

Rough sleeping rises in UK amid tidal wave of homelessness

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For the first time in five years there has been a marked rise in rough sleeping across England.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows that in 2022, an estimated 3,069 people were sleeping out on the streets of England, a rise of 26 percent. This is the biggest year on year rise since 2015 and exposes the pretense of the Conservative government's 2019 manifesto promise to "end the blight of rough sleeping" by 2024.

Even this rise is not the full picture as the numbers of those sleeping out on the streets does not include those who are homeless, living in temporary shelters or hostels.

There has been a rise in rough sleeping across all regions of England. London and the southeast represented half of those on the streets, with Westminster local authority in London recording the largest number of rough sleepers, 250 people, an increase from 63. Christchurch, Poole and Bournemouth showing a doubling of rough sleepers.

Up to two thirds (64 percent) of rough sleepers were from the UK, 21 percent were EU nationals and 6 percent were from outside the EU and UK. The remaining 10 percent were not known.

Rick Henderson, chief executive of the Homeless Link charity said, "The 26 percent rise is evidence of how the cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated long-standing drivers of homelessness, such as shortage of affordable housing, an often punitive welfare system and increasingly stretched health services".

Local councils are warning of a coming tidal wave of need, caused by soaring food and energy prices, benefit freezes, and the lifting of COVID eviction bans.

Research from a year ago by homeless charity Crisis and Heriot-Watt University predicted that by 2024, there will be 66,000 more homeless people in England,

including 8,000 more sleeping rough and 9,000 forced into unsuitable accommodation.

"The Homelessness Monitor: England 2022" surveyed 155 English councils, finding that nine out of 10 town halls are expected to see an increase in evictions from private rented homes over the next year. Eight out of 10 councils have concerns about the increase in homeless children.

It predicted that councils in London will see the biggest increase in homelessness. At the time a council official in southern England told researchers, "We are expecting a tidal wave, to put it mildly".

The rise in the private housing rented sector across the UK has led to many tenants constantly worrying if they will be able to pay the rent and worrying if they will receive an eviction notice.

ITV News recently reported prospective tenants being forced into a bidding war when looking for a place to live as rents increase and demand for properties is greater than current availability. ITV was told people were paying out hundreds of pounds to provide a deposit for a property, only to be gazumped by a bidder offering more money.

There has been a marked decrease in the building of social housing, with just 5,955 homes built for the cheapest social rents in 2020/21, down from 40,000 for 2010/11.

The private rented sector has doubled in the last 20 years to 4.6 million households, accounting for 19 percent of UK households.

The increase in interest rates and soaring mortgage costs has been passed on by landlords to their renters. According to Crisis, rental evictions have surged by 98 percent in a year.

Ministry of Justice figures for England and Wales show that between October 1-December 31, 2022, there

were 5,409 evictions, double the figure for the same period in 2021.

Action taken by landlords against tenants in the county courts in England and Wales with orders for possession were up by 135 percent, repossession claims up 42 percent and warrants up 103 percent. A survey carried out in December 2022 by Crisis indicated that nearly 1 million low-income households across Britain feared eviction in the coming months.

Crisis CEO Matt Downie said, “The devastating impact of the cost-of-living crisis, rising rents and low wages has once again been laid bare as thousands more renters are faced with eviction and the very real threat of being left with nowhere to go”.

The lack of private tenants’ rights has left many people worrying when they might be evicted. Portia Msimang, project coordinator from the campaigning organization Renters’ Rights London, said, “People are being held to ransom by landlords, who themselves are living really well.”

The homeless charity Shelter described the private sector as like the wild west, with people gazumped and tenants evicted and replaced with higher paying tenants. Many did not even know who their landlord is. One woman from Manchester told ITV News that she would need to put a minimum of five months’ rent up front.

ONS figures show that private rented sector rents increased by 4.4 percent in the last year, an increase from 4.2 percent from December 2021.

According to Citizens Advice renters in the private sector are paying 43 percent more on rent than those in the social housing sector.

Private sector landlords are also restrictive regarding who they will let to and will not always let to people on welfare benefits or will require deposits that are financially insurmountable.

The servicing of mortgage debt has been one of the key factors leading landlords to increase rents. The Bank of England having kept interest rates low for years has recently put through 10 consecutive base rate increases.

Many buy-to-let landlords will choose to sell up, as their profit margins diminish. According to estate agent Hamptons analysis of data from Countrywide, landlords sold 35,000 more properties than they bought across 2022. Hamptons has estimated that the private rented sector is losing homes at a rate of 66 per day.

In London the SpareRoom website, used by many to try to find a spare room to share, calculates that there are 106,000 people looking for a room to rent, with 1,500 available properties.

The rental crisis in London has led to record numbers of homeless families having to be temporarily housed in hotels. Westminster council has confirmed that in the last two years the number of families lodging in hotels has risen by a staggering 1,740 percent and is directly attributable to the cost of living crisis and the shortage of private rented properties.

Homeless families are being housed at enormous cost, with the average hotel room costing £268 per night, £8,152 a month.

Shelter estimate that there are nearly 250,000 people living in temporary accommodation, the majority families, including 123,000 children. Two thirds of families (68 percent) have lived in temporary accommodation for over a year. In the last decade there has been a 74 percent rise in those living in temporary accommodation.

Millions of social housing tenants are already seeing a rent rise of up to 7 percent this year. This comes on top of council tax and cost of living rises that have pushed many to the brink.



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