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Rough-sleeping on the Rise in England

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The number of people sleeping rough on the streets in England has risen by 30 percent in a single year, according to a new report from Crisis, a national charity for single homeless people.

The numbers of people making presentations as homeless across the UK has risen by 4 percent in the last year, with annual acceptances by local authority housing departments standing at 54,000. Since 2009/2010 this equates to an increase of 36 percent. The Homeless Monitor concludes that homelessness has worsened considerably in the last five years they have been producing reports.

The numbers of people that are included as part of informal homeless prevention and relief—including statutory homelessness acceptances dealt with by local authority case actions—stands at 275,000 for 2014/2015, a rise of 34 percent since 2009/2010. A third of all local authorities in England have reported an overall service demand for 2014/2015.

According to figures released at the end of February by the Department for Communities and Local Government, there were an estimated 3,569 rough-sleepers on any given night in autumn 2015. This is an increase of 825 people per night since the same period in 2014.

London is particularly affected, with rough-sleepers in the capital constituting 26 percent of the country's total. Although this is down 1 percent as a proportion of the overall figure for England, in real terms London has seen a 27 percent rise in rough-sleeping, rising from 742 people per night in autumn 2014 to 940 per night in autumn 2015. The London Borough of Westminster is the area with the highest rough-sleeping count of the whole country, at an estimated 265 people. According to the figures, London had 0.27 rough-sleepers for every 1,000 households, compared with a rate of 0.14 per 1,000 in the rest of England.

It is likely that these figures severely underestimate the total number of homeless people sleeping in the streets. The figures are disputed, with the UK Statistics Authority concluding that the official Homelessness Prevention and Relief and Rough-sleeping statistics do not currently meet the required standards of trustworthiness, quality and value to be designated as National Statistics.

In its report, Crisis recognised stagnant real wages, soaring housing prices—particularly in the capital—and government welfare cuts as the principal causes of this dramatic upsurge in numbers of rough-sleepers.

Citing cuts to in-work and housing benefits, the Conservative government's much-hated "Bedroom Tax" policy and welfare benefit sanctions as the main factors pushing vulnerable

people onto the streets, the report is an indictment of years of relentless, vicious austerity measures carried out by successive Labour and Tory governments.

Crisis noted that with the reduction of the total welfare benefit cap introduced in the 2015 budget—to £23,000 a year in London and to £20,000 in the rest of the country—many families will find that "affordable" housing, both privately rented and social, is far beyond their means.

The new Universal Credit benefit system to be rolled out across the UK is expected to further increase homelessness, affecting those tenants in the private sector who have their rent benefits paid directly to them.

The problem of finding affordable accommodation is further aggravated by the government's social housing privatisation policy. This has set into motion the forced sale of many high-value council properties, the long-term loss of properties via the government's "Right to Buy" scheme and the reduced investment in new social housing. As indicated in the report,

> "While the Government has stated ambitions for this diminished stock to be targeted on those in greatest need, the interaction of their rent-setting and welfare policies runs directly counter to this aspiration."

Labour's shadow housing minister, John Healey, posturing as an opponent of the government's housing policy and the homelessness crisis, said of the figures, "People will find it extraordinary that in England in the 21st century the number of people forced to sleep rough is going up."

This is pure hypocrisy. Labour has been entirely complicit in imposing the Tory government's austerity measures across the country, with the Labour-dominated local councils in Bristol, Brighton and Hove and Manchester reporting the second, third and fourth highest rough-sleeping counts after Westminster, at 97, 78 and 70 rough-sleepers per night respectively.

Even these shockingly high figures are a gross underestimation of the number of people actually affected by homelessness. Many people have been forced out of their own homes due to skyrocketing living costs and welfare cuts, but have so far avoided being driven onto the streets. According to Crisis, the vast majority of homeless people do not fall within the government's narrow classification of being homeless. Many exist out of sight in bed and breakfasts and squats, or are concealed in the households of friends and family members, on the floors or sofas of these often overcrowded homes. Crisis calculates that approximately 2.35 million households in England contain concealed single persons in this way, and that an estimated 3.1 percent of households are overcrowded.

Many other homeless people can fall under the radar and not be included in official estimates, as it is common for rough-sleepers to conceal themselves as a matter of personal security. Rough-sleepers often fall victim to physical, verbal and sexual abuse if they spend the night in visible and exposed locations and so many choose to shelter themselves in places such as commercial recycling bins.

The number of homeless people found spending the night in commercial bins has risen dramatically, according to waste management firm Biffa. In the 12-month period between

March 2014 and March 2015, the company found people sleeping in their bins on 93 separate occasions, up from 31 in the previous year. In the current year, which runs to the end of March, the figure already stands at 175.

Sleeping in recycling bins can have grave consequences. Spending the night in a commercial bin can lead to serious injuries and fatalities when the bins are emptied into collection trucks and the waste is crushed. According to the Environmental Services Association, there have been at least 11 fatalities since October 2010 as a result of rough-sleepers sheltering in commercial bins. Such gruesome deaths, allied with prolonged period of sleeping in the cold and damp and enduring a poor diet, are central factors in the average age of death for rough-sleepers being just 47.

Extra precautions have been implemented by many waste management companies in an attempt to prevent these tragic deaths. Most collection lorries now contain cameras inside their compactors that allow the driver to see what is being tipped into them; waste collectors are instructed to bang on the side of recycling bins to alert any rough-sleepers inside and to double-check the contents before allowing the bin to be emptied. Businesses and shops have a responsibility to lock their bins overnight and could be taken to court if they do not. Despite the terrible risks, the relative warmth and security of recycling bins can still be attractive to many rough-sleepers.

The Homeless Monitor report can be accessed here.

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