

DILEMMA: SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO MORE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS?

17 January 2020

SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO MORE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS?

THE DILEMMA

The number of homeless people in the UK has risen every year since 2010.

There has been a 165% rise in rough sleepers in the last ten years. Homelessness charity Shelter says there are at least 320,000 homeless people in Britain, with 5,000 of them regularly sleeping rough. (You can read more about how homelessness is defined later in this debate.)

A record number of homeless people died in 2018, a year that saw the biggest increase in deaths since reporting began. An estimated 726 homeless people died in England and Wales in 2018. That's almost two deaths a day. It's also a 22% rise from 2017, and the figure for 2019 is expected to be even higher.

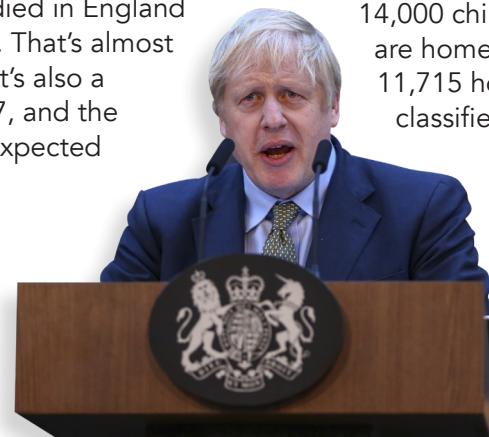
In England, the number of households that became

homeless or at risk of becoming homeless increased by 11.4% in 2019, according to Government figures. That's an increase of almost 7,000 households. Some 68,170 households in England were homeless or threatened with homelessness between April and June 2019.

In 2009, the current prime minister, Boris Johnson (below), was the Mayor of London. Back then, he pledged to end rough sleeping in the city within three years. But two-and-a-half times more people are sleeping rough now compared to 2009.

In Scotland, the most recent figures show that 29,894 households are classified as homeless. More than 14,000 children in Scotland are homeless. In Wales, 11,715 households are classified as homeless.

Some experts say that the homelessness crisis is a direct result of cutbacks to public services, such as



A rough sleeper outside the Houses of Parliament in London

social care, since 2010. Social workers try to prevent vulnerable people from ending up without a home. Others say that cuts have left people poorer and more likely to end up on the streets.

First News readers told us they cared about housing issues in our recent election poll. Affordable housing was

your third biggest concern, after the environment and Brexit. The UK is the fifth richest country in the world.

After being in power for almost ten years, have the Conservatives done enough to tackle homelessness? Are they doing all they can? Or is it an almost impossible problem to solve?

DILEMMA: SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO MORE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS?

17 January 2020

FACTS & FIGURES

In London, a total of **8,855** people slept rough in 2018. Fifteen new people a day sleep rough for the first time.



At least **135,000** children were homeless on Christmas Day 2019.

There were **617,527** empty buildings in the UK, as of September 2019.



Single homeless people have an average age at death of **47 years**, compared with **77 years** for the general population.

The areas with the most rough sleepers are **Westminster** (London) followed by **Camden** (also in London).



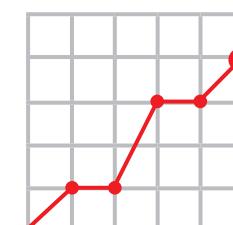
In 2010, the number of people sleeping rough regularly in England was

1,768

It is now

4,677

Temporary accommodation – also known as emergency housing – is offered by the council to people who do not have their own home. It is often in a bed and breakfast hotel or homeless hostel.



The number of households in temporary accommodation in spring 2019 was **84,740**. That's a **77% increase** since December 2010.

DILEMMA: SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO MORE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS?

17 January 2020

WHAT DOES 'HOMELESS' MEAN?

