

Why some eastern Europeans are driven to sleep rough



*Until the end of 2017, the Home Office was deporting homeless eastern Europeans. **Barbara Dorodowicz (East European Resource Centre)** explains why the precarious nature of the job market – made worse by the uncertainties about Brexit – has forced some eastern Europeans to sleep rough. Employers have exploited the uncertainty to cut pay and pit migrants against each other.*

Quietly, in November 2015, the government began to deport eastern Europeans who were sleeping rough in the UK. This practice was regarded as highly dubious from a legal and ethical point of view by migrant organisations and legal practitioners. It was [finally stopped](#) in December 2017 as a result of a legal challenge.

There are a number of possible explanations for the prevalence of rough sleeping among eastern Europeans. Let's start with work. Our intelligence – based on 3,000 Eastern European users we have worked with since the failed EU membership negotiations conducted by David Cameron in February 2016 – indicates that 82% of households earn below £10,000 a year. Exploitation is a common problem, with some workers earning as little as £50 per week. Unfortunately, existing barriers to formal employment, such as low levels of English skills or lack of knowledge of the British labour market, are aggravated by Brexit in three ways.



A rough sleeper in Primrose Hill, London, 2014. Face blurred to protect privacy. Photo: [Ian Livesey](#) via a [CC-BY 2.0 licence](#)

Firstly, some employers discriminate against Eastern Europeans by withdrawing job offers because of alleged uncertainty of their future immigration status. The 'right to work' introduced by the Immigration Act 2016 provides a handy excuse, as employers have an obligation to check the immigration status of any applicant. Secondly, workers report a worsening of working terms and conditions which is linked to employers' attempt to exploit Brexit uncertainties in order to lower wages by, among other things, withholding annual leave and sickness pay, or withholding a proportion of wages altogether. Workers hear that they would have to 'leave the UK anyway' and should be grateful for what they get. Thirdly, the Brexit discourse has provided an opportunity to vent anti-immigrant and populist views that some individuals have taken up with considerable enthusiasm. The resulting hate speech is used to intimidate Eastern European workers, and pit them against other ethnic minority colleagues, which affects their confidence, discourages them from seeking help and promotes the acceptance of worsening pay and work conditions.

Low and worsening incomes are contributing to housing poverty among the most disadvantaged eastern Europeans. Multiple occupancy houses, typically rented out without proper tenancy agreements and thus vulnerable to abuse by rogue landlords, are common. In-work poor families rent beds in sheds, and single men are often forced to explore 'hot-bedding' (renting a bed in shifts, usually eight hours long). Rough sleeping and camping in parks has been seen as a valid option for Eastern European labourers who earn so little that they cannot meet both housing costs and financial obligations towards their families back home.

The recently-challenged policy of administratively removing EU rough sleepers from the UK, regardless of whether they meet treaty obligations by being economically active, has worsened in-work and housing poverty. The risk of being removed has encouraged disadvantaged Eastern Europeans to seek precarious solutions, such as employment-tied accommodation or cash-in-hand informal arrangements often found through networks of fellow expats. We have also noticed increased use of the so-called franchise model, whereby employment agency workers are forced to provide work as self-employed traders – thus being stripped of employee rights such as paid holidays or sick leave. Our worry is that certain service industries, mainly cleaning, catering and domestic care, seem to be dominated by business models based on those and similarly unclear worker statuses. Women in particular are at risk of exploitation as they often need to build work around caring responsibilities, opt for part-time work, and take cash-in-hand temporary jobs that often become permanent despite the informal nature of this work.

Work, and income more broadly, is fundamental for EU nationals not only because of their welfare but also because of their immigration situation. Following the December 2017 agreement between the British government and the European Commission, we have more certainty about the future immigration status of EEA nationals in the UK post-Brexit. Despite the government's declarations that economic activity and income won't be taken into account in the new EEA settled status, we believe that evidence of work would make it much easier for Eastern Europeans to not only obtain new documents regulating their stay but also to access essential health and social services. For now, disadvantaged Eastern Europeans often struggle to prove their right to reside and habitual residency in the UK, which are essential tests introduced with the welfare reform in 2014. As a result, those living in in-work poverty have no safety net if things go wrong. As people cannot access support services, they are even more reliant on exploitative work and cheap, substandard housing. Brexit is unlikely to improve their situation.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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