

Explosive growth of homelessness in England

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26 December 2024

Homelessness in England has increased by 14 percent in the last year, according to the charity Shelter, who described their latest figures as “shocking” and “astounding”.

The report estimates that on any given night more than 354,000 people in England are homeless—an incredible one in 160 people. The figure includes 161,500 children in the world’s sixth biggest economy. Last year the figure was one in 182 people.

In May, the *Financial Times*, informed by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data, estimated the UK as the world’s worst country for homelessness, with one in 200 UK households living in temporary accommodation. This appears a serious underestimation in light of Shelter’s figures and because homelessness in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is considered worse than in England.

The 354,000 homeless would fill Wembley Stadium in London almost four times over. The number of homeless children alone in England is not far short of filling the national stadium twice. Shelter believes even these shocking figures are a significant underestimation because phenomena like “sofa surfing” goes unrecorded.

“Across England”, Chief executive of Shelter Polly Neate explained to the media, “extortionate private rents” combined with a “dire lack of genuinely affordable social homes” is “trapping more and more people in homelessness”.

“Parents are spending sleepless nights worrying about their children growing up in cramped and often damaging temporary accommodation, as weeks and months turn into years without somewhere secure for them to call home.” Neate said she believed “temporary” was a misnomer because it was frequently anything but, with family stays often extending for years.

Neate’s point about lack of affordable social homes is a crucial one, with the Labour government nominally set to build some 1.5 million housing units but with very few plans for a genuine social rented status, i.e., affordable rents around 50 percent of market rates paid to either the

local authority or a housing association.

Increasingly “affordable” and “social rented” mean rents of approximately 80 percent of the market or part owned property purchases from housing associations that are increasingly detached from their role as providers of public housing and becoming more marketised and profit seeking.

Shelter claims their research represents “the most comprehensive overview of recorded homelessness in England”. Shelter’s estimate is more encompassing and therefore more accurate because it counts people living in local authority arranged temporary accommodation, those who have arranged their own temporary accommodation, rough-sleepers and single people in hostels but not counted in government figures.

Shelter also included figures from Freedom of Information requests made to councils seeking to ascertain accurate numbers in temporary accommodation arranged by social services. They also included those made “legally homeless”, who cannot continue to reside in the present property, including those whose property is being foreclosed by a lending agency.

Consequently the homeless categories utilised by Shelter in their total include; 3,556 living in accommodation provided by social services—and the estimated number of people homeless and living in temporary accommodation arranged by them or “homeless at home”—at the end of June 2024 was 7,004 in total.

Shelter cited several factors; “extortionate private rents”, rising evictions and a chronic and “dire lack of genuinely affordable” public housing, for “trapping” ever greater numbers in homelessness. In addition, more protracted issues have exacerbated the housing crisis; inadequate rates of housebuilding, both private and public, a dwindling and increasingly residualised public housing sector and yearly cuts to housing benefits making affordable market rental properties increasingly rare.

London, with extortionate living costs, has the highest ratio of homeless people in England (one in 47) with the

total number of people experiencing homelessness in the capital rising by 12 percent over the last year to 187,000. The London borough with the highest rate of homelessness is Newham—with a population of over 350,000—with a jaw-dropping one in 18 homeless!

The English local authority with the highest rate of homelessness outside the capital is Slough, Berkshire, where one in 51 people are homeless. In Luton one in 57 people are homeless; in Manchester one in 61; in the UK's second biggest city Birmingham one in 62; and in coastal town Hastings, Sussex; one in 64.

Unprecedented pressure on working class household budgets and ruthless private landlords mean many people were now often experiencing homelessness for the first time in their lives. Shelter used the case study of Sally, 43, who is now living in temporary accommodation provided by Shelter in Dorset with her 14 years old daughter. Sally was evicted and spent eight hours on the street before getting a hotel room.

“I’ve always paid my rent on time but was still locked out of my home on the day the bailiffs came. I had to wait on the street for the whole day before me and my daughter were put in a hotel room by the council. It smelled like a urinal and was covered in pet hair, which made my chronic illness worse and left me very poorly. I’m grateful for Shelter’s support stepping in and getting us out of there.”

Conditions in temporary local authority accommodation are often “atrocious”, admitted the *FT*, with damp and mould commonplace, likewise rodent and insect infestations.

Working class families find themselves out on the street unable to afford private rented accommodation, and with local authorities managing a declining number of public housing units whilst demand grows in inverse proportion.

Workers’ incomes have been devastated over the past decade and a half by austerity measures and the cost-of-living crisis, with longer term welfare cuts and wages falling drastically in real terms under inflationary pressure. After a period of decline the number of English households living in temporary accommodation more than doubled between 2010 and 2023 from 48,000 to 112,000, which then was the highest figure since records began.

The primary reason for the explosion of homelessness is the deliberate decimation of public housing beginning in the late 1970s and accelerating since through right-to-buy legislation, demolition and gentrification by Labour, Tory and coalition administrations alike. Media estimates of a 25 percent decimation of the public housing stock since

the 1970s are conservative, especially for the major cities and London formerly with high numbers of now demolished multi-storey estates.

The destruction of council housing is a social crime that continues to wreak havoc across working-class communities. England’s chronic shortage of public housing has left over 1.3 million households on council housing waiting lists across the country. Over the past five years, the parlous state of temporary accommodation has been cited as a contributing factor in the deaths of 55 children in England.

With so few housing units left, families who become homeless have little hope of moving into a safe and secure property. Instead, thousands of families are forced to eke out an existence, spending months crammed into inadequate rooms, often sharing kitchens and bathrooms with strangers. Those who do not meet draconian conditions for acceptance and are deemed not entitled to homelessness accommodation are forced to rotate through friends and family or sleep-rough on the streets.

Relative to population size, 65 million, the UK builds far fewer new homes, private and public, than most comparable sized economies. The housing shortage has sent private sector rents skywards. According to research by the Institute of Fiscal Studies the share of private rented homes in England where rents are covered by housing benefit has declined from one in six to one in 20 in just a decade.



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