

Huge rise in deaths of homeless people in the UK

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Aaron French-Willcox, aged just 19, was found dead in a tent in Cardiff in the early hours of February this year. Aaron had type one diabetes and he died from diabetic ketoacidosis.

Just three weeks before his death, he had to leave a homeless shelter because he had been caught taking Spice, the synthetic cannabinoid.

Aaron's tragic death typifies the terrible plight that many of those who sleep rough across the UK face each night as they try to find a place to sleep. He was one of the many people who have been forced to live in temporary and semi-permanent tented encampments across the UK, an increasing number of whom are dying on the streets.

Across Britain, it is common to see tents and encampments set up in cleared wooded areas, underneath bridges, underpasses, or the less noisy areas of city centres.

The reaction of the local authorities to these encampments has been mainly to break them up, and move them on, utilising Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) and enforcement orders.

In July, 10 police officers broke up an encampment on the banks of the Severn river near Worcester Cathedral, where six rough sleepers had been living. Only days later, some of those who had been forced to leave were seen sleeping out in Worcester town centre.

Data on those living in tents and encampments is not formally collated. However the homeless charity Crisis said that last Christmas it was estimated that more than 9,000 people would have been sleeping out in tents, cars, trains and buses.

This figure is on top of the many thousands who are already sleeping out across Britain and represents an increase of 57 percent since 2011.

The official figures as to how many people are

sleeping out in England are calculated based on a "head count" of rough sleepers carried out on a given night. The count itself is guided by strict rules, including what constitutes a rough sleeper. Those sleeping in what are defined as encampments, including tents, and cars are not necessarily included in the total figure of the 4,751 who were accepted as bedding down outside overnight in 2017.

The official rough sleeper counts are considered a vast underestimation of the true scale of rough sleeping in England.

In response to last year's count of rough sleepers in Manchester, where 278 people were recorded, Mike Wright, the strategic lead on Homelessness in Greater Manchester, said the official figures failed to take into account the true number of rough sleepers, whose status fluctuates. Some 500 long-term rough sleepers were referred by Manchester council staff, GPs, and charities to a scheme working to find long-term accommodation for the most entrenched rough sleepers.

The numbers of those dying on the streets or in temporary accommodation has more than doubled in the UK in the last five years, with many being found dead in church graveyards, supermarket car parks and crowded hostels.

Many of these have been attributed to rising rents, welfare cuts and a lack of social housing, which have led to some of the most vulnerable ending up dying on the streets.

Matthew Downie from Crisis said, "These figures are a devastating reminder that rough sleeping is beyond dangerous, it's deadly, and it's claiming more and more lives each year."

There is an increase in the numbers who have died on the streets who have mental health problems, rising from 29 to 80 percent in the same five-year period.

Figures compiled by the *Guardian* earlier showed that in 2017 one person a week was dying. It is likely that these figures are an underestimation, because homeless deaths are not recorded at a national level and local authorities are not required to record rough sleeper deaths.

A recent investigation carried out by *Manchester Evening News* (MEN) journalist Jennifer Williams found that many deaths of homeless people are not only not investigated in the UK, but are not properly counted.

Donn Morgan, a 30-year-old man from the working-class Wythenshawe district of south Manchester, was found dead last month on Whitworth Street West in the city centre. His death only came to light because a member of the public rang the MEN to say the road was shut early Sunday morning.

By the time a reporter called the police about it, the road had been reopened and Morgan's death had been declared non-suspicious. One of Williams' colleagues went out the following day to ask other rough sleepers about what had happened to Morgan. They told him of another rough sleeper, a man named Luke Urmston, who had died only a few yards away from where Morgan had died just days earlier. Both died within just yards of some of the dozens of cranes that are constructing luxury apartments for the wealthy throughout the city centre.

An inquiry made to the city coroner into deaths of homeless people found that in the last five years it has investigated 50 deaths of people with no fixed abode, with this number increasing over that period. Of the 50 deaths, 48 were men, with the youngest being 28 and the oldest 90.

The report "Dying On The Streets," carried out by the St. Mungo's charity that works with rough sleepers, points to increasing problems with a lack of services and a marked increase in the numbers of rough sleepers dying.

The report was based on a survey carried out earlier this year that included St. Mungo's and 71 other providers of services across all regions of England. The number of people dying in London between 2010 and 2017 was counted at 158. In the first four months of this year the number of people who have died that have been recorded is 40—a figure that exceeds deaths for the whole of 2013.

Some of the survey's findings point to only a minority of deaths of people sleeping rough being reviewed, with 63 percent of respondents saying they had seen a death locally, but only 23 percent saying they had any experience of a review being carried out following the death of a rough sleeper.

Sixty-four percent of respondents said that access to emergency accommodation for rough sleepers had gotten harder compared to five years ago. Some 70 percent of respondents said access to mental health services for rough sleepers had gotten harder in the last five years.

Respondents reported that only 30 percent of services had staff with specialist training in mental health, substance use, or social care and immigration. The lack of specialist training in these areas significantly impacts services in London, where the migrant population is higher, yet only 23 percent of services have workers with specialist training, and 77 percent none at all.

In the last five years in England there has been a 97 percent increase in rough sleeping, whilst 31 percent of street outreach services reported they had seen a decrease in funding.

It is not surprising that with access to specialist services and accommodation becoming harder to obtain, increasing numbers of homeless people are dying on the streets. The average age for a homeless person dying is 47 for a man, 43 for a woman.

Much fanfare surrounded the government's recent announcement that a £100 million fund would be granted to eradicate rough sleeping within a decade.

This is a vastly inadequate response to the social catastrophe that is forcing more and more people out on the streets. Official statistics show that rough sleeping in England has gone up for the seventh consecutive year—an increase of 169 percent since 2010, when the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government came to power. Tory Housing Secretary James Brokenshire admitted that there is no new money in the fund and that this money will be spent over the coming decade.



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