Adrian
on the Strand, near Waterloo Bridge

Adrian, 60, from Brighton, and a former forklift truck driver, has been homeless for 30 years. He has one 33-year-old son in Newcastle. A hostel would cost him £50 per week. He has seen more homelessness in central London in recent years.

Nicola
at Victoria Station

Nicola Hawthorn, 31, originally from London Fields, east London, sleeps rough around Victoria Station. She lost both her parents and had been homeless in Sheffield before moving to London six months ago. She claims to have been on the Hackney Council housing waiting list since she was 18. She finds the streets busy nowadays and it is difficult as people do not carry cash.

Gary
on the Strand

Gary, 39, with his dog Kenji, 20 months, sits outside Pret on the Strand in central London. Originally from Glasgow, he has worked in the hospitality trade and has been homeless in London since 2018. He has seen organised crime move on to the streets of London.

Sebastian
in Trafalgar Square

Sebastian, 40, suffered an abusive childhood and got addicted to amphetamines as a teenager. He then got hooked on heroin after he started sleeping rough. Now two years clean, he says the hardest part of quitting is having to learn how to live a normal life again. "It's hard. You are starting your life from the beginning."

JAMIE LORIMAN FOR THE TELEGRAPH

'If we don't address the homeless emergency, then we will end up with cardboard cities again by winter'

The number of rough sleepers in London has hit a record high. *Melissa Lawford* reports on the crisis in the capital

As the light fades in Christchurch Gardens, a man, hooded with a soiled blanket hanging across his shoulders, rummages through a bin. Another is having a violent argument with an invisible enemy under a street lamp. A drunk retches loudly into a flowerbed.

Welcome to Westminster, the gilded backdrop for a crisis that mixes mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, migration and homelessness into a horror show for tourists.

It is home to the Houses of Parliament and one of the richest boroughs in the country – but also where the number of rough sleepers is highest.

Between April and June this year, there were 752 rough sleepers in Westminster, up 39pc compared to a year earlier, according to the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (Chain). Of these, a third were newcomers, a 47pc surge year-on-year. The number considered to be living permanently on the streets of Westminster was up 55pc.

SW1 is just the heart of a growing problem across London. In the year to March, the number of people sleeping rough in the capital hit a record 11,993, some 58pc higher than in 2015, according to the Chain.

The pattern is expanding nationwide, too. Since lockdowns ended, rough sleeping has rocketed, soaring by 60pc between 2021 and 2023, according to official data based on a single night in autumn. The Chain data show that London has hit an all-time high, and the national level of rough sleeping is closing in on its own grim record.

On the ground in Westminster is a chilling embodiment of years of policy failure and a real world problem that could prove an impossible task for the Government to fix.

'In a strange way, you're part of a community'

A young woman in her 20s is lying just off the pavement, eyes closed, beside the lift in the entrance to Tottenham Court Road Tube station on a Thursday lunchtime. She is not wearing shoes, and the skin of her heel is visible through a hole in her worn sock.

Leah Adams, an outreach worker at The Connection at St Martin's, a local homelessness charity, asks if she is OK. Adams knows her – she has been sleeping rough in Westminster for a couple of years. At a distance she could be a child, but up close her face shows the effect of years on the street.

Adams is about to buy the woman some shoes but then a man appears and lifts her up off the ground, and with one arm around her they disappear into the crowd. They are friends, Adams says – she leaves them be.

The sleeping spot was a careful calculation. Under CCTV cameras, in front of passers-by and at midday, it was one of the safest places a woman could choose to lie down in central London. The City of Westminster is Britain's long- established capital of homelessness. Of the nearly 12,000 rough sleepers recorded across Greater London in 2023-24, 2,102 were in the borough – more than double in Camden, which had the second highest total.

It has had the highest number of rough sleepers of any local authority in every year since at least 2010, according to the Government's snapshot data.

But what is particularly remarkable about Westminster is the number of long-term homeless people. Between April and June, there were 624 people in Greater London who were classed as living on the streets, according to the Chain. Nearly one in four of them, a total of 143, were in Westminster.

The borough has long been a magnet for the homeless. "The vast majority of the people that are sleeping rough in Westminster are not from Westminster. They're from other parts of London, the UK and the world. They're migrating into central London because it's recognisable," says Pam Orchard, the chief executive of The Connection.

Westminster's landmarks and heavy flow of tourists mean there are more opportunities to make money from begging. There is more cash-in-hand and casual work in the near-24-hour local economy. The nightlife makes people feel safer and the local outreach services are excellent. Orchard says as a result, there is a chicken and egg effect because people know there are other homeless people there. "In a strange way, you're part of a community," she adds.