This is the Government's explanation of what homelessness is:

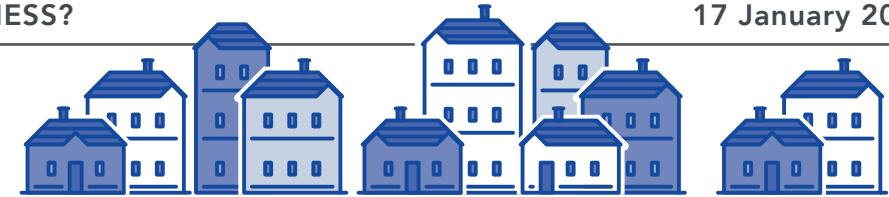
The definition of homelessness is not having a home. You are experiencing homelessness if you have nowhere to stay and are living on the streets, but you can experience homelessness even if you have a roof over your head. **Homelessness does not just refer to people who are experiencing rough sleeping.**



Homeless people in London in 1990

The following housing circumstances are examples of homelessness:

- people without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough
- **people living in hostels, shelters, refuges or other temporary circumstances, for example in institutions**
- people staying temporarily with family and friends ('sofa surfing') and people who are threatened with eviction (forced to leave a home by the property owner)
- **people living in unfit housing or extreme overcrowding**



TYPES OF HOMELESSNESS

In England, homelessness statistics measure something called **statutory homelessness**. People are considered statutorily homeless when they tell their local authority (council) that they are homeless or threatened with homelessness. They are then meant to be offered help with housing.

There's a legal duty for the state to help people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Councils are responsible for this in England, Wales and Scotland, while Northern Ireland has a single organisation responsible for housing.

If the local authority finds that the person is in priority need and has no place to stay, they have to provide temporary accommodation while investigating the case. If the authority decides that they have a duty to find the person a permanent place to live, they might continue to live in temporary accommodation until – if – a suitable home becomes available.



Shipping containers that have been converted to house the homeless

People who have not approached authorities for help and those who are found to be low priority or intentionally homeless are not included in the data.

Although **rough sleepers** (people who sleep outside on streets or in parks, etc) are homeless, they are counted in a different way, as many may not be in contact with local authorities.

Homeless charities also classify some people as **hidden homeless**. Those are individuals who are not counted in official statistics because they are not entitled to help with housing. Many of these people stay in hostels or bed and breakfasts (cheap hotels) or on friends and family's sofas or floors.

DILEMMA: SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO MORE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS?

17 January 2020

WHY ARE PEOPLE HOMELESS?

→ Unable to find affordable housing

People who are out of work or earn very low wages can struggle to afford a place to stay. This is especially a problem in London, which has the most expensive housing in the whole country. The average cost of rent per calendar month in England and Wales increased by 19% from 2007 to 2017. In London, the increase was 29%. Across the same period of time, weekly earnings in the UK fell from £463 in January 2007 to £458 in 2017. So people earn less but have to pay a lot more for their housing.

→ Poverty and unemployment

This is directly connected to the point above. If you don't have much money, you can't afford a place to stay. And the main reason you might not have much money is that you are unemployed or earn very little. Without a job, it is



Escape

Some homeless people have had to flee their homes because they were being abused by partners, parents or others. There are also young homeless people whose families kicked them out because of their sexuality. The Albert Kennedy Trust, an LGBT homeless charity, says that 24% of homeless young people identify as LGBT.

→ Traumatic events

Many homeless people end up without a home because of upsetting events that have happened in their lives. This could be a death in the family, divorce or other major traumas. It can also be difficult for people who served in the military to adjust to civilian life once they leave the armed forces. Some suffer from a condition called post-traumatic stress disorder, which is severe anxiety caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events. Although we don't know exactly how many ex-military personnel are homeless, one charity thinks the number is 13,000.



Leaving prison

People who have recently left prison or long-term care such as in a mental health hospital are often in a vulnerable position. They might not have the support they need to find a home – or the money. They might also fear living alone or without the structure and routine that life in prison or a care home has given them for months or even years.

Drug abuse

Research by homelessness charity Crisis has found that around 30% of homeless people are thought to have a drink or drug addiction. Two-thirds of people without a home say drug or alcohol use was a reason for first becoming homeless. Those who use drugs are seven times more likely to be homeless.

→ Mental health problems

According to the mental health charity Mind: "Housing and mental health are often linked. Poor mental health can make it harder to cope with housing problems, while being homeless or having problems in your home can make your mental health worse." The Big Issue, a magazine produced for homeless people to sell, says: "four in five homeless people suffer from a mental health problem".



