

Tens of thousands made homeless in UK as winter looms and temperatures plummet

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Tens of thousands in the UK have been made homeless since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic despite an ostensible government ban on tenant evictions. Since April this year, only eight months ago, over 46,000 people have been thrown out on the streets and another 45,000 left facing the same fate.

These devastating figures were revealed by the *Guardian* through a Freedom of Information request. Responses from 204 local councils showed that 36,359 people had been threatened with homelessness since the pandemic started, 6,184 people had received Section 21 eviction notices, and a further 46,894 people had already been made homeless. Section 21 allows landlords to remove tenants with two months' notice once their fixed-term contract has ended, without giving a reason.

During the first pandemic lockdown in March, Boris Johnson's Tory government falsely claimed it had eradicated rough sleeping through its "Everyone in" scheme. Even this limited measure minimised to a degree the risk of contracting coronavirus and saved an estimated 266 lives, according to a recent study in *The Lancet* medical magazine. But thousands of newly homeless have been created since then.

Writing in the *Independent*, London GP Tom Gardiner points out how "Winter night shelters normally provide a vital lifeline for rough sleepers, but the risk of coronavirus transmission in these communal areas is just too high, despite the best efforts of staff to make them Covid secure." The doctor referred to figures from a study in New York which showed the mortality rate from COVID-19 for those staying in shelters was 61 percent higher than the rate among the general population.

Homeless charities are demanding that the

government relaunch the "Everyone in" scheme and halt all plans to deport foreign-born rough sleepers. By some estimations as many as half of London's rough sleepers are migrant workers.

New post-Brexit immigration measures announced last month mean that officials can refuse a person permission to stay in the UK if they believe they have been sleeping rough. A number of housing charities including Shelter, St Mungo's, Crisis and Homeless Link believe such moves will drive workers into modern slavery-style exploitation in order to avoid being rendered homeless and deported forthwith.

These organisations are demanding ministers reopen hotels to rough sleepers as winter approaches. Epidemiologists have warned that failure to take action by the government will kill hundreds of those sleeping rough.

The homeless are more likely to contract COVID-19, to receive delayed and inadequate healthcare provision when required and to suffer the most severe outcomes of the virus, including death. They are three times more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions, and, through a lack of even basic hygiene provisions and access to healthcare, are left extremely vulnerable to infection.

Research conducted by the *Guardian* among both UK-born and migrant rough sleepers found that many had been made homeless in recent months after losing their jobs in the service sector—especially restaurants, clubs and event security. Some explained how domestic pressures created by lockdown or the difficulty of sofa-surfing, i.e. sleeping on friends or family's couches, during the pandemic were responsible for their homeless status.

Young people are especially vulnerable to rapacious landlords. The destruction of public housing over the

past four decades and the extortionate price of housing means low-paid and vulnerable workers, disproportionately the young, are largely reliant upon private rented accommodation. Almost two million young people are frightened they will not have a safe place to stay if they lose their main source of income, according to new figures from homeless charity Centrepont.

Many young workers are employed in the hospitality sector notorious for low wages, brutal conditions and a serious lack of workplace protection. It is estimated that 60 percent of the half million who lost jobs between the March lockdown and this summer were aged 16-25.

The number of young people sleeping rough in London, which has some of the highest accommodation rents in the world, has risen to a record high. Figures released by the Homelessness and Information Network, Chain, show how the number of 16 to 25-year-olds sleeping rough has risen to 368 in 2020 from 250 in the same period in 2019, an increase of 47 percent. Young people now make up 11 percent of London's rough sleepers, a figure charities describe as "a historic high".

Under mounting popular pressure, the government recently announced a pause in eviction actions against renters—but only until January 11 next year. An exception was made for cases of anti-social behaviour or domestic abuse, leaving an opportunity for unscrupulous private landlords to exploit.

The government claims nobody will be evicted by bailiffs while restrictions are imposed on business activity, but many do not live in orthodox housing arrangements.

Head of public affairs for the homeless charity Centrepont, Paul Noblet, told the *Guardian*, "Through our helpline, we have been hearing about lots of people losing their homes despite a ban on evictions—some of the calls are from young people who work in the hospitality industry whose home may have been linked to their job, so someone living at a hotel or a pub."

Noblet added that many young people were unaware of their rights under the circumstances and would be enormously stressed by receiving a Section 21 eviction notice.

Lucy Abraham, chief executive of the homeless charity Glass Door, said it was seeing a large number of people in precarious living situations who had found

themselves homeless. "Workers who were sharing overcrowded houses found these situations untenable because everyone was suddenly supposed to be home the whole time rather than just sleeping there".

Homelessness in the UK is having a devastating impact on children. According to a survey by Shelter and YouGov, more than half (56 percent) of 1, 507 teachers surveyed had been employed in an educational setting with children who were homeless and in the past three years had resided in temporary housing. There are 136,000 homeless children living in Britain.

Shelter reported last week, "88% of these teachers reported children missing school as a key issue. This is often because children can face significant difficulties with their journey to school if they become homeless and are accommodated a long way from their former home.

"87% reported children coming to school hungry. Temporary accommodation such as B&Bs and hostels are often not equipped with suitable or any cooking facilities.

"94% reported tiredness as an issue for homeless children and those living in bad housing. In overcrowded accommodation children may struggle to sleep.

"89% reported children arriving at school in unwashed or dirty clothing. This can be caused by a lack of proper or affordable washing facilities in temporary accommodation, as well as issues such as mould and damp in poor-quality housing."

The Socialist Equality Party demands that all be provided with housing as a social right and that all evictions be banned. Emergency housing must be provided to the homeless. The billions handed to the corporations throughout the pandemic crisis must be reclaimed and used to fund an immense programme of public works, including the provision of decent and secure homes for all who need them.



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