

Over 120,000 British children will be homeless this winter

By Alice Summers
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More than 120,000 children in the UK will be homeless this Christmas, according to a report by the charity Shelter. This is the equivalent of four children at every school in the country.

This figure comprising children living in temporary accommodation, such as emergency bed and breakfasts and hostels, or “couch surfing” involving indefinite stays at the homes of friends and relatives. It represents the highest level of child homelessness seen in the UK for eight years.

According to Shelter’s calculations, the number of families living in temporary accommodation has risen by 15 percent since last year alone, standing at 7,475 families by the end of June 2016.

In their report, Shelter interviewed 25 families who were currently or recently living in temporary accommodation. All of the families lived in grossly inadequate and overcrowded conditions, with every family having only one room to share between an entire family. Over half of the parents reported that they also had to share a bed with their children.

One family stressed how their accommodation fell way short of acceptable standards, explaining, “You know they say a brother and a sister can’t share [a bed] past 11 [years old], but [our daughter] shares with three boys and their mum.”

Another family told Shelter that they were sharing a two-bedroom terrace house with three other families.

The temporary accommodation these families are forced to live in was not only overcrowded, but also violated basic health and safety regulations leading many parents to fear for the safety of their children. Many of the rooms had problems ranging from dirty or broken mattresses to mould, sparking plugs, windows that would not shut and doors without locks. Some families reported vermin, exposure to drug abuse,

fighting and strangers sleeping in the corridors.

These conditions had serious effects on the mental wellbeing of children, with 18 out of the 25 families reporting that their children’s emotional and mental health had been negatively impacted upon. Parents described how their children became anxious, socially isolated and had problems sleeping.

Over half of the parents interviewed said that their children’s development had been negatively affected. Shelter reported, “[W]hile children in emergency accommodation might have a roof over their heads, they are clearly without a home. They do not have the space to live their lives—to play, study, or relax. Nor a place of stability and safety where they can grow and develop.”

This growth in child homelessness reflects a general rise in homelessness across the entire population. Another report released at the start of this year by Crisis, a charity for single homeless people, documented a 30 percent rise in homelessness in England over a single year.

Both Crisis and Shelter cite the huge lack of affordable homes, instability and high costs in the private rented sector, and reductions in welfare as the main causes of this surge in homelessness.

Over the past years, relentless cuts to social security payments, such as Job Seekers Allowance and in-work and housing benefits, have removed much of the safety net that many families rely on to avoid homelessness while they look for work or cheaper accommodation.

This month a cap on the amount a household can receive in welfare benefits came into operation. The cap will particularly hit those most in need, including an estimated 42,000 single parents. The total amount of benefits a household can receive has been slashed by a massive £6,000 from £26,000 to £20,000 nationally,

with the exception of London. In London, it is reduced from £26,000 to £23,000. The Institute for Fiscal Studies think tank said the benefit cap “almost exclusively affects families with large numbers of children or very high rents or both.”

Assessing the report, charities estimate that 112,000 families, responsible for 320,000 children, will be up to £115 a week worse off. The Children’s Society said more families could be made homeless as a result. “There are already 3.9 million children living in poverty across Britain and the new cap is likely to cause that total to rise. Children’s health, well-being and mental health could all be put at risk,” it stated.

Compounding the problem families face accessing any decent accommodation is discrimination in the private rented section, with landlords frequently refusing to accept families claiming housing benefits even if the household is in work. Under legislation that came into force at the beginning of this year, landlords are also obliged to verify the immigration status of potential tenants, with the possibility of receiving fines for letting out a property to an illegal immigrant leading many private landlords to be unwilling to let to people they perceive to be immigrants.

These stricter laws on renting to migrant workers—nominally to stop rogue landlords taking advantage of vulnerable people—have in fact imposed further restrictions on access to accommodation for migrant workers and the working class more broadly.

According to Shelter, barely half of the 250,000 new homes the country requires in order to keep up with demand are being built. The majority of which are sold at market rates—completely out of the price range of many families. Add this to skyrocketing property prices and the mass privatisation of many social homes under the “Right to Buy” scheme, and the reasons increasing numbers of families have been pushed into the unstable and unaffordable private sector become clear.

A tenant renting a property in the private sector can be asked to move out with just two months’ notice. For many families this is insufficient time to find alternative affordable accommodation, or to raise the large amounts of cash that are needed in advance to pay up-front costs such as letting agent fees, tenancy deposits and initial rents. As a result, many families are forced out of their homes and end up with nowhere to go.

Councils have a legal duty to provide homeless families with children with somewhere to sleep. However, due to the massive housing shortage, these families are often placed in insecure temporary lodgings.

A spokesman for the ruling Conservatives’ Department of Communities and Local Government hailed the provision of such inadequate housing, stating, “Temporary accommodation ensures that no families with children are ever left without roofs over their heads. ... Just last week, this Government announced it would be backing [Conservative MP] Bob Blackman’s Homelessness Reduction Bill—which will also provide vital support for many more people.”

The bill, which passed its second reading in Parliament on October 28, will extend the period of time during which a person is considered to be “threatened with homelessness” from 28 to 56 days, giving families an extra four weeks to seek help from their local authority in finding new accommodation. This token measure will do virtually nothing to solve the homelessness crisis. Without greater provision of social or affordable homes, after this extended period many individuals will still be forced into insecure, temporary accommodation or onto the streets.

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