

# Homelessness in London: Rough sleeping increases, removal of families from the city doubles

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6 November 2018

New figures shed more light on London's catastrophic housing crisis. A record number of people found sleeping rough in the capital was recorded between July and September.

The first six months of the year saw a rise of almost 50 percent in the numbers of London's homeless families being rehoused outside the city, some as far away as Cornwall and Manchester.

The first six months of 2018 saw a 46 percent rise in out-of-London placements, with councils sending more than 1,200 households out of the city. Most of these placements have been to neighbouring counties like Kent and Essex, but over the last year councils have sent households to Newcastle, Cardiff and the West Midlands and as far away as Glasgow.

Between April and June 2018 alone, 688 households were sent out of the capital. This is the highest rate in at least six years, up from 113 households in the first quarter of 2012-2013.

London accounts for more than two-thirds of all England's homeless households, and it is believed that the majority of those rehoused outside the city are families. Councils have a legal obligation to find them homes. This hardly alleviates the pressure on the households, as shelter provided is sometimes only for a few nights at a time.

Attention has focused on the massive distances some homeless households are being sent, but local displacement has a similarly devastating effect. Westminster North Labour MP Karen Buck reported one of her constituents with a job, a 12-year-old at school and a 14-month-old baby being moved away. She told Buck she had to wake her family at 5:40 a.m. to get her daughter to school and herself to work. They

got home at 9 p.m. after nearly five hours spent commuting.

Greg Beales, director of campaigns at the Shelter charity, said the result was that people were often forced to quit their jobs and drop out of education. Shelter described the figures as "a damning indictment of our housing system," pointing to the desperate need for more social housing.

The problem is not exclusive to London. According to responses to Freedom of Information requests made by the *Huffington Post*, in the last five years Birmingham has moved nearly 2,000 households outside the city, and Liverpool has moved 82. The Birmingham figure is significant, as many London boroughs have sought to do relocation deals with councils around that area.

The housing crisis, along with the slashing of benefit provision, has produced a record spike in rough sleeping. Between July and September this year, 3,103 people were found sleeping rough in London. This is the first time the figure has topped 3,000 in a three-month period. It marks a 20 percent rise on the previous three months, and a 17 percent rise on the same period in 2017.

Rough sleeping has been rising year on year consistently for the last seven years. Figures for January 2018 showed a 169 percent increase in rough sleeping since 2010. The July-September figures show this trend continuing, with outreach workers finding 1,382 people sleeping rough for the first time during this period. This was up 28 percent on the previous three months, and up 20 percent on the same period last year.

Official rough sleeping counts are considered a vast

underestimation of the true scale of the problem.

As the figures for rehousing of homeless households outside London were being released, the BBC was reporting on the city's "hidden homeless" who, either because of difficulties getting into hostels or from fear of sleeping on the street, sleep instead on the city's night-buses.

Dionne, who regularly sleeps on the N38 bus, told the BBC she had problems finding hostel accommodation because of her drug addiction. Because of the dangers of the street she preferred to sleep on the bus, although this meant sleeping only 40 minutes at a time. Such sleep patterns cannot help those already struggling with mental health issues.

Last month the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) compiled figures on homeless deaths over the previous year. As no official bodies collate these figures, the BIJ count is likely to be a substantial underestimation, but they documented 449 deaths since October 2017, well over one per day.

A bus driver said he often had to wake up to a dozen people sleeping on his vehicle. Transport for London and City Hall are funding outreach workers to try and get bus sleepers into hostels. This is no humanitarian or altruistic gesture, but an attempt to prevent disruption to services and revenue.

The crisis has been fuelled by punitive benefit changes over the last period. On average, poorer households in the UK spend 47.4 percent of their average disposable income on housing costs. The amount that can be spent on private rent under housing benefit has been frozen for the last three years, even though rents have continued to rise.

Rollout of the Universal Credit (UC) benefit system has seen around 80 percent of recipients in arrears before payment comes through. This can take up to eight weeks, meaning claimants are losing their housing and being seen by landlords as a high risk for future tenancy. UC is increasing numbers of the working homeless.

Labour councils laid heavy emphasis on the rehousing figures ahead of last week's Budget in an appeal for stabilising funding, which is on course to be cut by 63 percent, more than £4 billion, from 2010 to 2020.

But it is Labour councils that lead the way in the social cleansing policy of moving homeless households

out of London boroughs. Former Mayor of Newham, Sir Robin Wales, told 29 mothers from the Focus E15 hostel who went to meet him after cuts to a mother and baby unit, "If you can't afford to live in Newham then you can't afford to live in Newham."

Labour councils have also pioneered the transfer of social assets into the hands of private companies. Haringey Council, run by Blairites around former leader Claire Kober, was forced to scrap the hugely unpopular Haringey Development Vehicle, under which £2 billion of assets was to be sold off. After being forced to stand, the councillors who replaced them—supporters of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn—propose instead a "a wholly-owned company for the purpose of delivering new council-owned homes." This would see a council-owned for-profit company building council housing alongside private accommodation and acting as landlord for the council properties. Even while abandoning HDV the council continued to describe it as a "social investment programme."

Mayor of London Sadiq Khan pledged in May to build 10,000 council homes over the next four years. This is paltry compared to the around 250,000 Londoners on housing waiting lists. Labour are fully aware of the insignificance of these plans, with deputy mayor for housing James Murray admitting they were spending £1 billion on new homes, but this would not resolve the crisis.

In July, Khan introduced legislation requiring London councils to ballot residents on major regeneration plans if they wish to secure City Hall funding. These plans will not apply retrospectively, meaning existing social cleansing projects can proceed unhindered. Responsibility for deciding whether balloting applies is left up to the developers themselves, who have numerous exemption clauses open to them.

*The author recommends:*

Huge rise in deaths of homeless people in the UK  
[11 September 2018]



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