

Social cleansing escalates in Inner London boroughs

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Over the past five years, the number of children entitled to free school meals has dropped by almost a third in some Inner London boroughs. This is a 16 percent average drop across the whole of Inner London, compared to a 3 percent drop across the whole of England.

The number of children entitled to free school meals in an area is an effective indicator of local deprivation.

The greater fall in numbers, however, has nothing to do with any improvement in the position of London's poor. In fact, the figures reveal a process of social cleansing being carried out on a vast scale, with tens of thousands of poor families being forced out of their inner London homes and sometimes outside of the city altogether.

These findings echo the results of a 2014 investigation by the *New Statesman*, which uncovered a 27 percent drop in the number of private renters claiming housing benefit in central London, matched by a 9 percent rise in claimants in outer London boroughs.

Of the families leaving their homes, a significant number have been directly evicted by their local councils as a result of government welfare cuts. The Focus E15 protest earlier this year, for example, was a response to Labour-run Newham Council's eviction of families occupying the former social housing flats at the Carpenter's estate in Stratford.

The bedroom tax introduced in the Welfare Reform Act of 2012, which reduces housing benefit if the recipient is deemed to have "spare" rooms, and the more recently lowered welfare cap, from £26,000 to £23,000, have left increasing numbers of people simply unable to continue living in London.

Since 2011, one year after Mayor Boris Johnson claimed, "You are not going to see thousands of

families being evicted from the place where they have been living," 50,000 London families have been forcibly relocated outside of their boroughs. Given these figures are for families, the number of children being moved in this way is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands. Most end up in outer, poorer boroughs: Merton (19 percent), Bexley (15 percent) and Croydon (11 percent) have all seen percentage rises in the number of children entitled to free school meals.

More than 2,700 families have been moved outside of London altogether.

The Conservatives' punitive welfare regime is accelerating the effects of London's already catastrophic cost of living crisis. House prices and rents in the capital have soared in recent years. Since 2010/11, the rent for a one-bedroom flat in Greater London has risen 22 percent. In 18 out of 33 boroughs today, that means a monthly cost of over £1,000.

According to a report by McKinsey Global Institute, the gap between what Londoners should pay in rent—which they set at the high figure of 30 percent of their salary—and what they actually do pay is among the highest in the world, with many people spending close to 50 percent of their salary on rent.

So-called "affordable housing" offers little by way of an alternative. "Affordable" rents are set at 80 percent of market value; that is up to £655 *a week* in Westminster. Even in the poorer borough of Southwark, paying "affordable rent" for a two-bedroom flat would require an income of almost £44,000—putting the owner in the top 15 percent of earners in the UK.

Buying a house in London is now close to impossible for young families. A study by Shelter in April found just 43 homes with two bedrooms or more in the whole of Greater London that were affordable for the average

first time buyer. According to the Office for National Statistics, the typical house price in London is £513,000.

The causes of such exclusionary prices include the chronic and historic shortage of houses to meet demand, the financial incentive for developers to build high-value properties and avoid social or affordable home building, and the effects of the Conservatives' right-to-buy initiatives—both in the 1980s with regards to council housing and today with its extension to housing association properties.

Around 240,000 new homes are needed nationally every year just to keep up with demand, but barely half that number are actually built, fuelling competition for what is available and driving up prices. Of the homes that are built, particularly in London, most cater to the high-end market because of the greater return on investment for the developer. The total value of housing in London rose 20 percent (£247 billion) in 2014 alone.

Many developers are also buying houses to leave empty, waiting for the price to rise to extract huge profits. This intensifies the shortage, adding to the increase in prices. There are currently more than 80,000 empty homes in the capital.

Redevelopment of already existing housing—under the cynical title of “regeneration”—continues to chip away at social housing stock. At the Aylesbury Estate in Southwark, for example, a regeneration project cost the borough 934 social homes. The reintroduction of right to buy practically encourages the selling off of social housing to the private market. These underlying conditions, driven by the prioritisation of profit over need, create the conditions in which social cleansing is inevitable.

Those working class families not already forced away from the capital face conditions of dire poverty, as the high cost of living forces them to make severe sacrifices. London contains 14 of the worst 20 local authorities in the UK for child poverty, according to the Campaign to End Child Poverty. Fifteen of London's 33 boroughs have between a third and a half of their children living in poverty, with Tower Hamlets having the highest rate of 49 percent.

The capital has a greater proportion of children (650,000) from less well-off households than the national average who do not have a winter coat, a

bicycle or daily fresh fruit and vegetables. A significant proportion of these children also miss out on celebrations for special occasions, having a friend for tea, a hobby or leisure activity.

This is hardly surprising given the costs of living in London. An Oyster travel card, for example (for Zones 1 to 6) on the Underground, costs £225.10 a month and childcare is estimated by a Loughborough University study at £250 a week in inner London.

More working class families will be forced to follow the thousands already relocated away from the capital's centre. The London being created is one where deprived boroughs occupied by ordinary people orbit a well-developed, rich-only enclave, which the working class may enter only to work for low wage rates.

The richest 10 percent of Londoners own more than half the city's wealth, while the poorest third own just 1 percent. As long as such vast inequalities persist, social cleansing and exclusion will remain a feature of the city's life.



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