

Nearly 600 homeless died on UK streets in 2017

“We’re living in the Dark Ages—how can there be so much wealth and so much misery?”

Our reporters
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Homelessness and rough sleeping have reached record levels in the UK. After 10 years of relentless austerity, nearly 600 people died on the streets in 2017. The number of people sleeping rough has grown 169 percent over the decade, and charities warn the death toll is set to rise.

London is the capital of rough sleeping, with 136 homeless people dying on the streets last year. Just before Christmas, a homeless man died within yards of Parliament, at the entrance to Westminster tube station. The previous February, another homeless man was found dead, also at Westminster tube.

In December, housing charity St. Mungo’s reported that “floating support services” for the homeless in London—including those helping with mental health and substance use issues—have been cut by 41 percent since 2013. A toxic mix of social cleansing, gentrification and austerity saw an estimated 4,751 people bed down on London pavements in 2017. Labour controlled councils have been at the forefront of this scorched earth policy, with the largest cuts imposed by Labour’s Newham Council, which slashed spending by 33 percent between 2010-11 and 2017-18, according to a report issued by the Centre for London in May 2018.

WSWS reporters spoke to homeless people, charities and volunteers dealing with the escalating homeless crisis over the holiday period.

London

Steve is 59, has been homeless since he was 17 and is unable to work due to an injury.

Sitting on the pavement against the shop window of a chain of luxury grocers, Steve said, “I have survived the way I can, with five pounds a day when I am lucky. I eat once a day and many days I eat nothing at all. I walk around, sit down, beg for food or money for food. I don’t use charities.

“As regards the homeless crisis, it is getting worse. I am upset with the government, for they are doing nothing to deal with the ever increasing crisis. The housing allocation is a shambles.”

When we spoke to Steve, the next two days were forecast as freezing. “I’ll have to survive it,” he said. Labour Party Mayor of London Sadiq Khan recently announced a scheme to make 700 places available for homeless people to stay, but only during freezing weather. Steve said, “It’s 700 beds, it is barely nothing. What is the point of having a bed for one night? It does not remove homelessness. You look at the rich, the government takes care of them. Who is looking after us?”

Mike, 43, is from Manchester and is a former railway worker who was injured at work. He was made homeless three years ago and sleeps rough in London. Mike was lying on a flattened cardboard box, under a railway bridge spanning into Victoria mainline station. Along the line of the wall, three homeless people were sleeping, under their blankets.

He said, “I was not told anything about the mayor’s shelter programme, none of us under this bridge know. Where are those places they call shelters?”

Daniella sells the *Big Issue* magazine, a publication that homeless people can sell on a commission basis, earning a few pounds. She lost her job three years ago and had a mental breakdown. She is now under the care of the local hospital authority. But housing is a different matter, with her local council providing no housing for the mentally ill.

Daniella said, “I sell those issues for £25 a day for six hours’ work. It helps me for food and helps me cope with my mental illness, as I receive no support from carers and don’t have a doctor’s close attention.”

Sitting between two friends behind the church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, near Trafalgar Square was Asmaan, a 27-year-old immigrant worker. She was working in restaurants until her immigration status was categorised as “unresolved” by the UK authorities. She lost her job and became homeless: “We receive food once a day from charities with a rolling canteen or we have to go to the church to receive a little help in food and blankets.”

Greater Manchester

There were 50 deaths on the streets of Greater Manchester last year related to homelessness and rough sleeping. Two thousand Manchester children spent the Christmas in emergency accommodation.

Services in Greater Manchester have been decimated since 2008 because of Labour Party council cuts. In 2017, Manchester City Council (MCC) announced cuts of £30 million to be implemented over the following three years. This was on top of £271 million of savings and budget reductions imposed since 2010/11.

Greater Manchester’s Labour mayor Andy Burnham pledged to eradicate rough sleeping in the region by 2020. For all Burnham’s rhetoric, his mayoral team and Manchester council could not maintain even a paltry 15-bed homeless shelter. Set up as part of Burnham’s “Bed Every Night Scheme,” and run by the Riverside housing association for the council, the shelter was shut over Christmas due to a recurring

electrical fault.

In the town of Eccles, local volunteers occupied an empty doctor's surgery before Christmas and provided accommodation to homeless people. For the past month, Angela and three fellow volunteers have supported 15 homeless people, and a dog, who would otherwise have spent the holiday period on the streets.

Angela explained that she began helping the homeless in 2011. "I found a young lad, a runaway, freezing in the city centre," said. "It started from there. I found my calling. I've been networking with the fire service. I can't have any more people dying on the streets."

The building Angela's team occupied belongs to the National Health Service. "It's been empty for 13 years, used for storage for NHS equipment," she said, but explained that since the squat began the NHS wants the building back. A few days later, Angela told the WSWS that "papers to evict them will be served soon."

Her organisation, the Saving People Shelter Project, relies solely on public and charitable donations. The project also helps people register with a doctor and find work. "We put a shower in here ourselves, which was donated. I had a meeting with the rough sleepers' team. The first ones we brought in were asylum seekers I met in the city centre.

"Especially this year, homelessness has gone out of control, what with Universal Credit bringing threats of eviction. There's a lot more young ones on the streets, a lot more females. Yet look at the wealth around us, why can't they share the wealth?" Asked what she thought the solution was, she replied, "We need new housing like never before. Look what we've achieved with the help of the public."

Referring to Burnham's scheme, Angela said, "It's not a solution. I sent eight people to the scheme, but it's not suitable." She said this was because homeless people with mental health or alcohol problems need single rooms, not shared sleeping arrangements. "There's lots of empty properties, they could open these buildings up," she said. "All the empty commercial properties in Britain could be turned into flats.

"We're all only a payday away from being homeless. ... We're living in the Dark Ages in Britain. How can there be so much wealth and so much misery?"

Jay is 42 and has been living in the project's surgery. An electrical engineer by trade, he ended up on the streets for three weeks after splitting up with his partner. "There's no support" from the government, he said. "I worked on the building at Manchester University that invented graphene [a flexible material used in various medical, chemical and industrial processes]. Manchester holds the patent so why is there homelessness? And why all of a sudden, now you've got homeless people in the building, do the NHS want it back?" he asked.

The Wellspring Centre is a homelessness charity set up 27 years ago in Stockport, a town of 136,000 people in Greater Manchester. Open 365 days a year, the centre helps people with multiple problems including healthcare, access to welfare benefits, homelessness advice, education and meals. It also has a doctor on site and drugs and alcohol advice, with service provided by 300 volunteers and a small full-time staff.

The WSWS spoke to Wellspring Centre CEO Jonathan Billings, who described the growing homeless crisis in the town: "In 2017, 356 people presented as homeless, and in 2018 this number had risen to 500. People were presenting at the centre from other parts of the country, not just Stockport. People were coming as far away as Newcastle."

Last year, 50 homeless people died on the streets in Greater Manchester. Jonathan said that Wellspring is one of the few organisations keeping a record of the dozens of homeless people who have died. A "Wellspring Remembers" memorial wall at the centre displays photographs and the names of the dead.

Rachel works for the Centrepoint homeless charity in Manchester, which serves as a referral and support service on behalf of the council.

"Anyone under 25 at risk of becoming homeless is sent to us, and we

can refer them to hostels," she explained, adding that numbers needing support are "definitely" increasing.

"Services for mental health are so overstretched. There's not a lot of mental health support available. Someone has to be in a crisis before they can get help. Accident and Emergency departments don't know what to do with them. I had to wait five hours for an ambulance for someone.

"Before I finished for Christmas," Rachel said, "we had 28 young people assigned to us, and they had all suffered physical, sexual or emotional abuse. The families they are coming from are all in poverty.

"Half of them are put in B&Bs [Bed and Breakfast accommodation], which are shitholes, where they could be targeted by older adults.

"Everyone who presents here has a mental health or drug issue and things have got worse because of the lack of support. And the support staff who run the hostels haven't got mental health training."

Sheffield

Alan Hutchinson, 39, is a *Big Issue North* seller in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. He has been homeless for nearly 20 years after being disowned by his family at a young age. "I've been homeless for most of my life," he said. "It's all I know, really."

Trying to earn enough money each week to pay for a bed at the Salvation Army Hostel on Charter Row is a constant struggle. There is no homeless shelter in Sheffield, and board with the Salvation Army costs around £30.50 a week. The Salvation Army hostel provides board for around 50 people—a tiny proportion of Sheffield's homeless population. The maximum length of stay is six to nine months and you need a referral. Across Yorkshire an estimated 5,000 people are homeless, an increase of 600 in the past year alone.

"Homeless people have got to come out here working for peanuts," Alan said. "Out in the cold, freezing, not being able to afford a hot drink or anything. I don't think it's right. They wonder why our health's deteriorating and people are dying out on the streets. It needs to be better."

Hutchinson earns money selling *Big Issue North* seven days a week, but it's not enough to pay for accommodation. On a good day he might make £20 or £30, including donations, but most of that, he explained, is needed to buy copies of the next issue. The magazine sells for £2.50, but Alan must fork out £1.25 to buy each magazine up front. "If you can't pay, you get nothing."

Sheffield's Labour-run council has enforced cuts of £430 million since 2010, decimating services across the UK's fifth largest city.

According to local homeless charities, there are more than 600 vacant and disused council houses in Sheffield. While these and other properties have been allowed to rot, investors have poured hundreds of millions into expensive student accommodation and gentrification. Alan said, "There's possibly more than 600 [vacant] homes. There's student accommodation going up all over the place, but how come you never see them building any hostels for the homeless people? It comes down to money. Money talks. The true fact is, whenever you're down on your luck nobody cares, even if you're laying down on the floor dying. I blame the government for it all."

Bradford

In Bradford, where £30 million in cuts were agreed by the Labour-council in 2018, homelessness has reached its highest level in nine years.

Nearly 500 people are registered with Bradford Council as being homeless and in priority need of accommodation. But the official homeless figures do not include rough sleepers or those staying temporarily with various charities such as the Salvation Army, Bradford Cyrenians or InnChurches.

The vast majority are made homeless after a relationship breakdown or private tenancy eviction and have nowhere else to turn.

Lee, who finds shelter in Bradford city centre, has been homeless for the last three months. He said, "I lost my autistic child last year and lost everything through dabbling with drugs, which I do no more. Once I lost my child ... everything got messed up. I lost my job as an engineer at Keighley Lifts and my house with it. My benefits were messed up with Universal Credit, so this is why I have to sleep out and beg during the day.

"I managed to get a tent that I sleep in on one of the traffic islands. It was so cold the other night that I had to wrap a sleeping bag over my head to keep warm. I'm trying to rebuild my life and trying to get things back on track. This tent is tiny but better than sleeping directly on the street."

Diana, a young worker from Latvia, was begging on the street near the railway arches in Forster Square. "I have lived and worked in Bradford for six years. Seven days ago, my landlord threw me out of my basement flat saying he needed it for his friends. He had no papers to get me out, like an eviction notice. When I went back the next day all my possessions were on the street, including my laptop smashed up.

"I went straight to Citizens Advice and explained my situation and have spent the last four days sleeping on the street in the railway arches. The police gave me vouchers for McDonalds.

"The Salvation Army have really helped me and I have a room for 28 days in the new year at the hostel. Because I have not been sleeping, I have lost my job as a housekeeper."



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