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The Guardian view on rising homelessness: a crisis made in government | Editorial

A sharp rise in the number of households in temporary accommodation in England – which can mean being placed in a Travelodge from week to week, with no kitchen – is a clear signal that the UK’s broken housing system is hitting the poorest people hardest. The latest annual figures show that 157,640 families were homeless in 2022/2023, which is 12.1% higher than before Covid.

One recent report suggested that 440,000 children across the UK sleep on the floor. Such substandard living conditions carry a heavy physical and emotional toll, while moves disrupt education and employment (10.8% of homeless householders are in full-time work). There has also been a sharp rise in the number of homeless people aged 65-74.

From next year, a long-delayed ban on section 21 evictions – when a landlord tells a tenant to leave for no reason other than that they want to sell or re-let a property – will grant tenants some urgently needed new rights. This was a Conservative manifesto pledge and Michael Gove, the housing secretary, has had to fight No 10 to ensure it is kept. That Conservative MPs, 68 of whom are landlords, have succeeded in delaying the reform until now is disgraceful. A huge increase in the number of households who are homeless due to no-fault (section 21) evictions provides the clearest possible evidence of the problem with the law as it stands.

But greedy landlords did not create this problem. Successive governments did through their policy of pumping up house prices – to please voters who view them as investments – while failing to provide for the roughly one-third of the population for whom even the lowest rung of the property ladder is out of reach. While the situation has got drastically worse under the Conservatives, Labour too bears responsibility both for house price inflation and the lack of socially rented homes. The last time that the number of families in temporary accommodation topped 100,000 was in 2004-05.

A combination of new duties for councils, restrictions on right to buy and mortgage subsidies eased the situation. But since 2010, Tory cuts to council budgets, combined with a freeze on housing benefit, have seen it deteriorate sharply, as millions of people have been forced into an under-regulated private rental market that is totally unsuited to providing secure homes for people on low incomes.

This has been a gross failure of public policy. A portion of the colossal wealth generated by the UK’s property market in recent decades should have been reclaimed, through taxation, and directed towards providing homes for those who are excluded from it. Instead, as in other areas such as social care and provision for special educational needs, cash-starved councils are left to pick up the pieces – and pay bills that have spiralled out of control. The gap dividing the housing haves from have-nots is worthy of Scrooge. Shrinking it should be a priority for anyone who cares about social justice. (487 words)