

Notes on the London housing crisis

Number of London homeless sleeping on the streets tops 8,000 nightly

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26 September 2016

Rough sleeping doubles

Figures released by the Communities and Local Government Select Committee show that the number of people rough sleeping (sleeping on the streets) in London at some point during 2015-16 has doubled since 2010, rising 7 percent in the last year alone, to 8,096 people.

Research by the Crisis charity shows that the number one cause of homelessness is the ending of assured short-hold tenancies in the private rental sector—accounting for one third of all homeless acceptances by local councils.

Jon Sparkes, chief executive of Crisis, said, “The number of people rough sleeping in London is the highest in the country and for the first time in many years numbers are increasing in all parts of England. The biggest reason someone finds themselves homeless is the end of a private rented tenancy.”

Dying homeless in London

More than 8,000 people sleep rough in London, and for these vulnerable citizens, the average life expectancy is just 47 years. The average for the UK as a whole is 81.5 years.

Many of London’s homeless die violent or lonely deaths.

This summer, a spate of deaths in Camden Borough due to poisoning from synthetic cannabis led to an outcry from residents. The drug, once legal in London, is peddled to homeless residents for £1 per cigarette as a cheap alternative to marijuana. However, the strength of the synthetic drug is unpredictable, sometimes with devastating consequences.

This past June the decomposing body of Joseph Coughlin was found in his homeless hostel, three days after he had died. Social services and hostel managers failed to check on him, and his death went unnoticed until residents complained of a foul odour coming from his room.

Last year, former concert pianist Anne Naysmith, nicknamed

“The Car Lady of Chiswick,” died after being hit by a lorry in West London. Naysmith had been living in her car until Hounslow Council towed it away in response to complaints from residents. After this, she lived in various places, including an alleyway behind an Italian restaurant, Charing Cross Hospital’s boiler room, and shrubbery behind Stamford Underground Station.

Last year a Kensington resident discovered the body of an unknown man impaled on a spike in the prosperous Conservative-controlled borough. After an exhaustive search, police discovered he was a Polish immigrant worker. He left behind a family in Peterborough.

Homeless university students in London

A survey of undergraduate students at London Metropolitan University (LMU) School of Social Professions found that 27 of the programme’s students are homeless. These homeless students were too ashamed to admit their situation and seek help from the university.

At LMU, the least expensive single student room with shared facilities is £584 per month, on par with private bed-sit rentals in London. This extortionate sum is forcing many low-income students to sleep on floors or couches or in hostels and local council emergency accommodation.

Martin Blakey, chief executive of Unipol housing charity for university students in Leeds, Nottingham and Bradford, said the survey findings don’t surprise him, telling the *Guardian* :

“It’s hard to get figures on homelessness because universities don’t monitor it, but I strongly suspect that it is a problem not just for LMU. Even in Leeds, when we hold viewings for family accommodation we find that people want to move in within days. When we ask about their present contracts, they are often extremely vague about where they are living. In London, student accommodation is being left to the market, so special groups, such as students with families, need greater help

and support if they're to survive in the market-driven jungle.”

According to the Degrees of Debt report by Sutton Trust, the average English university student can expect to graduate with around £44,000 of student loans. For the first time, English university students are now graduating with more debt than their American counterparts.

Homelessness and health

In 2015, at least 2,521 homeless London residents had “identifiable psychiatric needs”—a 260 percent increase from 2009, according to figures released by St. Mungo’s homeless charity that year. Mental health problems are the most common cause of homelessness.

In addition, homeless people also experience higher incidences of common diseases as well as diseases that were all but eradicated in the Victorian era, such as tuberculosis.

According to a Crisis charity survey of homelessness and access to general practitioner health care, one in 50 homeless people reported having tuberculosis, 25 times the national average. Responses from survey participants also revealed that homeless people are twice as likely to suffer from diabetes and five times more likely to suffer from epilepsy. Eighty percent of survey participants reported they are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol.

The Crisis survey reports that access to health care by homeless people is limited by a number of factors, including difficulty registering with a surgery, lack of trust in institutions and authority figures, and lack of awareness or understanding of their own health situation.

Children transferred out of boroughs suffer abuse and neglect

An *Independent* newspaper investigation, published earlier this year, revealed the tragic deaths of children who were “lost” by social services authorities after being moved away from their local area. These included “the death of a six-month old child from head injuries, the death of a 13-month-old child from ongoing abuse, the death of a neglected one-year-old baby, and the miscarriage of a baby after the eight-month pregnant mother collapsed from stress and exhaustion.”

Councils moving homeless and vulnerable families to a new borough have a lawful duty of care to notify the new borough council of the family’s situation through a system known as Notify2 in London, especially when there is a history of child abuse and neglect. However, local authorities report that

transferring councils routinely do not provide critical information about these families.

The Independent reports that between July 2011 and June 2015, London Councils moved 64,704 homeless families, with 4,053 of these families moved out of Greater London area entirely.

Boroughs targeting homeless with Public Space Protection Orders

Councils across London are increasingly threatening to criminalise rough sleeping individuals through the use of Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs).

PSPOs were first introduced in 2014 as part of the UK Government’s Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, an anti-democratic bill with sweeping powers to criminalise everything from congregating in groups to sleeping rough, and particularly discriminating against the homeless. An investigation by Vice.com revealed that 36 local authorities are using the PSPOs to target rough sleepers, slapping them with a £100 penalty and possible criminal record and a further fine of £1,000 if they fail to pay the original penalty.

Under pressure from homeless advocates, Hackney Council in East London recently dropped its plans to charge homeless £100 on the spot for “anti-social behaviour” such as begging, street drinking, and rough sleeping in designated “hotspots.” But the council is undergoing a review of the use of PSPOs by other boroughs to determine if they will reintroduce them in the near future.

Tens of thousands of London homes stand empty

There are currently 56,000 empty homes in London. One of the main reasons is the phenomenon known as “buy to leave.” Property investors simply buy a house, leave it empty for a period until house prices rise enough to sell it on and make a substantial profit.



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