

British government imposes collective punishment by evicting families from public housing

Simon Whelan
5 July 2018

The British government intends to roll out nationally a scheme piloted in north London, whereby the families of gang members and violent criminals are evicted from their public housing residences.

The Conservatives are acting under laws conferred by the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Under the legislation, landlords in England and Wales, including councils, can evict tenants as a result of serious and violent criminal activity.

Home Office minister Victoria Atkins, the privately educated daughter of former Conservative MP and MEP Sir Robert Atkins, became the first minister to publicly endorse the scheme, saying the government had “changed the law to enable it to happen.”

Interviewed in the *Daily Telegraph*, Atkins said, “In the most serious cases, with these people who are exploiting young people, making the lives of local residents a misery, putting fear into people’s hearts when they’re picking children up from the school gates, I think absolutely they should understand the consequences of their criminal behaviour.”

Nick Davies, the police commander in an area of north London in which the eviction scheme has been piloted, said the power to threaten whole families “seems to be a particularly effective strategy in changing the behaviour” of gang members. In an interview with the *Sunday Times* earlier this month, Davies insisted the “threshold for eviction is high.”

Neither the police nor the government offered any evidence regarding how many families have been thrown onto the streets, nor how they measured the “effectiveness” of teaching offenders the “consequences of their actions.” Neither did they mention the consequences of evicting a family from a

decent home, where they could have been living for life, and the consequences of pushing whole working class households into homelessness and destitution.

Such barbarous measures have zero rehabilitative purpose. This is punishment meted out by the ruling class to aid its brutalization of the working class.

Needless to say, the families of those found guilty of corporate crime involving millions of pounds—in the rare cases where this happens—can rest easily in their penthouses and mansions.

The legislation is saturated with right-wing, anti-working class stereotypes. Tellingly, the *Daily Mail* claimed, “Experts say the impact on family members, particularly single mothers, is one of the strongest deterrents they have.”

Press coverage was replete with stock photos of hooded gang members being led away by police and ubiquitous high-rise, multi occupancy modernist public housing—usually the worst looking examples—which are poorly maintained and neglected by local authorities.

In her *Telegraph* interview, Atkins claimed, “If they search someone’s address and they have suspicions this person is at the head of a gang or they’re recruiting young people to a county lines gang [that uses children to traffic drugs], I want the police when they get into the house and they find a zombie knife to have the power to arrest that person on the basis of that, so they’ve got all the tools they need to lock people away.”

Other anti-working class stereotypes are utilized to reinforce the claim that irresponsible parenting rather than socio-economic conditions is responsible for crime, that gang members and violent criminals reside solely within public housing, and therefore the

provision of public housing, part of a so-called “dependency culture,” is assisting crime.

The measures create a two-tier and entirely arbitrary system, whereby simply because they live in a council home, families are to be made homeless. Working class families in council housing, who lose a member to prison, will then lose their home. Offenders whose families own their own home or rent in the private sector receive a conviction but no eviction.

Children will be uprooted from their communities and schools in addition to losing their home. Adults will potentially lose jobs, reinforcing reliance on a welfare system transformed over recent decades into a series of cruel and vindictive “sanctions,” designed to withhold financial payments for the merest transgression for months on end.

These families will be forced to register as homeless by the very local authority that has just evicted them. If they are lucky they will be housed in temporary rented accommodation. Local authorities no longer have a statutory obligation to provide suitable accommodation to those presenting themselves as homeless—meaning a family, once evicted, could be denied re-housing because they are deemed by the local authority, which colluded in their eviction, as responsible for their own homelessness.

The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 was widely criticised when it was introduced. Civil rights group Liberty noted: “Whole families could be turfed from their homes because of the actions of one person. This will pile pressure on innocent and vulnerable people at a particularly difficult time for them and their family.”

Liberty added that people who had passed through the criminal justice system would be doubly punished. “A basic principle of criminal law is that an individual should be subject to appropriate punishment for their crime just once. Our criminal law is designed to do exactly this.”

The collective punishment of those living in social housing has been prepared over years. Following the 2011 riots in London and elsewhere in the UK—after which more than 5,000 people were rounded up and arrested, with 1,292 jailed for a total of over 1,800 years—Conservative-controlled Wandsworth Council in London moved to evict an entire family from their home based on the actions of a single individual. This

was before the person involved, Daniel Sartain-Clarke, had even been convicted of rioting. In the event, he was convicted of shoplifting. The council eventually relented on its threats, but only after the family suffered months of trauma.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact