Up to 600,000 children in England either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless

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More than half a million children in England are living in families classed as homeless or about to become homeless.

A report by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England also exposes the Dickensian-like conditions for homeless families living in temporary accommodation. Some are forced to take refuge in converted office blocks and even shipping containers.

Aptly named *Bleak Houses*, the report found that 120,000 children live with families in temporary accommodation, a rise of 80 percent since 2010. Another 90,000 children are "sofa surfing" (staying temporarily with friends or relatives), while 375,000 are living in families at risk of becoming homeless.

The Children's Commissioner is a public body responsible for promoting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in England.

Official government figures on homelessness do not include children who are "sofa surfing." The English Housing Survey provided an estimate for this group.

The figures are even higher when including children with families in temporary accommodation organised by children's services rather than local councils. This is due to their families falling into the category "intentionally homeless" or because of their immigration status.

Including all groups, the report estimates that between 550,000 and 600,000 children in England are either homeless or at risk of becoming so. The impact this has on the mental and physical well-being of the developing child is immeasurable.

In 2013, the government offset the desperate shortage of social housing by changing planning rules. Profit-hungry developers no longer need planning permission from local councils to convert office blocks into residential accommodation, thus bypassing size and quality stipulations. Dozens of former commercial buildings, in Harlow and Basildon in Essex and Croydon in South London, have been converted into dwellings.

Families are dumped in areas without amenities to live in tiny units. Some flats in Templefields House in Harlow, Essex measure 18 square metres. The average sized house in England and Wales is 90 square metres.

There are 13 converted office blocks in Harlow consisting of 1,000 individual flats "no bigger than a parking space" and so cramped that whole families must eat and sleep in the same room.

Included in the report are interviews with children. Daisy, aged 9, said, "We have to eat on the floor as there's not enough space."

The report also identifies areas, including Brighton, Cardiff, Ealing in West London and Bristol, where an unknown number of homeless families are housed in converted shipping containers.

Last year Bristol's mayor joined 76 other council leaders in writing to Tory government Communities Secretary James Brokenshire complaining that councils' budgets were near collapse. Since 2010, 60 pence out of every £1 has been cut from central government funding, including a funding gap of £159 million to tackle homelessness.

While Labour-run Bristol council eschews responsibility for housing the homeless in container homes—the project is operated by a charity—the council provides the land.

The containers with one or two bedrooms, a bathroom and kitchen facilities are small and not fit for human habitation.

According to the report, they are "… very hot in summer—one mother told us she had to sleep with the front door wide open and that her baby got heat rash—but are too cold in the winter … Ovens … can be too close to the ground… in reach of very young children."

Lulu Abakar lives in a container "home" in Ealing with her four young children, one of whom is autistic. She told

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Sky News, " It was 36C last week, the floor was boiling, it was hot, flies were all coming to our home ... How are we going to breathe? How can we sleep or relax?"

This is the sixth time Lulu and her family have moved in recent years, searching for accommodation to suit the needs of her autistic child.

"[Containers are] where people keep their storage. We are not animals, we are not storage or furniture. We are human," she continued.

In December, the report states, 2,420 homeless families were living in bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation with shared bathroom facilities. By law, this temporary arrangement should last no longer than six weeks—but this was exceeded by a third of families, and some were in B&Bs for as long as 13 months.

Homeless families denied any council help sleep on the streets, in hospital Accident and Emergency waiting rooms, on night buses or police stations. The Project 17 London charity attempts to remedy this by taking legal action against councils, citing the Children's Act. Only then are 90 percent of families offered temporary accommodation.

Shocking as these bald statistics are, the tragedy really strikes home when figures are translated into the everyday lives of the homeless.

A health visitor links one baby's delayed physical development to the deprivation suffered by the family. A "mum who won't put her 18 month old baby on the floor to play because of a mice infestation so she spends a lot of time in her high chair … children need floor play. As she's been placed out of borough the mum has to do the school run with her older child which takes 2 hours, and so her baby is in the push chair for much of the day. Her baby can stand up and balance but has only really been standing up in her cot."

Children's emotional development is also badly affected. There was the case of a "three year old whose play space was the size of a cot in the main walkway of the room, so that she was never out of view of her mother … she became extremely upset whenever she could not see her mother … leading to concerns as to how she would cope when starting nursery." Older children on the other hand can become angry or aggressive.

Some households are rehoused away from schools, family, friends or workplace. Ruby, aged 6, said "The journey to school takes too long and I'm tired." Families may be relocated from the south of England to as far away as Birmingham. This dislocation takes a terrible toll.

Homelessness is endemic and a product of government policy. The report is clear on this:

"Most incidents of family homelessness in England are not the result of personal circumstances like mental health problems—primarily it is a result of structural issues, including the lack of affordable housing and welfare reform."

Between the 1980s and early 2010 social housing availability massively declined, due to the right-to-buy council housing policy introduced by then Conservative Prime Minister Thatcher and embraced by Blair's Labour government. Today, some councils build no new houses and are fast selling off their existing stock. The Shelter charity says 3.1 million new social homes are needed over the next 20 years, including 1.27 million for homeless families.

Private accommodation is expensive, with rents growing 60 percent higher than wages between 2011-2017. It is "telling that over half of homeless families are in work," notes the report.

The amount families receive under the Universal Credit (UC) benefit allocation for housing costs does not cover rising rents. The five-week delay between an application for UC and receiving it means a family can very easily slip into destitution and homelessness.

Bleak Houses presents a very bleak picture of life in England for an increasing number of families. It offers no solution, however, beyond vain appeals to the government to change course.

Labour are complicit in this intolerable situation. Upon taking office in 2015, party leader Jeremy Corbyn and his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell instructed local Labour councils to enforce "legal budgets." The latter continued implementing Tory cuts and privatising services while developing lucrative links with property developers.

Decent, affordable housing is a basic social right, increasingly unavailable under capitalism, which demands a socialist reorganisation of society. Billions must be directed towards a mass house building programme. This requires the expropriation of society's wealth presently in the hands of the super-rich.

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