

Stark increase in UK homeless deaths in 2022, more than 4,000 dead since 2019

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According to research by the Museum of Homelessness charity, 1,313 people died while homeless across Britain in 2022. The last three years of reporting by the charity have shown a continuous year-on-year increase in deaths of this kind, with 1,286 fatalities recorded in 2021, 976 in 2020, and 710 in 2019, making an overall increase of 85 percent.

The Dying Homeless Project was established by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in October 2017 and taken on by Museum of Homelessness in April 2019. It commented on the figures, “More than 4,000 people have died while homeless across the UK since 2019, with someone now dying every 6.5 hours on average.”

The real number of deaths is likely to be higher as several local authorities did not respond to freedom of information (FoI) requests, including Ealing, Hackney Lewisham, Hillingdon, Blackpool, Fife and Birmingham. Birmingham, the UK’s second largest city with a population approaching 1.2 million, told the charity that they do not collect information on how and when people are dying in homelessness settings.

Other local councils reported that they were not able to provide more detailed information relating to age or causes of death.

As well as FOI requests, details were gathered from members of the public, grassroots groups, coroners’ reports, homelessness charities and family members.

For the first time, the death figures include those living in exempt accommodation, which is usually shared and where some support is provided, but which is not currently regulated.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) also provides data on deaths of homeless people, however the methodologies are different. The Homelessness Museum survey covers the whole of the UK, and

captures data from sources left out of official statistics gathering. Nonetheless, the ONS too found an increase in deaths, with their most recent estimate for 2021 significantly higher than in any of the years 2013-2017.

The homeless population is often understood to include those sleeping out on the streets, but in fact includes people in a number of settings. These include supported accommodation (13.8 percent), emergency accommodation (4.3 percent), bed and breakfast accommodation (4.4 percent), temporary accommodation (35.5 percent), rough sleepers’ accommodation (24.4 percent), and others (6.9 percent). The street homeless make up 10.6 percent of the total.

Homelessness deaths occur throughout the year, with a higher number actually occurring in the summer. This is contrary to the popular understanding that homeless people are more likely to die in the winter time and shows that the serious risk to life is in no way seasonal.

The causes of death were sampled from 314 people from the overall number of 1,313—all of them living on the streets with no fixed abode. After physical health conditions, they are predominantly linked to drugs, alcohol and overdosing.

The study notes, “Last year we reported on 31 people completing suicide; this has increased to 35 this year [to March 2023]. Five of these deaths were of people who were street homeless and had no fixed abode.”

People who are homeless or sleeping out on the streets often struggle to access mental health support, and there are gaps in provision for what are some of the most vulnerable people in society.

The ages of 951 of the people who died were known, with people often perishing before they reach middle age. The most common group for age of death was 35-55. This figure is shocking when one considers that

average life expectancy in the UK is 80.

Those who died in exempt accommodation are highlighted in this year's report. This is accommodation not commissioned by local authorities, but which is used to house vulnerable people. Such housing is exempt from local licensing regulations and housing benefit caps, which mean the local council or police have few powers to act over the quality and safety of the dwelling.

The majority of local authorities responding to FOI requests for information on deaths in exempt accommodation said they did not have data. Of the total 151 deaths recorded across the twelve who provided data, Manchester had the highest number at 109.

Even the government's own report into exempt accommodation published last year via the Department for Levelling up and Communities was scathing in its criticisms. It described the system as a complete mess and in some instances involving the exploitation of vulnerable people, as unscrupulous providers make excessive profits by capitalising on loopholes. The gold-rush is all funded by taxpayers through housing benefit paid by tenants to landlords.

The inquiry found that some residents' experiences of exempt accommodation are hellish and that some people's situations actually deteriorate versus living on the streets as a result of the shocking conditions in which they live.

Homelessness Museum calls for mandatory fatality reviews for all local authorities, including accountability. Co-founder Matt Turtle said, "The fact that so many people continue to die in unregulated, taxpayer funded accommodation run by rogue landlords is a disgrace".

In 2022 the government spent £1.6 billion putting people into this type of accommodation, mostly owned by private companies or individuals.

At root, homelessness deaths are the outcome of year of cuts to housing, mental and general health, drug, alcohol and allied services. Figures published by The Health Foundation show that the public health grant has been cut by 26 percent in real terms per person basis since 2015/16. Paid to local authorities from the Department of Health and Social Care budget, the grant is used to provide preventative services including drug alcohol services, smoking cessation, children's health services and sexual health services.

The real terms per person cuts have been even greater to those living in some of the most deprived areas of England. The seaside town of Blackpool, considered to be the most deprived upper tier local authority in England, has seen its grant (including new drug and alcohol treatment funding) cut by £33 per person in real terms since 2015/16.

Poor health outcomes are strongly associated with living in areas of socio-economic deprivation. A girl born into one of the most deprived 10 percent of areas can expect to live in good health for 19 years less than a girl born into the least deprived 10 percent areas—a factor that contributed to high COVID-19 mortality rates.

The deaths of thousands of homeless people is a chilling confirmation, amid an ongoing pandemic that has taken over 220,000 lives in Britain, that the ruling class views the lives of working-class people as entirely dispensable.



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