

Hundreds die on UK streets as homelessness reaches record levels

Margot Miller
3 January 2019

Thousands of people are living on the streets in every UK town and city and a record number of roofless people are dying.

One encounters homeless people on every major high street—sitting, sleeping, begging, wrapped in a sleeping bag or blankets in an attempt to keep out the winter cold.

Homelessness shot to national prominence again over the holiday period when a man died just feet from Parliament on December 20. Hungarian national Gyula Remes had been homeless for the last three months. According to friends, he had just found a job as a chef's assistant and was hoping to be off the streets soon.

His death came as the Office for National Statistics revealed figures showing that almost 600 people died in 2017 while sleeping rough on the streets. The grim tally of 597 dead marks a 24 percent increase over the last five years, with the highest numbers in London and the north west of England. Over the last five years, an estimated 2,627 homeless people have perished on the streets.

There were 50 deaths on the streets of Greater Manchester last year, with homeless people dying at a higher rate, relative to population, than London, where 136 homeless people died.

In the region's main city, Manchester, on December 26, Tony Lawless, who had been a rough sleeper on and off since the death of his father, was found dead in Rochdale canal. The former market worker had just been released from North Manchester General after collapsing on Christmas Day and was 51 years old.

Homeless people often resort to sleeping in refuse bins, which has led to several deaths. Last January, Russell Lane, 51, died from his injuries after being tipped into the back of a refuse lorry in Rochester, Kent. He had wrapped himself in a disused roll of carpet in the bin.

The number of rough sleepers in England doubled in 2017 to 4,571, from 1,768 in 2010, according to the House of Commons Library, which also reported average

life expectancy for a rough sleeper at just 47 for a male and 43 for a woman.

The first published deaths of the homeless on the street coincide with the latest figures released by the Crisis charity, revealing a record 170,000 families and individuals without homes. The number is expected to rise.

Research carried out at Heriot-Watt University on behalf of Crisis found a year-on-year increase in homelessness between 2012 and 2017. Approximately 38,000 under-25s and 4,200 over-65s are homeless.

There are 170,800 homeless households in comparison to 151,600 in 2012. Included in this figure are those who are rough sleeping, sofa-surfing, or staying in hostels.

Crisis lays the blame at the doors of government, including policies which have created an acute shortage of genuinely affordable social housing, reduced Housing Benefit which no longer covers rent and is not available to under 25s, and youth thrust out of the care system aged 18 without provision. John Sparkes, chief executive, said, "This new research echoes what we see every day in our front-line work—that there is no such thing as a 'typical' homeless person ... this crisis is affecting people who range from young care-leavers to pensioners. ... This is a wake-up call to see homelessness as a national emergency."

These figures are corroborated by housing charity Shelter, which revealed at the end of November that there are 320,000 homeless people living in Britain, an increase of 25,000 since last year. This figure, which includes people in working families, is likely an underestimate. Official figures only include those in contact with local authorities and not the hidden homeless residing with family or friends.

Shelter Chief executive Polly Neate said, "Due to the perfect storm of spiralling rents, welfare cuts and a total lack of social housing, record numbers of people are

sleeping out on the streets or stuck in the cramped confines of a hostel room.”

The charity cited one of the causes of rising homelessness as the low level of housing benefit—a means-tested welfare benefit to help meet costs for rented accommodation—which does not cover average rent. The local housing allowance in Manchester, for example, is set at £532 a month for a family needing a three-bedroom house. However, private landlords, apart from student lets, ask for rents of £800 per month and upwards.

The homeless crisis has become so visible and public anger so widespread that Theresa May’s Conservative government has been forced to retract its previous denial of responsibility. Just prior to Christmas, Housing Minister James Brokenshire said the Conservatives “need to ask ourselves some very hard questions” regarding the increase in rough sleepers since the government came to office, and that what was necessary were “changes to policy.”

This was just PR, with the government doing virtually nothing to ameliorate an appalling crisis. After announcing “the end of austerity” in September, May allocated a measly £100 million—a repackaging of money already announced—as part of the government’s “Rough Sleepers Strategy” that is supposedly to eradicate rough sleeping by 2027!

Leading politicians of all parties, whose austerity policies over decades are responsible for the crisis, interrupted their Christmas celebrations for a show of sympathy for the homeless and destitute.

In recent weeks, the public have been forced to endure the obscene spectacle of Conservative MPs visiting food banks and supermarket food bank drop-off points for photo-ops. Among these were Dominic Raab, who infamously said in 2017 that those using foodbanks were people “who had a cashflow problem episodically.” The reality is that huge swathes of the population are going hungry and being forced onto the streets due to more than a decade of brutal anti-social policies, such as the bedroom tax and universal credit.

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn visited a homeless hostel run by Crisis in his Islington constituency on Christmas Eve. In his Christmas message he invoked the spirit of the Good Samaritan, while his government-in-waiting has bent over backwards to reassure the rich it will not encroach on their ill-gotten gains to provide essential services.

Labour’s promise of initial funding of £100 million for one year into a rough sleepers’ cold weather fund is

derisory and would not end rough sleeping. Corbyn acknowledged as much when he suggested Labour in office would repeal the 1824 Vagrancy Act, under which there have been 2,365 prosecutions in 2015-2016. This would make it legal to sleep and beg on the streets but would not eradicate the causes of destitution.

The homeless crisis is an indictment of a failed system, capitalism. Beginning in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher, and pursued enthusiastically by subsequent Labour governments, over 1.5 million council houses were sold off as the building of new stock ground to a halt. Last year only 6,463 homes were built in England for social rent, while 1.25 million families are on the waiting list.

Labour councils throughout the UK have implemented every cut imposed by central government and implemented privatisation of services with zeal. In London, residents have organised in opposition to the regeneration plans of Labour’s mayor Sadiq Khan, which involve the demolition of 8,000 council estate homes so property developers can get their hands on prime real estate to make a killing.

Greater Manchester’s social housing stock has declined by 5 percent in the six years since 2012 and 85,639 households languish on Labour council-run housing waiting lists. This led to 2,000 children spending their Christmas in emergency accommodation.

Gentrification and social cleansing are happening everywhere, with city skylines crowded with cranes and newly built luxury high-rise blocks that are unaffordable to everyone but the richest.

The resources can and must be found to provide safe, decent homes for all. The wealth of the billionaires and super-rich, acquired by exploiting the working class, must be expropriated to meet urgent, life or death, social needs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact