

Hundreds of thousands in UK spend Christmas and New Year homeless as pandemic worsens

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On any given day one in every 185 people in the UK do not have a home.

The annual report by homeless charity Crisis issued last month is based on research by Heriot-Watt University. It states, “More than 200,000 households will be experiencing the worst forms of homelessness this Christmas, including sleeping on the streets, hunkered down in sheds and garages, stuck in unstable accommodation such as B&Bs or sofa surfing far away from their support networks...”

The numbers of homeless has been rising for the past five years reaching a peak of 219,000 at the end of 2019—up from 207,600 in 2018. Crisis attributes a slight drop this year to the effects of the Everyone In scheme which the Tory government was forced to bring in as it responded to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The scheme saw around 15,000 homeless put up in hotels or other emergency accommodation in an effort to control the number of pandemic cases that threatened to overwhelm the National Health Service.

Homelessness is not only the visible form of those having to sleep rough on the streets, the report notes. More than nine in ten (95 percent) of homeless households in England are hidden from view, “drifting from sofa to sofa or trapped in insecure, temporary accommodation.”

Crisis chief executive Jon Sparkes commented, “Homelessness is dangerous and devastating, and yet this Christmas there will be thousands of people sleeping on strangers’ floors, freezing in flimsy tents or trapped in rundown B&Bs with nowhere else to go and no one to be with.

“It’s unquestionable that the emergency measures taken to support people sleeping rough into safe accommodation, and the introduction of a ban on evictions, had a significant impact and protected the lives of thousands. With the economic damage of the pandemic set to be long-lasting, and with millions expected to be out of work by early next year, there is a very real risk homelessness will increase

unless urgent action is taken.”

These calls have fallen on deaf ears. The Everyone In scheme was rapidly ended in May and replaced in September by a paltry £91.5 million fund. This was to be shared by fully 274 councils in order to fund their plans for rough sleepers over the next few months. It was topped up by just £15 million through the Protect Programme in November. A third lockdown is now underway with the government committing no more funding and Everyone In consigned to the scrapheap.

The Crisis report notes that poverty, destitution and poor housing problems are acute in regions in the north of England. Here homelessness has increased by 20 percent over the last five years.

London Councils represents the 32 London boroughs and the City of London. A separate report by the organisation in December stated that 63,000 London households, two thirds with children representing 90,000 individuals, would not spend the Christmas holiday period in their own permanent home. They would instead be in bed & breakfast accommodation, hostels or some other form of short-term accommodation, because of the severe lack of social housing in the capital where housing has become the prerogative of the rich elite. The figure for those in temporary accommodation in the capital are the highest for 15 years.

London Council’s Executive member for Housing and Planning, Darren Rodwell, who is leader of Labour-run Barking and Dagenham Borough Council, noted that “almost 90,000 children in the capital,” were “living in homeless households and set to spend Christmas in temporary accommodation...”

The homeless crisis in London can only worsen because “As well as skyrocketing temporary accommodation figures, councils face the nightmare scenario of extreme pressures on rough sleeper services that need to cope both with Covid-19 and cold weather snaps. And this is all taking place against a backdrop of horrendous budget constraints.”

These points are correct but Rodwell conceals the role of Labour who are operating in the words of party leader Sir Keir Starmer as a “constructive opposition” to Boris Johnson’s Tory government. Moreover, Labour councils nationally have, for over a decade, faithfully imposed the austerity cuts demanded by the Tories in central government.

The Shelter housing charity published its annual report on homelessness in December, *Homeless and Forgotten*. Shelter estimates the numbers of homeless and living in temporary accommodation in England to be 253,000, a figure it declared the highest figure for 14 years.

Shelter wrote of the report, “Rising homelessness is already a major problem—with the latest figures showing 115,000 more people are homeless and trapped in temporary accommodation than a decade ago—but Shelter argues the economic chaos caused by Covid-19 risks turbo-charging the crisis. The charity’s analysis of government data shows the number of people in temporary accommodation jumped by 6,000 in the first three months after the pandemic

“However, the number of people experiencing homelessness is undoubtedly higher, as many people will be undocumented by councils because they are sleeping rough or sofa-surfing.”

The shocking statistics highlighted by the report include the fact that 68 percent of those living in temporary accommodation are in London—one in every 52 people living in the country’s capital city. Outside London, over the last five years homelessness has increased by 16 percent in the northwest of England and the Midlands it has grown by 400 percent and 300 percent respectively.

The report notes, “One in six homeless households (17%) are in emergency B&Bs and hostels—where poor conditions and gross overcrowding are rife. The use of emergency B&Bs alone has increased by a staggering 371% over the last ten years.”

Shelter’s chief executive Polly Neate commented, “Over a quarter of a million people—half of them children—are homeless and stuck in temporary accommodation. This should shame us all. With this deadly virus on the loose, 2020 has taught us the value of a safe home like never before. But too many are going without, because of the chronic lack of social homes. Many people will spend Christmas in grim, dangerous places, cut off from loved ones and faced with a daily struggle to eat or keep clean...”

The Health Foundation charity, on December 28, highlighted the role of inadequate housing in exacerbating the pandemic. It noted, “Going into the COVID-19 pandemic, one in three households (32% or 7.6 million) in England had at least one major housing problem relating to overcrowding, affordability or poor-quality housing.”

It adds, “The pandemic has highlighted the health

implications of housing. Poor housing conditions such as overcrowding and high density are associated with greater spread of COVID-19, and people have had to spend more time in homes that are overcrowded, damp or unsafe. The economic fallout from the pandemic may lead to an increase in evictions.”

An expression of the severity of the growing social crisis in Britain was the decision of the United Nations children’s agency, UNICEF, to hand a £25,000 grant to School Food Matters, a community organisation. The money is being used to provide 18,000 nutritious breakfasts across 25 schools during the Christmas and February half-term breaks. This is the first time in the agency’s more than 70-year history that it has made such a gesture to provide relief for people living in Britain. Such funds are generally used to provide support and relief in so-called developing countries. Today, they are necessary in the fifth richest country in the world that is socially polarised to an extent not seen since the Second World War.

The Tory government refused to even acknowledge that such were the terrible social conditions that the UN is funding the feeding of children there. Leading Conservative MP and co-founder of a £5.5 billion emerging markets fund house, Jacob Rees-Mogg, attacked UNICEF’s grant to School Food Matters. Speaking in parliament December 17, he said the agency’s role was to look “after people in the poorest and most deprived countries in the world where people are starving where there are famines and where there are civil wars, and they make cheap political points of this kind giving I think £25,000 to one council. It is a political stunt of the lowest order...”

The Tory government launched a similar attack on UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston in 2018 upon the completion of his devastating indictment of social conditions in the UK after he had visited nine areas of the country. In his report, Alston noted of a situation which has dramatically worsened during the pandemic, “In England, homelessness is up 60% since 2010, rough sleeping is up 134%. There are 1.2 million people on the social housing waiting list, but less than 6,000 homes were built last year.”



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