Young people typically find themselves facing homelessness through no fault of their own. As a society, we owe them a national safety net devised from more than just guesswork,” Chatrik added.

The chief executive of charity Shelter, Campbell Robb, declared, “This research paints a grim picture of youth homelessness in the UK and demonstrates that the Government’s current plan to cut housing benefit for 18-to-21-year-olds could be nothing short of catastrophic—as it’s this which helps to pay for the hostel beds that keep young people off the streets.”

Robb was referring to the recent Conservative government’s budget and the announcement that those aged between 18-21 would no longer be able to automatically claim housing benefit under the new rules.

The new restriction takes place under conditions where many young workers are unable to buy a home because of soaring house prices, with the average age of a first-time buyer rising from 29 to 38 in the last decade. As a result, many young people have to live at home with their parents, as they are unable to move out and live independently.

demise of social housing and the crisis in general housing provision, many people are unable to find secure, affordable and comfortable housing in which to live.

At the other end of the scale, homes in the UK are being bought and sold for millions of pounds by the super-rich. Just last month, a mansion in Hyde Park in London, which had been put on the market for £300 million, received a private bid of £280 million. The house went on the market after the death of its most recent owner, Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia.

Not too far away, people are being forced to sleep out in cars and parks at night, with nowhere to stay.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact