

Death on the streets: Shock extent of homeless fatalities in Scotland

EXCLUSIVE BY LIAM O'HARE

SHOCKING figures reveal that four homeless people are dying every month on the streets of Glasgow – that's one death each week. The revelations have now prompted the director of one of Scotland's leading homelessness charities to hit out at the "shameful" numbers of rough sleepers dying on the streets of Glasgow.

Figures obtained by the Sunday Herald from Glasgow City Council via a Freedom of Information request reveal that at least 39 homeless people have died in Glasgow in the space of just 10 months.

The deaths occurred between May 2016 and March 2017 with the council admitting that the numbers likely underestimate the full scale of the scandal. Details of the number of deaths in other major Scottish cities are currently unavailable.

"Each one of these cases represents a human life lost too soon," said Graeme Brown, director of Shelter Scotland. "We know that homeless people, in particular those who sleep rough, have worse health than the general population and are far more likely to die young."

"It is simply shameful that this is happening in 21st-century Scotland. Sadly, we know that homelessness is still far from fixed in Glasgow and across Scotland today."

The figures were collated through a critical incident group which was set up in October 2016 but backdated to May that same year.

However, the council admits that it may not include all homeless deaths in the city "such as deaths of rough sleepers who are not from Glasgow or not engaged with our services".

Shelter Scotland estimates that as many as 5,000 people sleep rough in

Scotland every year, while over 10,000 households were in temporary accommodation last year.

Following the recent local elections, Labour lost control of Glasgow City Council for the first time in nearly 40 years. Brown has called on the new SNP administration in the City Chambers to take urgent action to address the problem.

"We urgently need real leadership and action across local and national government to get to grips with this problem," he said.

"Safe, secure and affordable housing is fundamental to the health and well-being of all of us as individuals and Scotland as a country. We hope the new administration in the city will prioritise tackling this challenge head on as a matter of urgency."

Out of the 39 recent deaths in Glasgow, only five were over the age of 60, with the vast majority aged between 25 and 59.

One of those was Matthew Bloomer, 28, who was found dead outside the TJ Hughes department store on Argyle Street in Glasgow's Trongate in March after spending the night outside in freezing conditions.

At the time police said they were treating his death as "unexplained".

In 2015, 70 homelessness caseworkers from Glasgow conducted a 17-week strike to demand better pay and conditions.

In January of this year, the Sunday Herald reported how staff in Glasgow City Council's community teams complained of being overworked and understaffed. They said they were forced to turn people away without help because they have no accommodation to offer.

The rising problem of homelessness has led to heightened campaigning on the issue, with the graffiti "No More Homeless Deaths" seen daubed around the city. The sight of people, and sometimes couples, sleeping in doorways



throughout the city centre has become increasingly common over the last year, with beggars often on every street corner in the part of the city stretching from Central Station to Sauchiehall Street.

The campaign group Homelessness Shame Glasgow had engaged in lobbying and direct actions to raise the profile of the issue, as well as organising food and blanket distributions to people on the street.

It has also called on empty buildings to be opened up to rough sleepers in

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order to protect them from the elements and prevent any future deaths.

Sean Baillie, an activist with the campaign, warned that the figures obtained by FOI are "a scary indication of the scale of the crisis Glasgow is suffering".

He said: "Political pressure and action is desperately needed. The previous local government did all they could to cover up and dismiss the scale of the issue. Our hope is that with the change in leadership within the council, much more will be done."

"However, we will not be taking a

back seat and giving any new councillors coming breathing space to settle in. We intend to continue to ramp up our actions to ensure that everyone in the City Chambers knows that this must be a priority in order to prevent the devastating loss of lives in our city."

Glasgow City Council says it receives around 6,000 formal homelessness applications each year, with 2,000 people housed in temporary accommodation at any one time.

Commenting in response to the high number of deaths, a spokesman

Scenes of suffering and deprivation are growing increasingly prevalent in Glasgow city centre – with 39 homeless people dying on the streets within the past 10 months

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT PERRY



for Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership said: "These figures sadly reflect the harmful lifestyles and risk taking behaviours of some people who are affected by homelessness."

"In Glasgow there is a wide range of support available for vulnerable people and we are looking to implement new services that are relevant to those affected by homelessness, particularly in the city centre."

"We do whatever we can to engage with vulnerable people but offers of support can be declined."

'I've been kicked in the head, urinated on, my hands turned blue with the cold ... no wonder people like me are dying'

IF THEY AREN'T BEING BEATEN BY DRUNKS, THEY ARE SO COLD THEY TRY TO GET ARRESTED TO SPEND A NIGHT IN A CELL. PETER SWINDON SPEAKS TO ROUGH SLEEPERS IN SCOTLAND'S BIGGEST CITY. WARNING: REPORT CONTAINS DISTURBING DETAILS

VIOLENCE, drugs and the cold are killing a record number of homeless people in Scotland's biggest city, according to those who sleep rough. Figures obtained by the Sunday Herald following a Freedom of Information request show at least 39 have died on the streets of Glasgow in the last 10 months alone – that's one person every single week.

Jessica Jennings, 23, has been sleeping rough in the city for nearly a year, finding refuge under cardboard behind a bin in a filthy lane.

She said: "It's very dangerous at night on these streets. I was asleep and someone ran up and kicked me on the head, for no reason. They were just drunk at the weekend. People urinate on you. Some people carry knives and all sorts around with them. If you don't give them what they want it can get very dangerous."

Jennings says she fears she'll die on the streets because it's so cold at night. She said: "It's horrible. Literally, your hands turn blue it's so cold. A few nights ago I was going to go to hospital because I was so cold it hurt. I couldn't breathe properly. My chest was tight. The next day I was so stiff from the cold I couldn't walk."

"I worry every day that I'm going to die on the street. I walk past people and some of them do look dead. I'm surprised that the number is so low. I think there's probably more. It's very easy to die on the streets."

"It might sound weird but it could also be depression. If you're not looking after yourself you go in to deep depression. You get no help. You just give up. Your body just fails."

"People need more help. I would say there's hundreds on the streets of Glasgow. I see a new homeless face every day. They're everywhere. Every door. Every street. Not even just in the city centre. There are so many homeless people now."

One homeless man who gave his name as "Paddy" said he has been on the streets for three years.

The 42-year-old from Glasgow's east end said: "I've known people who've died from hypothermia. There's a lack of sleeping bags. I might get handed one from the street team and then leave it lying and it'll be stolen. Then I'll go back to the street team but there will be none left. You just have to sleep in a doorway under cardboard."

Paddy also said violence is a problem, particularly at weekends when drunk



Jessica Jennings, above, and 'Paddy', left, spoke of abuse and assaults on Glasgow's streets

revellers roam the streets. Some even film the assaults on mobile phones and post the footage online.

Men described by Paddy as "the young team" also exploit Glasgow's sectarian tensions as they abuse homeless people. "They'll offer you a few pounds for a bottle or a couple of cans to sing The Sash if they're Rangers fans or The Fields of Athenry if they're Celtic fans," Paddy said.

"People walk by of a different persuasion and hear us singing it and they come back and kick f**k out of us. You know what Glasgow's like. Sometimes we're better off in prison so we get ourselves arrested to get to jail. When it's really cold and the sleeping bags aren't helping we just shout and bawl at the police and get arrested. At least in Barlinnie you've got a room with a bed and heating. It's a revolving door. You just have to carry on regardless."

One woman from Ayrshire, who asked not to be named, has been sleeping rough for several years.

She has a tent and a sleeping bag but wouldn't reveal the location because she was afraid other homeless people would overhear her.

The 42-year-old said: "They're dying because they're taking drugs. It's white valium and kit (heroin). You get a bag of 25 white pills for a tenner. They're drinking, they're taking drugs, and they're sleeping in the cold. It's not a good combination. I have a drink problem but I don't take drugs."

She is a mother and a grandmother but hasn't seen her children for many years and hasn't met her grandchildren.

"I just want my family back," she added. "If I could get a house I'd get to see them. I've been in every hostel. I'm on waiting lists. They're knocking houses down. Why are they not letting us stay there instead of demolishing them?"