

Homeless woman gives birth to twins outside the University of Cambridge's Trinity College

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At 7 a.m. on December 23, as a cold day dawned, a homeless woman gave birth to twins outside Cambridge University's historic Trinity College.

The babies were born at 29 weeks, which is 11 weeks premature. They are currently receiving care along with the mother—known only as “Sophie” and aged around 30—in the nearby Rosie hospital, a specialist maternity centre.

Had it not been for the prompt assistance of the public, the mother and children may have died on the steps of one of the world's richest universities. Staff from nearby supermarket Sainsbury's as well as passers-by saw the woman in distress and called an ambulance.

This shocking event underlines mounting social inequality, which tipped many like Sophie into destitution and many more into poverty or debt. At the other end of the scale, the richest 500 on the planet increased their wealth 25 percent since last year to an almost incomprehensible \$5.9 trillion.

In the UK, the total number of billionaires rose to 151. Yet more than half a million children in England live in homeless families or families on the verge of homelessness. One in 200 individuals are without a home.

Housing charity Shelter's chief executive Polly Neate declared, “Homelessness blights lives and leaves a lasting imprint of trauma, and yet 280,000 people in England are without a home this Christmas. And many are only days away from joining them...127,000 children in England will wake up homeless on Christmas day.

“As well as those facing serious ill-health or even death sleeping rough on our streets this winter, there are thousands of families trapped in grotty emergency B&Bs, with no space for children to sit and eat, let alone play.”

The charity's latest report, “This is England: a picture of homelessness in 2019,” reveals the crisis at its most acute in London with one in 52 people homeless. The borough of Newham has the worst problem, where one in

24 are homeless, followed by Haringey and Kensington and Chelsea (both one in 29).

The figures for areas outside the capital include Luton (one in 46), Birmingham (one in 66) and Brighton and Hove (one in 75). Manchester has one in 102 people homeless.

Shelter indicated the figure 280,000—a year on increase of 13,000—is likely an underestimation, as it does not include sofa surfers and other forms of “rough sleeping.”

The organisation's review of government data revealed for the first time the numbers threatened with homelessness—almost 220,000 people in England in 2019.

Since the 1980s, the state under both Conservative and Labour abrogated the responsibility of providing housing, beginning with the right-to-buy council housing policy introduced by then Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and embraced by Tony Blair's Labour government. Today, some councils build no new social houses and are selling off existing stock. Shelter estimates that 3.1 million new social homes are needed over the next 20 years, including 1.27 million for homeless families.

The shortage of housing is so critical that some families are housed in converted office blocks and even tiny shipping containers.

The lack of social housing and the shortage of affordable, private rented accommodation combined with the introduction of Universal Credit (UC)—a means-tested welfare benefit—have led to homelessness becoming a national epidemic.

The amount families receive under the UC benefit allocation for housing costs does not cover rising rents, and there is a five-week delay between applying for and receiving UC. This, plus the bedroom tax, whereby households living in social housing suffer a benefit cut if they have a spare bedroom, means a family or single person can very easily slip into destitution and

homelessness.

Former Conservative leader Ian Duncan Smith launched UC in 2013, as Secretary for Work and Pensions under Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. The punitive benefit was rolled out from 2016, designed to drive people into low-paying work and keep them there. That Duncan Smith has been bestowed a knighthood in the New Year's Honours list underscores the right-wing agenda of Boris Johnson's Tory government, which will continue to shovel wealth from the working class to the very rich.

The previous Conservative government's Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was window dressing—placing new duties on councils to prevent homelessness without providing the necessary resources. In 2018, then Housing Secretary James Brokenshire announced a totally inadequate £30 million grant for councils to tackle rough sleeping.

As always, it is working people rather than government officials who come forward to help.

“Imagine giving birth alone on the pavement, in the shadow of the richest college in Cambridge,” said Jess Agar, who launched a crowdfunding campaign for homeless Sophie on discovering her plight. “This is the reality for many people living on the streets,” she said. Within a few days, the fund exceeded its £22,000 target, reaching £24,688.

The terrible social plight of growing numbers of vulnerable impoverished such as Sophie contrasts with the soaring fortunes of the affluent. Cambridge's richest college, Trinity—a bastion of wealth and privilege that has educated the scions of the ruling class for centuries—is a case in point as it sits on assets totalling £1.34 billion.

In May 2018, the *Guardian* revealed the prestigious colleges comprising Oxford and Cambridge Universities (Oxbridge) held assets—including priceless works of art and original manuscripts—worth a staggering £21 billion.

Oxbridge have used their credit ratings, higher than the Bank of England and UK government, to move into the bond market—issuing bonds worth hundreds of millions of pounds. In this way, Oxford raked in £750 million and Cambridge £600 million in recent years.

Cambridge's previous £350 million bond issue financed an extensive property development. Trinity College used some of its money to buy shares in Arconic, the manufacturer of flammable cladding responsible for the social murder of 72 in the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire.

The Paradise Papers revealed that Oxbridge holds millions in tax-exempt offshore investments.

Labour has proved time and again that it will never encroach on the wealth of the rich and upholds the profit system. On becoming Labour leader in 2015, Jeremy Corbyn and his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, instructed local Labour councils to enforce “legal budgets.” The latter—having already imposed billions in cuts in cities and towns they administer nationwide—implemented Tory cuts and privatised services while developing lucrative links with property developers. The burgeoning number of new apartment blocks that followed are priced way beyond the reach of many.

The answer of all political parties to homelessness and society's ills is to strengthen law and order and criminalise the poor. Since 2014, the use by councils of public space protection orders to forcibly close homeless camps has more than trebled in five years.

This Christmas, charities have been working overtime to provide for the poorest, including Christmas dinner at many locations across the country. About 350 were fed at Birmingham's New Street station, for example.

London's Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan opened the council's City Hall to 100 selected homeless people, where he posed for a photo-op complete with Santa hat serving a three-course meal. Shelter calculated there were 170,068 homeless people on any given night in London!

“Since I became mayor we've more than doubled the amount of money we've spent on rough sleeping and the size of our outreach team,” said Khan. “But we're just scratching the surface. We've not got the money or the resources to do much more. ...”

This is a lie. The resources do exist and in abundance to immediately house the homeless and provide safe decent housing for all under an emergency housebuilding programme. They reside, however, in the hands of an obscenely wealthy minority and global corporations and must be expropriated.



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