

FRIDAY, 18 OCTOBER 2013

Growing scourge of homelessness

Wealth levels may be increasing around the world but growing numbers of people are going to bed without a roof over their heads. Homelessness is a growing scourge in the modern world. Pope Francis has spoken of how heartbreaking it is that the world today is more concerned about the health of banks than homeless children dying of starvation and cold. "This is happening today. If investments in banks fall, it is a tragedy and people say 'what are we going to do?' but if people die of hunger, have nothing to eat or suffer from poor health, that's nothing. This is our crisis today," said Pope Francis, who organised a reception for 200 homeless people at the Vatican in July. Today, and it breaks my heart to say it, finding a homeless person who has died of cold, is not news. Today, the news is scandals, that is news, but the many children who don't have food - that's not news. This is grave. We can't rest easy while things are this way." The Pope called on the Catholic Church to seek out those who need help the most. This would include the 100,000 million plus homeless people across the world. Latest figures for the UK from the Department for Communities show 13,460 people accepted as being owed a duty relating to homelessness for the quarter to June 2013. This was an increase of 5 per cent on the corresponding quarter for the previous year. 56,210 households were classified as being in temporary accommodation, a nine per cent rise. There have also been growing numbers of rough sleepers. Overcrowding is also growing. A number of charities have been seeking to respond to Pope Francis's challenge. Keith Fernett, the director of Anchor House in east London, tells of a 62 per cent increase in homelessness in London over the past two years, with 6,500 rough sleepers counted. Mr Fernett also tells of the thousands of hidden homeless, people sleeping on friend's sofas and such like. He sees the cuts in welfare, coming about due to the government's austerity agenda, hitting some of the most vulnerable people hardest. "The under 25s are being systematically disenfranchised. The under 35s are only allowed to share a room," said Mr Fernett, who refers to "a tsunami of people" moving from central London -

as a result of things like the housing benefit cap and bedroom tax - to outlying boroughs and other parts of the country. The rents in the centre of the capital are going up with a ripple effect outwards. Even in Newham, where Anchor House is based, and one of the poorest areas in the country, individuals seeking to rent in the private sector are having to pay £150 to £250 a week for one bedroom flats. Operating in Westminster, the Cardinal Hume Centre has seen the effects of the cap on housing benefit, set at £250 a week. In an area where single rooms are being let at £350 a week, this is contributing to people moving out. Mr Fernett describes an inequitable situation, where the rental levels are going up, with many of the jobs available offering only minimum wage at best. "If someone is on minimum wage, most the money will be going on accommodation," said Mr Fernett, who also regularly sees examples of overcrowding in the locality. "There is a lot of overcrowding with 20 or 30 people often living in a four bed house." In Newham, there have been huge cut backs, with the social exclusion budget, which deals with the homeless, reducing by 70 per cent. Indeed, Anchor House is the one remaining provider of support for the homeless that still has a council contract. Even Anchor House has problems due to the lack of facilities to move people onto, so violence levels are increasing at the centre as frustration overflows. Mr Fernett describes a crazy situation whereby individuals with a variety of problems from having been domestically abused to mental health issues come to Anchor House which is expected to support them for £50 a week. The charity is doing remarkably well in this quest, still managing to get 50 people into jobs out of its 119 staying in the past year, but there seems to be a growing realisation that those in government simply are not bothered about these issues. The result at the end of the day seems to be that as all the supports are withdrawn, it becomes more likely that individuals will turn to crime. They then end up in the criminal justice system. So many of those who, if they had received the help needed at the right time, could have got back on their feet and lived independently, instead end up in prison. And for those continually concerned about the cost of everything, this finishes up costing the taxpayer around £40,000 per prisoner a year. What Mr Fernett would like to see is an increase in the level of housing, which means building at least 250,000 units a year. Most of these need to be affordable. He also believes that the term affordable needs a redefinition to take in those on low incomes. At present to be eligible for affordable accommodation often means earning £35,000 a year. Mr Fernett also thinks there needs to be a New York style rent capping

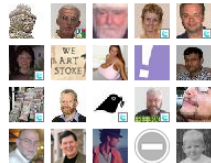
system, to stop the landlords continually raising rents. What is rarely mentioned in the ongoing debate on housing benefit is the amount that is taken up because landlords keep raising the rents. Charity Housing Justice has focused on the damage being done to family life by the bedroom tax. This welfare reform means that people on housing benefit who have a spare bedroom have to either move or see benefit reduced by £60 a month. "In order to avoid having to move, affected tenants have been reported as cutting their food expenses, even to use candlelight instead of electricity," said Alison Gelder, chief executive of Housing Justice. "Moving, as often as not, simply is not an option, as it implies moving far away, because of the severe shortage in affordable housing, and this is deeply unfair to people who have lived for a great number of years in their home - some of them having even raised their children in their flat, the reason why there is a spare bedroom in their home in the first place." Cathy Corcoran, chief executive of the Cardinal Hume Centre, tells how the bedroom tax has left many people in rent arrears, who are now threatened with eviction. "Many of these people have never been in rent arrears before," said Ms Corcoran. "Bedroom tax is affecting many disabled people who need an extra room for care purposes." "More widely, Housing Justice reports growing demands in the area of homelessness. Churches and homelessness projects in our network all have to deal with the growing demand for their help. Soup Runs and drop ins are seeing many more people in need of food, including those with no recourse to public funds and UK nationals whose benefits have been cut or sanctioned. As well as the need for emergency food and support there is a growing gap of places where people can get advice and advocacy, especially households affected by the benefit caps and the bedroom tax," said Alistair Murray, director of projects at Housing Justice. So there is much to be done to combat homelessness in this country and the wider world. The challenge for Church in the UK is to address policies that seem to be disproportionately hitting the poorest people hardest. Politicians seem absorbed with the need to stoke up the housing market whilst failing to understand the growing number of human casualties being created by ill thought out welfare reforms.



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 - ▶ August (5)
 - ▶ July (4)
 - ▶ June (8)
 - ▶ May (7)
 - ▶ April (7)
 - ▶ March (4)
 - ▶ February (5)
 - ▶ January (5)
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- ▶ 2011 (49)
- ▶ 2010 (47)
- ▶ 2009 (39)

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