DILEMMA: SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO MORE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS?

17 January 2020

GOVERNMENT CUTS

Many experts say the Government's policy of spending cutbacks since 2010 has caused the rapid increase in the homeless population.

Between 2010 and 2015, the UK was ruled by a joint government of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives have ruled alone since 2015, and after they won the general election last December, they will probably stay in power until at least 2024.

Cutbacks to social care and youth services, as well as reductions in welfare (benefit) payments and a lack of affordable housing are thought to have led to the sudden increase in people unable to afford their own home and ending up homeless.

Council spending has fallen by 21% in the last ten years, so there's less money available for local authorities to help.



A homeless shelter in London

SO WHAT IS BEING DONE?

In August of 2018, the then-government announced a £100 million plan to tackle homelessness called the Rough Sleeping Strategy. But soon after it was announced, it became clear half of the promised £100 million had already been committed to homelessness and rough sleeping, while the other half had been shifted from other budgets.

Just before Christmas 2019, the new government made a big commitment: they promised to provide more than £260 million for councils to help combat homelessness.

The funding will be given to local authorities "to support people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless", according to the Government.

But there are no specific details as to how they will achieve that. The announcement simply says: "Councils can use the funding to employ specialists to provide practical advice to vulnerable people to help ensure they are meeting their rent payments, as well as helping them to find long-term stable accommodation."

OPINIONS

"It shames a country as decent and well-off as ours that tonight thousands of people will sleep outside for want of a place to stay. Tragically, people are not just living on the streets in greater numbers, they're dying there too."

- John Healey MP, Labour Party spokesperson on housing



"It cannot be right in the 21st century that people are homeless or having to sleep on our streets, and this Government will work tirelessly to bring this to an end. This new funding

is going to help councils provide better support to homeless people and, importantly, prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place."

- Boris Johnson, prime minister



YES, THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO MORE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS



1. EXPERTS SAY THEY AREN'T DOING ENOUGH

According to many experts, the major programme of cutbacks since 2010 is the biggest cause of the increase in homelessness. If the Government is serious about ending homelessness, they need to spend a lot of money, and let homeless people sleep in the hundreds of thousands of properties lying empty.

2. THE NUMBERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

There are thousands more rough sleepers and more homeless people since 2010. That's no coincidence: it's when the Conservatives came into power. This crisis is their responsibility and it's only getting worse.

3. THEY AREN'T DEALING WITH AFFORDABLE HOUSING

If ordinary people – especially youngsters – can't afford homes, the situation won't get better. The Government needs to build more homes.



NO, THE GOVERNMENT IS ALREADY DOING ENOUGH TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS



1. THE PROBLEM IS BIG AND WILL TAKE TIME

Like all big issues with lots of complicated causes, the UK's homelessness crisis cannot be solved overnight. Politicians need time to fix the situation.

2. THE PM IS COMMITTED

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said "we're committed to expanding rough sleeping and homelessness programmes". His party may have been in power for 10 years, but he has only been PM since last summer.

3. THEY ARE INVESTING IN PREVENTION

The announcement late last year shows the Government cares and is determined to end rough sleeping altogether. They are spending millions on helping people get the support they need to find a permanent home.

DILEMMA: SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO MORE TO TACKLE HOMELESSNESS?

17 January 2020

DISCUSS • ?

Why is homelessness increasing?

DISCUSS • ?

What is the difference between homelessness and rough sleeping?

DISCUSS • ?

What three things do you think the Government could do to help reduce homelessness?

DISCUSS • ?

Would you ever give money to a homeless person who asks for it, or do you think it isn't helpful?

DISCUSS • ?

Is homelessness acceptable in a country like the UK?

DISCUSS • ?

Why do people end up homeless?

DISCUSS • ?

Have you or anyone you know ever been homeless?

DISCUSS • ?

What can you, your family and school do to help the homeless?

DISCUSS • ?

What do you think of the Government's plan to spend £260 million on tackling homelessness?

DISCUSS • ?

Should the Government build more cheap homes for people to rent and buy?