UK councils and Tory government play down homeless numbers

Tom Pearce
5 March 2019

Homelessness and rough sleeping have reached record levels in the UK after a decade of austerity. Nearly 600 people died on the streets in 2017.

The number of people sleeping rough has grown 169 percent over the decade, with experts warning the death toll is set to rise.

Further analysis of the 2017 statistics reveals a connection between deaths among homeless people and the most deprived areas of the UK. Deaths of homeless people were nine times higher in deprived areas of England than in the least disadvantaged areas. The figures show 497 homeless deaths recorded across England and Wales in the most deprived areas, compared to 56 in the least deprived.

A study carried out in 2018 by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (Feantsa) found that for some of the lowest earners in Britain, the cost of a home has risen faster than anywhere else in Western Europe. Freek Spinnewijn, the director of Feantsa, said, "Housing exclusion and homelessness have taken on dramatic proportions in the UK."

There were an estimated 21 deaths in Manchester, 18 in Birmingham, 17 each in Bristol, Lambeth (in London) and Liverpool and 15 in Camden (in London) in 2017. Camden, along with Birmingham and Manchester, have all recorded at one time the highest amount of homeless deaths in the past five years.

Ben Humberstone, head of health analysis for the Office for National Statistics, told the BBC, "The figures show that the deprivation level of an area has a real impact. Many more people die homeless in the most deprived areas of England and Wales and 95 percent of the deaths are in urban areas rather than rural areas."

It is likely that the scale of fatalities is larger, considering that the ONS figures are for deaths registered rather than deaths occurring in each year since 2013. The Local Government Association, which represents councils in England and Wales, said that preventing these deaths was becoming increasingly difficult as homelessness services face a funding shortfall of £100 million next year.

The lack of such basic services is not simply due to tens of billions of pounds in central government austerity cuts, but the implementation of those cuts by the Labour Party, which runs local authorities in every major town and city in the UK.

The Conservative government has put aside just £1.2 billion for homeless services. Communities Secretary James Brokenshire said, "Councils have used this funding to create an additional 1,750 beds and 500 rough sleeping support staff—and figures published last month show this investment is already starting to have an effect."

The statistics Brokenshire refers to—showing a reduction in rough sleepers—cannot be trusted. The method for reporting on homeless numbers by councils has changed significantly in the wake of government initiatives, meaning that Labour and Tory councils are playing down the homelessness crisis.

The statistics trumpeted by the government show a fall in homelessness for the first time in seven years. But this is belied by the situation seen by millions of people who cannot walk down any high street in Britain without witnessing the homeless living rough.

Figures released last week show that in 2018 a total of 4,677 people "slept rough" in England, a 2 percent decrease (74 people) on 2017. However, overall homelessness is still on the rise—with an increase of 165 percent (2,909 people) from 2010.

The lower figures showing the 2 percent drop result

from making street counts on a single night of the year, rather than estimates provided by an array of agencies working in the field.

The *Guardian* reviewed the figures, finding that "more than 30 councils switched from submitting an estimate to a street count from 2017 to 2018, with some councils reporting reductions in rough sleeping of up to 85 percent."

This percentage figure refers to Southend-on-Sea, which registered a reduction in rough sleeping from 2017 to 2018 (from 72 to 11 people) as a result of the changed method of counting.

In Brighton and Hove, the official number for rough sleepers fell from 178 to 64 people (64 percent) in 12 months due to the single-night-count method. Even a Brighton Conservative councillor, Robert Nemeth, said, "Physically counting produces lower figures as it will always be the case that not every rough sleeper can be found on any given night. This happened in November 2018 when the count was conveniently carried out when it was snowing. It produced a figure that was under half of what the city's rough-sleeping campaigners estimated as the real number."

Other local authorities reporting huge decreases in homeless cases after switching their method to a street count include Redbridge, Eastbourne, Medway, Worthing, Thanet, Exeter, Basildon, Ipswich, Warwick and Gloucester.

Even so, in the top 10 local authorities from the previous year, only Brighton and Hove and the City of Bristol showed a decrease in the number of rough sleepers. All the inner London boroughs—except Tower Hamlets and Lewisham, which showed a fall in numbers, and Kensington and Chelsea, which showed no change—showed an increase. Overall the numbers of rough sleepers have increased year on year in the inner London boroughs since 2010.

That what is taking place is deliberate misrepresentation is demonstrated by the fact that several local authorities were "advised" to change their methods by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This came after councils received money through the Rough Sleeper Initiative—a short-term fund aimed at reducing rough sleeping in the most affected areas.

The "targeted" fund launched in March last year is worth just £30 million for 2018 to 2019 "for local authorities with high levels of rough sleeping." But success is measured according to whether the councils in receipt show reductions pointing to "the government's ongoing work to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027."