

Sleeping rough in the UK: “I never expected to be on the streets”

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For the seventh consecutive year, rough sleeping in the UK is on the rise, according to recently published government figures. An estimated 4,751 people were sleeping out on the streets of England for the year 2017. This represents an increase of 15 percent on the previous year and 169 percent since 2010.

The actual figure is estimated by some to be almost double that, possibly as high as 9,100 for the UK.

Figures for London show a rise of 18 percent, and the capital accounts for nearly a quarter of all rough sleepers. Homelessness is no longer confined to the major cities and has become a national crisis. Outside London rough sleeping rose by 14 percent, with the biggest regional increase of 39 percent in the north west, almost doubling in the last two years. Particularly hard hit are Salford, Tameside and Manchester.

Balbir Chatrik, director of policy at the homeless charity Centrepoint, said, “These figures are shocking, but they only attempt to count the number of people sleeping rough on one night. We know there are thousands more young people who are hidden homeless, sofa-surfing for months on end, sleeping on public transport or staying with strangers just to find a bed for the night.”

The director of policy and external affairs at the Crisis charity, Matt Downie, also urged caution regarding the government’s statistics. Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s “You and Yours,” he explained that the government based their figures on an estimate by 83 percent of local councils—only 17 percent did an actual head count. “Academics in the field” point to “8,000 rough sleepers in England, 800 in Scotland and 300 in Wales,” he said.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke to rough sleepers on the streets of Manchester.

Neil is 40 years old and from Pontefract, West

Yorkshire. He has been homeless for eight months.

Speaking on a cold, damp winter’s day outside a Co-op supermarket, he explained:

“I never expected to be on the streets. When my mum died I moved from Yorkshire to live with my girlfriend, but the relationship broke down.”

Neil approached the local council to be rehoused, but the council refused to help as they did not class him as vulnerable: “Because I’m not originally from Manchester. I’m not a criminal, mentally ill, or addicted to substances. The council won’t rehouse me.”

Making a claim for benefits while rough sleeping is fraught with almost insurmountable problems. Not having a permanent address, or a “care of address” makes it virtually impossible for the claimant. Job Seekers Allowance and Universal Credit (UC) benefits have conditionality attached to them—the claimant has to prove he or she is actively seeking work with evidence of job searches—which is all but impossible when you are on the streets.

Neil explained, “I have to earn £12.50 a day to earn enough for a homeless centre, otherwise I’ve nowhere to sleep at night. I can’t claim Job Seekers Allowance because you have to look for a job to qualify, and I need to spend my time collecting money for food and shelter. So I get no benefits.”

“The private landlords don’t want the bond scheme, (whereby the charity Shelter acts as a guarantor),” he said. “You’re talking £1,000 to move into private property ... I’d love to get a job. I was a bench joiner. I’m experienced, I’ve got skills, I’ve worked in London making counters.”

Gemma, 37, from the nearby town of Warrington, used to be a care worker. Asked what Manchester council is doing to get her rehoused, she explained,

“I’ve no local connection. They said I’ve got to be seen on the streets for eight months, then they’ll work with me. But I’ve been on the streets now for 22 months. They want to rehouse people from Manchester first.”

Gemma is unable to claim any benefits because, “I need an address up here to claim ... My aims for this year are a roof over my head, benefit sorted, and a move into some kind of work.”

Barry, 46, has been homeless for four months since his relationship broke down.

He told us that he had heard of homeless people freezing to death, but that this had gone unreported in the media.

“The authorities say I made myself intentionally homeless, but my ex-partner had mental health problems. With the arguments it was not a good place to be,” he said.

“This is embarrassing, degrading. I know a lot of people. I should be asking for money, but I feel down enough as it is. I appreciate it if someone comes up with a hot drink and a sandwich.”

Barry can claim benefits as he has a “care-of” address, unlike many other rough sleepers. He was keeping company with mother of three, Gemma. Gemma is 31 and had just been evicted from a private hostel.

“It’s driving me crazy,” she said. “I was on the streets on my own on Christmas Eve, on Christmas Day and New Year’s Eve. I’ve been attacked, kicked while asleep, I’ve bruises.”

Sarah, 35, has been homeless on and off since she was 18. Wrapped in a sleeping bag, she explained that all her family are in Ireland so they can’t help.

“I don’t claim benefits because I don’t have an address and the night shelters are all full.”

Night shelters provide emergency accommodation when temperatures plunge. Such are the numbers of homeless that all 41 fire stations in Greater Manchester recently opened their doors to rough sleepers.

Visibly distraught, Sarah broke down in tears, saying “I’m hoping to get £15—I can’t stay out here tonight. Once you’re wet you can’t get dry. I’m cold and tired and just want a warm bed.”

A few steps away from where Sarah was huddled was a billboard proclaiming, “Manchester ending Homelessness.” The same message has appeared on

posters and billboards all over the city. Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, told “You and Yours” about “Housing First,” the latest council homelessness policy and one backed by the Conservative government.

The scheme is based on the lie that homelessness is a result of individual failings.

Housing First, with funding of just £1.8 million backing it, is a drop in the ocean and does not even begin to address the scale of the homelessness crisis. As far back as 2014/15, some 6,000 people approached Manchester City Council asking for advice and assistance with homelessness issues. With the crisis far greater now, Housing First targets just 200 homeless people and offers fixed-term accommodation of six to 12 months. It is slated to last just three years and the only homeless who can qualify are those who have slept rough regularly over the past two years or are well known to homelessness services.

Promoting the scheme, Burnham said, “So people can focus on themselves or other challenges they may have, be that addiction or mental health ... It will allow people to stop worrying about housing ... so they can deal with other issues stopping them from leading a productive life.”

When asked how the scheme would be funded, he said there would be a government backed “social impact bond”—paid to “a consortium of [private] organizations, according to the number of people successfully moved from the streets ... payment by results.”

On the same programme, Matt Downie pointed to societal causes of the epidemic in rough sleeping. “In every part of the country the housing market is on its knees in terms of affordability,” he said. “There’s not enough social housing. [And] rents in the private sector outstrip wages, benefits and Universal Credit.” The rollout of Universal Credit is aggravating homelessness, according to the charity the Booth centre, as claimants have to wait up to six weeks for housing benefit, by which time they could be evicted.



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