

Britain's 380,000 "hidden homeless"

By Richard Tyler
28 July 2004

The charity Crisis estimates that some 380,000 people are without a home, almost equal to the population of Manchester. It projects that this figure could rise to one million by 2020 on present trends.

In its report *Hidden Homelessness: Britain's Invisible City*, Crisis emphasises, "There are far more Hidden Homeless people than is officially recognised and the problem has only been partially understood and only partly tackled."

These people are "hidden homeless" since they only manage to keep off the streets by staying in various forms of temporary accommodation. The charity estimates some 75,000 people stay in bed & breakfast lodgings, 10,000 are squatters, 220,000 share overcrowded accommodation with friends or family, with 70,000 being in a household only under sufferance. The rest are those at "imminent risk" of eviction. For many, such "temporary accommodation" is far from temporary, with some homeless people being shunted from one hostel or b&b establishment to another for several years.

The soaring cost of housing in recent years also has the potential to bring about a rapid rise in homelessness. As the UK house price bubble in the 1980s showed, a rapid rise in interest rates can quickly translate into mortgage defaults and compulsory reposessions, forcing people out of their homes. In 2002, MORI Social Research Institute found that more than one in five people struggled to pay their rent or mortgage because of financial insecurity and the high cost of housing in many areas.

Crisis calculates that the cost of this "hidden homelessness" is £1.4 billion every year. A significant proportion of this is due to the lost or diminished incomes and taxes of the homeless, but almost half represents the cost to the public purse of providing housing benefit and accommodation payments.

The "hidden homeless" are predominantly young and

single, since there still exists a statutory duty for local authorities to provide accommodation to those with dependant children.

Centrepoint, a London charity that helps young people with a wide range of problems, provides a bed for over 500 homeless young people every night in the capital. Black and ethnic minority youth represent almost 60 percent of the people helped.

Amongst some hidden homeless populations, Crisis found 33 percent suffered mental ill health. "A high proportion of Hidden Homeless people have more complex problems including mental ill health and addiction. They are urgently in need of specialist help including psychiatric assessment and care, detox and rehabilitation support. Many are not in touch with specialist drug or mental health workers and few are even registered with a GP [doctor]," according to the charity.

Other estimates put the percentage of homeless people experiencing mental health problems as high as 50 percent, with a large proportion also suffering from drug and alcohol misuse. The detrimental health impact of homelessness—with high rates of TB, respiratory and skin diseases—is underlined by the fact that rough sleepers have an average life expectancy of just 42, according to homeless charity Shelter.

According to Shelter, families in temporary accommodation "experience significantly more health problems than the general population." Homeless children are twice as likely to need hospital admission for accidents and infectious diseases. Children in homeless families suffer more with behavioural problems and mental ill health is "significantly higher among homeless mothers and children".

Those without a permanent address have far greater difficulties gaining employment. Many employers will not consider someone who provides a hostel or bed & breakfast lodgings as an address. Thus the single

homeless are caught in a vicious circle, without a job they are unlikely to secure decent accommodation, without a fixed address they struggle to gain permanent employment.

The Labour government has rejected the figure of hidden homeless outlined by Crisis and claim there are “only” 97,290 homeless households. Even if each household equates on average to two people, this would still put the figure at almost 200,000!

New Labour established a Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU), which claims to have removed over two thirds of those sleeping on the streets of the UK. Even if this figure is accepted—and there is evidence to suggest it is open to question—as the Crisis report shows, the result has only moved the problem out of sight, off the streets and into the hidden world of hostels and other temporary accommodation. Some charities have disputed the RSU figures, citing examples where the homeless are moved off the streets for one night only, which just happens to be the night on which the official count is taking place.

According to www.homeless.org.uk, “for every one person counted during a street count, there are approximately ten times the number sleeping rough over a period of a year”.

For New Labour, homelessness, like every other social ill produced by the capitalist system, is viewed through the “law and order” prism. The Rough Sleepers Unit used high-pressure tactics, including the threat of arrest, to move people into hostels and other temporary accommodation. At the same time, Labour pioneered a campaign against so-called “aggressive begging”, criminalising the destitute, while gutting other social programmes and support for poor families.

Hidden Homelessness: Britain's Invisible City

Available from the Crisis website:
<http://www.crisis.org.uk/hidden/>

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>