

Nearly 30,000 single-parent families made homeless in England in 2017

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New figures published by the UK government show that nearly 30,000 single-parent families were made homeless last year, an increase of 8 percent on five years ago. Up to three quarters of homeless households in England are single-parent.

Figures released for the period 2016–2017 by the Department of Communities and Local Government showed that single mothers represented 47 percent of the overall figure for those deemed as statutory homeless, yet they only represented 9.2 percent of households.

Most single-parent households are working households, with many of these parents struggling to balance work and child care costs. Many are faced with cuts to their income due to cuts to welfare benefit payments and increasing private rental costs.

Last year, single-parent charity Gingerbread published research showing that a third of single parents had been affected by welfare cuts, while 39 percent are struggling in low-paid, often insecure work. The numbers of single parents on zero-hours contracts—at the beck and call of employers with no guaranteed working hours—has increased tenfold over the last decade, with 40,000 now employed this way.

Dalia Ben-Galim, Gingerbread’s policy director, said many more single parents were reaching out to the charity for advice and support when facing eviction and homelessness. She described a “perfect storm of rising living costs, stagnating wages and changes to the benefit system eroding an essential safety net for families, single parents are hard hit and struggling to keep a roof above their children’s heads.”

The research highlights that the living standards of single parents, employed and unemployed, were decimated under welfare reform programmes introduced by the 2010–2015 Conservative-Liberal

Democrat coalition government. Between those years, single parents were the worst affected household type, and are predicted to be the worst effected from 2017 onwards.

It is estimated that average single parent families will lose 15 percent (£3,800 annually) of their net income by 2021–2022 because of 2010–2017 tax and benefit reforms—constituting the biggest loss among different household types.

Child poverty is projected to rise sharply, with 63 percent of children in single parent families expected to be living in poverty by 2021–2022.

The statistics show that the number of households in temporary accommodation have risen by two thirds since 2010. Jon Sparkes, CEO of homeless charity Crisis, said, “Temporary accommodation is often cramped, unsuitable and sometimes even dangerous.”

A report by homeless charity Shelter last December described the conditions for many families living in temporary accommodation as “a national scandal.”

One of those interviewed, a 17-year-old girl, described how her parents and three siblings lived in one room for four months. She told researchers, “Three people sleep in the double bed with one person at the bottom and two people at the top.”

Research from Gingerbread concluded that many single-parent families are only just managing financially, with half of those surveyed, rarely, if ever, left with spare income after paying the main household bills. They have often accrued debts when trying to set up a new home and can barely survive on a low income.

This virtual hand-to-mouth existence can easily tip over into disaster when a financial crisis occurs, such as having to replace broken household goods or carry out essential car repairs.

Single parents face financial difficulties because the welfare benefit cap disproportionately affects this group.

The roll-out of Universal Credit (UC) will place many single-parent families at risk of not being able to meet “conditionality” to be able to claim this benefit.

Since April 2017, parents of preschool-aged children will need to look for work, as a condition of receiving out-of-work benefits, or face financial sanctions on their welfare payments. A claimant will now have to look for work as a condition of claiming when the youngest child turns 3, in contrast to a decade ago, when the age of the youngest child was set at 16.

The “in work progression” component of UC not only requires all claimants to look for work, but also expects them to progress while in work, requiring less dependency on work benefits. Claimants could be encouraged to increase hours to be able to earn more money, take on additional jobs, or find a new job.

The pressures on single household parents to find flexible working conditions and affordable child care places a greater burden on this group of claimants, with the cost of child care consuming a greater part of their overall income.

The cuts to the work allowance under UC will have a greater effect on single-parent households, with up to 1 million working single parents expected to claim. Gingerbread’s analysis shows that the cuts to the work allowance will leave the average working single parent losing at least £800 a year (3.9 percent of income) by 2020–2021. The poorest working single parents will lose most, with the poorest fifth losing 7 percent, equivalent to nearly a month of their income over a year.

Single parents face a far greater risk of being sanctioned than they did a decade ago, following the introduction of more stringent rules and harsher penalties in 2012.

This was most notable under the Labour governments of Tony Blair (1997–2007) and Gordon Brown (2007–2010). They introduced compulsory work-focussed interviews for single parents on income support who had previously been exempt from work preparation—and the introduction of Lone Parent Obligations. The latter removed entitlement to income support, by ending eligibility when a single parent’s youngest child turned 5 rather than 12.

This had the effect of pushing many single parents onto Job Seekers Allowance, with full-time job-seeking conditions attached.

In a report last year, Gingerbread found that that one in seven single parents on Job Seekers Allowance were sanctioned in a single year. In the last decade, more than 209,000 single parents were sanctioned, including some who had been referred more than once.

Single parents are disproportionately sanctioned unfairly, in comparison to other claimants with 62 percent of sanctions against them overturned when formally challenged, as against 53 percent of challenges to other sanctions.

The sadistic sanctioning system of ending or withholding benefit payments only increases the vulnerability and risk of debt, rather than moving them to a more-secure financial footing, and thus into work as the government claims.

Gingerbread’s report calls for action from the government and other “stakeholders” including employers, suggesting that senior politicians have a key role in leading the way.

The only action the government will take, as revealed by the creation of tens of thousands of homeless families under their rule, will be to pile up the misery of the poorest. Successive Labour and Tory governments have enforced changes to welfare that have led to a lack of secure and affordable housing, and inherently unfair conditionality demanded of benefits claimants.

The policies of the parties representing the ruling elite are predicated on the need to claw back everything that has been won by the working class in the post-war period, from the safety net of social housing to social welfare.



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