

Significant rise in UK homelessness

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Shelter has revealed that the number of homeless people in England has risen to over 250,000.

The homelessness charity included the following sources in order to record an accurate figure: national government statistics on rough sleepers, statistics on those in temporary accommodation, the number of people housed in hostels, and those waiting to be housed by social services departments (obtained through Freedom of Information requests).

Of these homeless people, almost half are children.

Shelter released the new figures to mark the 50th year since it was founded in response to the appalling social conditions of post-war Britain. Shelter chief executive Campbell Robb explained, “Shelter’s founding shone a light on hidden homelessness in the sixties’ slums. But while those troubled times have faded into memory, 50 years on, a modern-day housing crisis is tightening its grip on our country.”

Shelter explained that their analysis gives a conservative, lower-end estimate and real homelessness figures are much higher. They report that calls to their helpline are up by 50,000 since last year, so they now receive one call every 30 seconds. The number of families living in temporary accommodation rose by 15 percent. Further thousands do not qualify for formal housing assistance.

The geographical breakdown of the figures reveals homelessness hotspots in the urban centres. London is worst affected, with a shocking 2 percent of people facing housing insecurity. Here, the number of people sleeping rough has doubled in five years from 3,673 in 2009-10 to 7,500 last year. The city hosts widespread social deprivation alongside incredible wealth as one of the world’s major playgrounds for the corporate and financial oligarchy.

In Birmingham, Britain’s second-largest city, 9,650 people lack proper accommodation each night and dozens are forced to sleep on the street. At the end of

last month Chiriac Inout was found dead after sleeping rough when temperatures plunged to six degrees below freezing.

The next worst affected cities are Luton, where one in every 63 people are housing insecure, Brighton (one in every 69), Slough (one in 164), Bristol, Coventry (one in 204), Reading (one in 170) and Manchester (one in 266).

Around 3,600 people sleep on the streets each night in England. Precise figures are not available and the real number is likely to be much higher. These numbers have doubled since 2010.

Homelessness is a frightening and isolating experience that causes difficulties finding employment and has a massive impact on mental and physical health. The life expectancy for homeless people is only 47 years of age, dramatically lower than the national average of 81. Rough sleepers are 35 times more likely to commit suicide and are extremely prone to mental health and drug problems. Homelessness causes permanent psychological damage to the children it affects.

Thousands are being forced out of their homes by rising rents and cuts to housing benefit. The biggest immediate factor is eviction from accommodation in the private rented sector, as many face tighter budgets and insecure tenancies. This causes two-fifths of homeless cases in London and the figure nationally has risen fourfold between 2010 and 2015, according to homelessness charity Crisis. The financial issues are often compounded by social problems, mental health disorders or relationship breakdown.

Existing state aid for homelessness is barely adequate, with hostels or bed-and-breakfasts often run-down and at a large distance from schools and local connections. Councillor Martin Tett of the Local Government Association stated, “Funding pressures are combining with housing and rents continuing to rise

above household incomes to leave many councils struggling to cope with rising homelessness across all areas of the country.”

Tett is leader of the Conservative-led Buckinghamshire County Council and neglects to mention that his party has vastly exacerbated the homelessness crisis over the past seven years with its imposition of over £100 billion in austerity cuts to services and job losses.

Local authorities of all political stripes are imposing harsh measures affecting the homeless following central government spending reductions. Labour-run Birmingham City Council is cutting its “supporting people” budget, which covers homelessness among other social problems, by £10 million over two years. Another Labour-run authority, South Tyneside, recently imposed £100 fines, under draconian Public Spaces Protection Orders, on homeless people who accept food and drink from members of the public.

Fully 1.5 million private renters rely on some form of welfare benefits, rising to 4.6 million, including social housing tenants. Around 500,000 are in paid work but still rely on such support—a figure that has almost trebled since 2009. The Tory government freeze means that housing benefits are falling in real terms due to rising rents, affecting over 300,000 of the poorest households. The government’s £25 billion housing benefits budget has been cut by £7 billion in recent years. According to Shelter, by 2020 four-fifths of local councils will not be able to provide housing benefits sufficient to afford even the cheapest accommodation.

More broadly, a dearth of affordable housing has developed over the past few decades due to the anti-working class policies of consecutive Labour and Conservative governments. Council housing has been privatised and no new stock has been constructed to replace it. In 2013-14, only around 140,000 new houses were built, far below the 250,000 required to meet demand.

It is notoriously difficult to be accepted for homelessness assistance. Local authorities are only obliged to assist those who fulfil a strict set of criteria. Of the 275,000 people that applied for local authority support last year, only half were accepted, according to research by several homelessness charities. As Matt Downie of Crisis explained, “It’s only half a safety net.” In Wales, the proportion of accepted applications

is only 36 percent.

Most single homeless people are not entitled to assistance and form many of the “hidden homeless” getting by in hostels and staying with friends. There are around 35,000 hostel beds for single homeless people nationally—down 4,000 since 2012—due to funding cuts.

The government denied the new figures, with the Department for Communities and Local Government claiming that rough sleeping had fallen to half its peak figure in 2003.

In reality, economic stagnation and government austerity measures are driving hundreds of thousands into poverty. The bourgeoisie requires that the bank bailouts that followed the 2008 global financial crisis be paid off by the working class through a new “age of austerity.” This agenda could only be imposed with the complicity of the Labour Party and the trade unions.

Alongside years of cuts to welfare entitlements, last month the Conservative Government of Prime Minister Theresa May imposed a draconian welfare cap, agreed by her predecessor David Cameron. This massively reduces the income of the most vulnerable layers of society.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond promised an additional £1.4 billion for housing in England in his Autumn Statement—enough to construct just 40,000 homes. Even if these houses are built, it is far below what is required to meet the real scale of the housing crisis.



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