Broadening profile of homelessness

The Chain data on the borough paint a clear picture of how rough sleeping intersects with Britain's multiple socio-economic problems.

A quarter of rough sleepers in Westminster have problems with alcohol and 29pc have drug problems. More than half (51pc) have mental health issues while 29pc have previously been in prison and 13pc have been in the care system.

Of the 651 rough sleepers in Westminster whose nationality was known between April and June, 43pc were from the UK, according to the Chain. Just over 35pc were from Europe, with the largest chunk (21.4pc) coming from Romania. A further 14pc and 6pc were from Africa and Asia respectively.

Many of the rough sleepers from outside Europe are refugees who have been evicted by the Home Office.

Between September 2023 and January 2024, the number of refugees sleeping rough in London after they had been evicted by the Home Office more than tripled, rising from 93 to 311, according to London councils. Of these, 90pc had been granted asylum, but they did not have enough time to find accommodation before they were evicted. The Home Office gives them just 28 days' notice.

"Those were people who had just been granted refugee status who ended up on the streets immediately," says Emma Haddad, chief executive at St Mungo's.

Immigrants can also be more at risk of homelessness because they do not have support networks of family and friends to fall back on if they are hit by evictions from private landlords. Those without immigration status can also get trapped on the streets because they cannot access housing benefits.

But the profile of rough sleepers is also getting much broader. "Since Covid, I have seen more people coming to the streets who you would not expect," says Mick Clarke, chief executive of The Passage, a Westminster homelessness charity. He notes cancer patients who have had to take time off work for treatment and a professional dancer at the end of their career.

"We've also seen a rise in female people who are street homeless. There's been a rise in domestic violence," says Clarke. Rough sleepers are also getting younger, he adds.

'Canary in the coal mine'

Sebastian used to be one of Westminster's rough sleepers. Now aged 40, he was a drug addict for 24 years of his life and spent the best part of a decade in and out of sleeping rough.

"For me, the most important thing I needed was to have heroin. Without heroin, I could do absolutely nothing," he says.

Today, he is clean and about to graduate in a course that means he can support other people struggling with homelessness and substance abuse. He will be working on the front line of a crisis that is at breaking point.

The reality for people on the streets is a brutal one. But what it says about Britain's economy is just as sinister.

"Homelessness is the canary in the coal mine," says Lord Adebowale, chairman of the NHS Confederation and a member of the Kerslake Commission on rough sleeping. "It is seen as a political issue. In truth, it's simply an indicator of failing public services, dysfunction and poor value for taxpayer money." It is a problem that Labour is desperate to fix, with a promise to boost social housebuilding, plans for a new inter-ministerial group on homelessness and a manifesto pledge to "put Britain back on track to ending homelessness".

But it is a manifesto promise that echoes a similar 2019 Tory pledge that went nowhere. Details on the inter-ministerial group are so far scant, there is no talk of funding, and campaigners are sceptical of whether Labour can deliver on its housing promises.

"I haven't seen the Government actually making the commitment to social rent that is really needed," says Lord Best, chairman of the Affordable Housing Commission.

Housebuilders have warned Labour's target of 1.5m homes over five years will be impossible to achieve and the housing associations who build the vast bulk of social rent homes have warned they do not have the money to ramp up development.

Without a cash injection, local authorities will be unable to fulfil their existing homelessness duties, adds Jasmine Basran, head of policy and campaigns at Crisis.

Unless the root causes are addressed, more people will fall through the net – and once they do, rough sleeping can often become entrenched.

"My fear is that if we don't start really addressing the emergency and look at how we can prevent this happening in the first place, then we will end up with cardboard cities again, with winter approaching," says Clarke.

Housing crisis

In March 2020, the Government took the unprecedented step of telling councils to move all people at risk of rough sleeping into accommodation, a policy dubbed "everyone in". Combined, across 2020/21 and 2021/22, the Government provided an extra £1.65bn in taxpayer cash to tackle homelessness and local authorities used the hotel rooms that were empty during the pandemic to house rough sleepers.

"It worked until it stopped," says Adebowale. The number of people on the street plunged but rocketed again when the policy ended, the extra funding disappeared, and the hotel rooms were returned to their old uses. But hotel rooms were never really the solution to rough sleeping. The root cause of Britain's homelessness crisis is a chronic shortage of homes, says Clarke.

"We have largely abandoned social or council housing at rents that someone leaving home on the first rung of a career could afford. This is economically stupid," says Adebowale.

A national slump in social housebuilding at the same time that around 2m council homes were sold off via Right to Buy means that in the 50 years to 2022, the proportion of social rent homes in England fell from 29pc to 16pc.

Low-income earners are stuck in the private rented sector – a big problem in the post-pandemic era when rents have soared at record rates, spiralling out of control in proportion to wages, just after Covid lockdowns derailed the economy and inflation hit a 41-year high.

"Additional numbers of people have been made homeless as a result of losing jobs and entire businesses during the pandemic. We also have the additional and largely underestimated impact of the pandemic on mental health," says Adebowale.

Austerity funding cuts mean local authorities and health services have less bandwidth to make early interventions with people who have mental health problems, just as the numbers balloon.

But Britain's economy is also pushing more unexpected people towards homelessness. "We're seeing more and more people who still have jobs, but their rent has just become absolutely unaffordable, and they've lost the roof over their head," says Haddad.

Rough sleeping is only the tip of the iceberg. In the year to March 2024, the number of households living in temporary accommodation surged by 12pc to a new record high of 117,450, according to Crisis. Councils' spending on temporary accommodation rose by 29pc to hit £2.29bn.

"It's a real crisis, and I think it is at breaking point," says Clarke.

'These are people who survived terrible things'

Something that is simultaneously impressive and depressing in Westminster is the level of services available for rough sleepers.

Every evening, St Mungo's delivers a Street Outreach Service (SOS) to find and register rough sleepers, assess their needs and facilitate referrals for accommodation and support. Westminster City Council provides around 1,000 Supported Housing Pathway beds – short-term accommodation with tailored support.

At The Connection, rough sleepers can shower, wash their clothes and charge their phones. There is a canteen that serves hot meals, a computer room and nursing beds where people can get vaccinations and wound care from nurses who visit twice a week. Why are these people so stuck? "You know all of the horrible stories that you see in the media about babies and small children dying at the hands of abusive parents and social services and the police and the school system for one reason or another haven't been able to intervene? The people that you see sleeping rough in central London are often the people that survived that," says Orchard.

Sebastian himself had an abusive childhood. He grew up in a small city in Poland with an alcoholic father. "He beat me, he beat my mother, he beat my brother. I remember when I was seven, I understood that life was c---," he says.

At 14, Sebastian started taking drugs and quickly became addicted to amphetamines. He moved to the UK in 2004 and started working as a handyman but his addiction meant he spent his first night sleeping rough in 2011. For the best part of the next decade, he would be in and out of homelessness. It was on the streets in the UK that he got addicted to heroin.

Many rough sleepers have had incredibly poor experiences of the support system in the past, so they have become intrinsically suspicious of it, says Orchard. The company that comes with rooms in hostels – namely other rough sleepers who are often suffering from mental health problems and addictions – can also be a deterrent.

"We've had clients who go into accommodation but sleep on the floor rather than sleep in a bed because it is so entrenched for them, they have just been on the streets for so long," says Adams. When Sebastian heard about The Connection, his friends on the street warned him not to go. "I lost a lot of people on the street and it's not because they didn't have help. They just weren't ready."

Substance abuse

As in Sebastian's case, substance abuse is a major part of the national rough sleeping story – partly in terms of how they get there, but also what keeps them stuck. And the problem is getting more severe.

"Society views drugs as the problem and actually drugs are the solution for someone who hasn't developed coping mechanisms for their traumas," says Adams.

She and her colleagues sometimes have to call emergency services two or three times a day when they find rough sleepers who have overdosed on Westminster's streets.

Spice and crack cocaine are highly prevalent. So is alcohol and street heroin.

London is still a long way from America's opioid crisis but outreach workers say fentanyl and other synthetic opiates are on the rise. Nitazenes have become more common on the streets in the last couple of years, says Leon Nicolson, deputy operations manager at Turning Point's Westminster branch.

Nitazenes are a type of synthetic opiate that was developed in the 1950s as a painkiller but which were never approved for medical use because they were so strong and addictive. Now, they are man-made in laboratories and are increasingly being mixed with street heroin. Because nitazenes are much stronger, they make overdoses more likely.

The homeless community is targeted by organised drug gangs, says Nicolson. Some rough sleepers sell on prescribed medications such as the epilepsy and anxiety medication pregabalin and sedatives such as benzos, says Jennifer Peckett, of Turning Point. Mostly, people take a combination of everything. "Polysubstance misuse is most common. It's hard to say it's just heroin or just crack because it depends on the supply available. It can change rapidly," adds Nicolson.

'Nothing short of a national scandal'

In a back alley strewn with rat poison boxes in Soho, a man in his early 50s has built a makeshift house out of pallet boxes just beside a drain. Rough sleeping is interwoven with the local economy – and many business owners are on the front line. The Heart of London Business Alliance (Holba) has a team that clears up doorsteps in central London every morning in the wake of rough sleepers.

"We receive calls on a daily basis, primarily from shops and hospitality businesses which need to open their doors in the morning. And we know the hotspots, so some businesses don't even need to call," says Ros Morgan, the chief executive of Holba. Among businesses, there are mixed feelings of apathy and frustration. "It has been going on for decades. These businesses are paying some of the highest business rates in the country, and yet this is a daily occurrence that is affecting their day to day," says Morgan.

The Government knows it needs to act. A housing department spokesman said: "Homelessness levels have sky-rocketed and this is nothing short of a national scandal."

The Government is pressing ahead with the Renters' Reform Bill, first introduced under the Tories, which will scrap Section 21 so-called "no-fault evictions". It has also begun to overhaul the planning system to unlock what it says will be "the biggest increase in social and affordable homebuilding in a generation to stop people becoming homeless in the first place".

But landlords have warned that rental reform will reduce the supply of homes to rent even more. And even if Labour can truly unlock housebuilding, it will take decades to ease the pressure on costs. "You've got to keep building ahead of demand to get the prices down. That's a 25-year run before you really get an impact on the actual cost of buying and renting," says Best.

Angela Rayner, the Deputy Prime Minister, will also chair a dedicated Inter-Ministerial Group tasked with ending homelessness.

This policy is an echo of the Rough Sleepers Unit set up by former prime minister Tony Blair in 1998, which has widely been hailed as a success story. The unit reported directly to the prime minister and had a target to slash rough sleeping by two thirds by 2002. Headed by former Shelter deputy director Baroness Louise Casey, the unit met its target a year early, and numbers stayed low for the rest of the decade – until things fell apart in the years after the financial crisis.

Since then, successive Tory governments promised to end rough sleeping to little avail. In London, Mayor Sadiq Khan has quadrupled City Hall's rough sleeping budget since 2016 and has made a promise to end rough sleeping by 2030 – yet homelessness is at a record high.

Dozens of people set up camp on a green space close to Park Lane in Mayfair earlier this year, just yards from an Aston Martin showroom, prestigious hotels such as The Dorchester, and Marble Arch. Transport for London (TfL), which is run by Mr Khan, is now seeking a possession order for the area, which would force the homeless residents to move.

A spokesman for the Mayor of London said: "No one should have to sleep rough on our country's streets, so it's shameful that numbers are rising in London and across the country. The mayor is committed to doing everything in his power to help as many people as possible off the streets and into more secure accommodation."

There were two key reasons for the Rough Sleepers Unit's success, says Crisis's Basran. First, it worked across government departments. Second, as well as bringing rough sleeping down, its work was integrated with wider measures to tackle poverty.

If Rayner is to shift the dial, she will have to pick major fights with various government departments to address some of the massive inconsistencies in Britain's approach to rough sleeping. In addition to Home Office evictions, other glaring own goals are prison leavers released with nowhere to go and insufficient support for people leaving the care system.

Everyone agrees that prevention is key, because once people get onto the streets they become far harder to help.

Even once Sebastian had found his way to The Connection, it took him several years before he could commit to getting clean.

"I was so tired, like a zombie," he says. "You want to do something but your body says no."

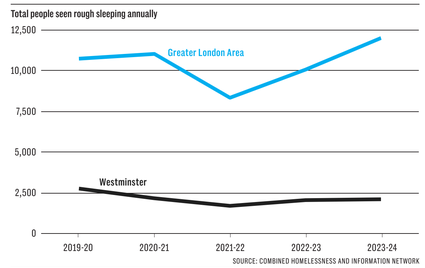
On Sept 8 2022, the day Elizabeth II died, a switch flicked inside him. "I said, this is my date." He went straight to Turning Point and got a prescription for methadone.

Getting sober has not solved all his problems. "Even if you take the methadone, you are still in your head, you still feel your pain," says Sebastian.

"The biggest problem is that when you quit everything, you are learning to eat, sleep, go to the shop, do your laundry – simple things. It's hard. You are starting your life from the beginning."

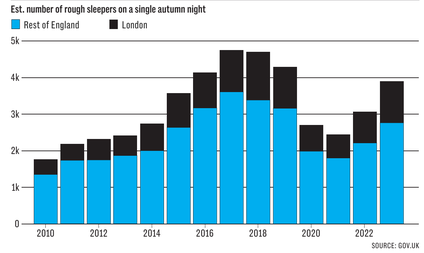
But two years on, he is about to become a support worker with Turning Point. "This service is the first thing in my life that is what I want to do, not just something that I'm doing because I cannot choose a different way."

London has surpassed pre-pandemic rough sleeping highs



SOURCE: COMBINED HOMELESSNESS AND INFORMATION NETWORK

Rough sleepers are overrepresented in the capital



SOURCE: GOV.UK