

Homeless face desperation on London streets amid lockdown

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Despite promises that all homeless people would be provided with accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic, rough sleepers face increasing challenges on London's streets.

The government's response to the homeless during the crisis has mirrored their reaction to the disease as a whole—too little and too late. By the end of March, when Prime Minister Boris Johnson decided to order all councils to furnish emergency accommodation for the homeless within 48 hours, local governments and charities had already been stretched to the limit with the existing crisis, worsened by successive governments through austerity budgets and gutting of public services.

Months before the appearance of the coronavirus, national figures on those sleeping rough had reached record levels. Last October, the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) found 3,985 people sleeping outside in London between July and September 2019. This represented a 28 percent increase from the same period in 2018. Some 2,069 were new rough sleepers, an increase of 50 percent in a year, adding 22 unfortunate people every day.

Jon Sparkes, chief executive of the charity Crisis, described the statistics as “simply unforgivable” and called for the scrapping of the Vagrancy Act, which criminalizes begging and rough sleeping. Chief executive of St. Mungo's, Howard Sinclair, said it was a “national scandal” and called on the government “to take bold action and a longer-term view.” Reform researcher Imogene Farnham blamed the lack of long-term funding for council services and the high cost of renting for the failure of the Homelessness Reductions Act and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

Even these appalling numbers have been found to be undercounted. Data from councils retrieved under the Freedom of Information Act at the end of February found nearly 25,000 people in the UK slept rough in 2019, about five times higher than official estimates drawn up in Whitehall. The London boroughs of Westminster and Camden were among the highest in Britain.

Sparkes said, “We still do not have a clear picture of how

many people are forced to sleep on our streets throughout the year.” The councils gather figures of those who slept rough at least one night of the year, whilst the government count is simply based on a snapshot survey taken on a single night. As long as a year ago in April 2019, UK Statistics Authority chairman Sir David Norgrove wrote the housing ministry, telling them to stop using their homeless data to bolster arguments about the success of their rough sleeping initiative.

By the first week in March, charities like Crisis expressed concern at the lack of coronavirus guidance for handling and helping homeless people, many of whom were already suffering from a range of health conditions. Charities voiced worries at the absence of ongoing advice about how to communicate information about the virus to the thousands crowded into homeless hostels, temporary accommodation and unregulated supported housing. The charity Glass Door, one of London's largest night shelter operators, reported refusing to house one man they suspected of carrying the virus. They had been asking the government for guidance for three weeks without success.

Megan Preston, the charity's coronavirus lead, pleaded, “We urge the government to offer a solution—such as some form of safe temporary accommodation where a homeless person can self-isolate.” Chief executive of Housing Justice Kathy Mohan called for Public Health England to provide advice, but they said nothing would be forthcoming until it was coordinated by the Ministry of Housing.

The lack of coordination has had a dangerous impact. On March 24, a day after the government issued physical distancing guidelines to tackle the virus, the Travelodge hotel chain slipped letters under the doors of its homeless families and key worker guests, giving them two hours to vacate the rooms in 360 hotels. The action provoked widespread chaos across the country, panicking guests and forcing local authorities to find alternative housing with no notice whatever.

Although the government's own regulations exempted those hosting the homeless or key workers such as NHS

staff, Travelodge pressed on with its evictions, ignoring the request of Homeless Minister Luke Hall to reverse their actions. Other hotel chains such as Premier Inn and Jury's Inn, who have made millions through emergency accommodation arrangements, also evicted guests. This meant councils had to find hotels or blocks to house those expelled. London Mayor Sadiq Khan announced he had made 300 rooms available, but Crisis said this represented "nowhere near the scale it needs to be."

Gbolagade Ibukun-Oluwa was thrown out of the Premier Inn near Heathrow Airport, where his bills had been subsidized by *Guardian* readers. Another Windrush victim, he has lived in the UK since 1980 but has been homeless for a decade after being labelled as an illegal immigrant by the Home Office. He had rung Hillingdon Council housing department but had not been offered help. "I haven't a clue as yet where I'll be sleeping," he admitted.

With Prince William, patron of the homeless charity The Passage, calling on March 26 for another 600 people to be removed from the streets by Friday March 27, the Johnson government felt obliged to be seen doing something—giving councils 48 hours to find emergency accommodation for all homeless. Although charities and councils welcomed the decision, they observed extra funding would be necessary to meet the deadline, especially under the absurd situation where the same government had ordered hotels to close!

Even Louise Casey, the government's new COVID-19 and rough sleeper coordinator, stressed the importance of closing street encampments and night shelters to slow the spread of the disease, and Luke Hall instructed local authorities to set up a COVID-19 rough sleeper "coordination cell."

But no new funding or guidelines were forthcoming. However, Hall announced that asylum seekers and those with limited immigration status who had formerly been classified as "no recourse to public funds" (NRPF), would now be allowed housing support and accommodation. Again, no additional monies or direction was proffered, as local authorities were told in a letter to "utilise alternative powers and funding to assist those with no recourse to public funds who require shelter and other forms of support due to the Covid-19 pandemic."

Jon Sparkes observed, "The government has committed to ending rough sleeping by 2025. This proves it can also be done in 2020 if we make it the priority it deserves to be."

Others were not so encouraged. Jessie Seal of Naccom, which housed 1,300 poor migrants in 2019, noted, "Without change from the Home Office, people will continue to be turned away from homelessness support services on the ground."

Paul Atherton, a homeless filmmaker living at Heathrow's Terminal 5 commented, "The likelihood of anyone being

housed before the weekend is infinitesimally small." He observed the government request would have more success if it had ordered councils to comply.

Reports on March 30 found thousands continued to suffer in the streets. Crisis estimated that some 4,200 had been rehoused over the weekend, but that there remained thousands more sheltering next to each other in church hall floors, night shelters, and hotels with shared washing and cooking spaces.

Those remaining on London's streets face increased deprivation, as normal sources of food from distributors and food kitchens have gone. Those failing to supply address histories continue to fall through the bureaucratic gaps, as do migrants categorised as NRPF. Last October CHAIN reported that 52 percent of UK rough sleepers were migrants, and with even Mayor Khan observing that thousands of them work as National Health Service staff and delivery drivers across London.

Crisis, supported by other charities, sent an open letter to the prime minister on April 2 listing issues needing resolution, including: removal of all legal barriers such as NRPF, a dedicated funding stream for local authorities, COVID-19 care and personal protective equipment for staff working in the front lines, and advanced non-repayable grants for people claiming punitive Universal Credit welfare payments.

Despite Boris Johnson's own brush with death, funding for the homeless remains a pittance. Adding an additional £1.6 million brings the total to £3.2 million. When council data show that 25,000 people slept rough in 2019, the figures work out to just £128 per person!

Even those brought into housing remain at risk. At least six people in London homeless hostels have died since March. The *Guardian* estimates that up to 35,000 people may still be crowded together in hostels with shared facilities where physical distancing is impossible. University College London epidemiologist Andrew Hayward describes hostels as "risky as care homes and prisons" and having "the perfect conditions for coronavirus attacks."

Now, facing huge job losses and an economic crisis, many experts are warning about new waves of homelessness caused by increased poverty. The newly unemployed pose a humanitarian and health crisis but face a capitalist class incapable and unwilling to meet fundamental human needs.



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