

Homelessness to soar as UK eviction ban ends

By Julia Callaghan
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A massive wave of homelessness is set to hit the UK, with Monday's lifting of the eviction ban for private renters in England and Wales.

With the jobs furlough scheme coming to an end from November, the removal of these protections by the Conservative government, as both unemployment and coronavirus cases soar, will be catastrophic.

The ban on evictions was introduced in March and has been extended twice. But on Monday the government gave the green light for those suffering the worst financial effects of the pandemic to be forced out of their homes.

Under the terms of the last extension, anyone served with an eviction notice since August 29 has been given a six-month notice period. Yet, up to 55,000 households served notices between March and August are not afforded this protection and their tenancies are immediately threatened, according to campaign group Generation Rent.

There are 4.5 million private rented households in the UK, supplied by an estimated 2.2 million landlords. Debt charity StepChange reports that 590,000 tenants have fallen into rent arrears since the lockdown, with an average of £1,076 debt per household. This leaves more than half a million people in danger of homelessness.

The eviction notice period has been extended from three to six months, except in cases of anti-social behaviour, and there will be a so-called "Christmas truce," meaning no evictions over a few days at Christmas. This all means that the nearly 200,000 people who have already been served notices can still face homelessness from this week, including through Section 21 "no-fault" evictions. Housing charity Shelter reports more than 170,000 tenants have already been threatened with eviction by their landlord or letting agent.

Even as the government was cynically extending the

ban on evictions, in the face of growing anger, it was putting into place the legal infrastructure to ensure that they can go ahead in the period ahead. Eviction hearings will now resume in courts in England and Wales to deal with the backlog of legal proceedings that have built up during the coronavirus outbreak. To get the ball rolling, courts are firstly dealing with eviction cases involving domestic violence or anti-social behaviour and ones where the rent has not been paid for more than a year. A Generation Rent briefing noted that 200 judges have been given special training to deal with housing cases as courts prepare to get through the backlog.

The most at risk of eviction are the young and lowest-paid workers. According to the Office for National Statistics, more 16- to 24-year-olds are losing their jobs than any other age group, with the number in employment falling by 156,000 in the three months to July. This represents the steepest drop since the midst of the last recession—and the true situation is worse than this as the data only records up to July.

The horrifying effects are already visible, as homelessness among young people is rising sharply. Sussex and Surrey charity YMCA Downslink Group says it has seen a 61 percent rise in youth homelessness since the start of the coronavirus crisis, as well as an exponential increase in mental health emergencies among this vulnerable group.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation points to the fragile circumstances of the lowest paid, and the huge difference in income security between these workers and the rest of society. While only 1 percent of those earning over £41,000 are at risk of redundancy, 40 percent of workers on minimum wage face a high or very high risk. As the average low-income family in the UK has just £95 in savings, even a temporary loss of income can have immediate and catastrophic effects.

The lifting of the eviction ban and a huge wave of

homelessness, just as COVID-19 cases are resurging, will accelerate the spread of the virus. The British Medical Association (BMA) has warned that “people who are homeless are three times more likely to be chronically ill with lung and breathing problems—a serious risk factor in the development of the virus.” It notes the comments of Professor Dame Parveen Kumar, BMA board of science chair, who said with the ending of the eviction ban, “we could see large outbreaks of COVID-19 among the homeless population, not only putting this community at risk, but also the wider population.”

For the government and the landlord lobby, this is a risk worth taking. Some landlords are even venturing that their own predicament has been worse than that of their tenants during the pandemic! Elisabeth Kohlbach, chief executive of property investment firm Skwire, said, “While tenants themselves have been able to rely on pandemic assistance, such as furlough pay, landlords have, throughout the pandemic, had no government support.” She insisted that, despite now having the power, landlords “have been and remain unlikely” to evict anyone financially impacted by COVID-19.

Food insecurity among the poorest is another aspect of the escalating social crisis. The UK’s largest food bank network, the Trussell Trust, has said it expects extreme poverty to double in the three months to Christmas, with at least 670,000 additional people becoming destitute. It expects a 61 percent increase in food parcels needed across its UK network in October to December, equating to 6.5 handed out every minute, or a total of 846,000 parcels.

This staggering demand will dwarf even the unprecedented level of need for emergency food seen in April and June, when 100,000 people used food banks for the first time. Trussell Trust Chief Executive Emma Revie warned that, unless action is taken, there will be a significant “reshaping of the landscape of poverty, destitution and food insecurity in this country.”

Families with children have been the worst hit by food shortage, which brings profound stress and deprives children of the nutrition they need to grow, develop, and participate actively in school and society. Data from the Food Foundation reveals that 14 percent of families with children have experienced moderate or

severe food insecurity in the past six months, with 12 percent of the adults in these families reporting skipping meals because they could not afford or access food. Four percent said they had gone a whole day without eating.

Like the pandemic, this destitution crisis is global. Unemployment is expected to triple in Poland this year, and quadruple in the Czech Republic. In the US, 14 million people are now unemployed, and in the Philippines, joblessness reached a record 45.5 percent in July. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says 75 percent of Syrian refugees in the region are now in “extreme poverty,” up from 55 percent before the pandemic. According to UNICEF and Save the Children, the coronavirus crisis has plunged 150 million more of the world’s children into poverty.

The ongoing suffering of hundreds of millions of people in the UK and internationally during the lockdown is the opposite of the experience of the ruling elite, who have vastly increased their wealth. Since the lockdown, UK billionaires have seen their fortunes soar by 20 percent, or £25 billion.

The Labour Party and Liberal Democrats’ parliamentary opposition have done nothing to oppose the attacks on private renters, beyond making occasional mealy-mouthed calls to “extend the ban.”

Yesterday, after the horse has already bolted, Lib Dem peer Baroness Olly Greender put a motion forward in the House of Lords, using the archaic “Prayer to Annul” mechanism, to try could force a vote on the government’s pandemic regulations, including evictions. On Labour’s behalf, justice spokesperson Lord Ponsonby of Shulbredeh put down a “Regret Motion” against the changes.

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