

Record homelessness in London, surge in rough sleepers since Labour took office

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Several reports attest to a massive increase in homelessness in London, with another surge since Labour came to power in July.

A report published last month by London Councils group, a cross-party organisation representing London's 32 borough councils and the City of London—estimated that there were now more than 183,000 Londoners homeless and living in temporary accommodation, costing local boroughs around £4 million per day. “London is grappling with the most severe homelessness crisis in the country,” it declares.

London's homelessness emergency notes that this represents the highest level of homelessness ever recorded in the capital, equivalent to one in 50 Londoners.

Child homelessness has reached staggering levels with the report stating, “The number of Londoners in temporary accommodation includes almost 90,000 children. London Councils estimates this is equivalent to one out of every 21 children living in the capital and means on average there is at least one homeless child in every London classroom.”

An enormous 320,000 households are on waiting lists for social housing in London.

London's population is almost 9 million (8.9 million) and its wider metro area almost 15 million. The report extrapolates on the basis of the 8.9 million figure.

The study explains, “London is the epicentre of a national emergency--homelessness is a major concern across the UK. However, London accounts for over half of England's homelessness figures. As the situation in the capital worsens, the impact is increasingly felt beyond its boundaries. This is demonstrated by the number of out-of-London homelessness placements boroughs must make due to the chronic shortage of affordable accommodation in the capital, which in turn can exacerbate housing pressures elsewhere in the country”.

The huge increase in homelessness is stretching the

resources of local councils, many already teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, to breaking point. London “boroughs’ collective spend is around £114m each month--or £4 million every day--on temporary accommodation for homeless Londoners. It warns, “London boroughs are currently forecast to overspend on their homelessness budgets this year by £250m despite an increase in funding.”

In the first months of the Labour government the number of people sleeping rough in London has risen by almost a fifth, to a new record high. A total of 4,780 rough sleepers were seen on the capital's streets between July and September, according to the latest figures from the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (Chain).

This represents an increase of 18 percent from 4,068 people in the same quarter of 2023, and up 13 percent from 4,223 in the weeks between April and June this year. Chain's data showed nearly half, 49 percent (2,343) of those counted between July and September, were new rough sleepers. The number of rough sleepers it recorded between July and September was the highest quarterly figure since their records began in 2009.

Almost 12,000 (11,993) people were witnessed rough sleeping in the UK capital in the year to March 2024, according to Chain's statistics--the highest ever recorded by Chain for a single year. The total number of rough sleepers in the year to March was up by 58 percent on the 7,581 people seen rough sleeping 10 years ago, in 2014-15.

The Glass Door Homeless charity, which operates emergency shelters across London are preparing for a hectic winter. Its shelters opened November 4 and will remain so until April. There were more than 1,500 applications for its shelter spaces last winter, an 80 percent increase on the previous year that saw the waiting list for men seeking emergency shelter closed three times

due to excess demand.

Chain's figures reveal almost half of rough sleepers in London are UK nationals, 8.1 percent are Romanian nationals and Polish nationals make up 5.1 percent. There has been a 41 percent increase in the number of young people aged between 18 and 25 sleeping rough compared to 2023. Of the total of rough sleepers, 52 percent of those assessed were experiencing mental health issues, with another 35 percent having issues with drink and class A drugs.

Reporting on the record breaking number of rough sleepers, the *Daily Mail* noted, "Westminster--a hub for luxury shopping and late-night entertainment--had by far the highest number of rough sleepers".

It said of a recently evicted migrants rough sleeper encampment in Park Lane, "Opposite their home are the luxury Park Lane Hilton and The Dorchester hotels where room rates can start from more than £1,000 a night. Top of the range cars such as McLarens, Bentleys and Ferraris line the streets nearby and an Aston Martin showroom has pride of place next to the five star Grosvenor House Hotel."

Grotesque inequality is illustrated not to elicit sympathy. The migrant rough sleepers are demonised for being poor and for blighting the life-styles of the super-rich. "Tycoons" the article complains, "who look out on the camp from their penthouses are infuriated to see people drinking at 7am and using Hyde Park's shrubberies as toilets."

Before the general election the then ruling Conservatives sought to implement new laws that could have seen "nuisance" rough sleepers arrested for how they "smelt". Under the proposed legislation, those deemed a "nuisance" would have been fined as much as £2,500 and/or jailed if they refused police orders to shift from a certain locality.

In the prelude to *Serious Money: Walking Plutocratic London* (2023), Caroline Knowles of Queen Mary University of London notes how in contrast to the silence on the vast siphoning off of societies wealth by the super-rich, the "Media and political attention focus on the habits of the poor, with impecunious migrants and refugees providing a focus for popular discontent..."

"Plutocrats are a tiny proportion of London's population, yet their wealth is extraordinary... Yet as wealthy residents increase so do the ranks of the dispossessed. The number of homeless people in London without a fixed residence, some of them rough sleepers, increased sharply from 2010, when, following massive

public investment to forestall financial collapse threatened by the banking crisis of 2008, a politics of austerity hit the public finances and the budgets of local councils."

"A direct line can be drawn between London's housing and social welfare crisis and the super-rich," writes Knowles "including international developers and investors who have bought up the city's real estate, and wealthy residents who--permitted to do so by permissive governments--avoid making a fair contribution to the public finance."

Rising homelessness is the most naked expression of entrenched poverty. Stephanie Ratcliffe of St Mungo's homeless charity said the record rise in new rough sleepers over the last year is being driven by the cost-of-living crisis and a shortage of suitable housing in the capital. "People who have never been at risk of homelessness before--that's never been a tangible possibility for them--are finding themselves in that position and sleeping on the street, which I think is very shocking and heartbreaking", said Ratcliffe.

Fuelling the emergence of widespread rough sleeping and homelessness in London and across Britain is the destruction of public housing. Demolition of countless housing estates, gentrification, right-to-buy legislation, the marketisation of housing associations, and a failure by government of all political stripes to invest in substantial new public housing since the 1970s has created a disaster for the working class.

Nearly 60,000 public housing units have been demolished in England in the last 10 years. Over 161 London council estates have been demolished since 1997 and another 123 estates are set to go. Deliberately, brick by brick, London's working class is being deprived of public housing and frequently kicked out onto the pavement.



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