

'Never. A child should never sleep on the street.'

Drawing on the experience of children living in emergency shelters in Brussels



By **Sarah de Liamchine**, Chief Executive, Samusocial Brussels

A child should never have to sleep on the streets. Yet one in four people accommodated by Samusocial is a child. To mark International Children's Rights Day, Samusocial launched a campaign in autumn 2025 to raise awareness of the reality faced by children experiencing homelessness. The campaign also calls for urgent and structural measures to ensure that emergency accommodation centres provide dignified accommodation that is appropriate to children's needs.

In Brussels, the growing number of children experiencing homelessness is an alarming reality. The latest count carried out by Bruss'Help in November 2024 identified 9,777 "people without a home", including 1,678 children and adolescents. In just two years, their number has increased by 72%.

Against this backdrop, Samusocial is currently the main organisation in the Brussels-Capital Region providing emergency accommodation for families throughout the year. At Samusocial, one in four people accommodated is a child. Every day, nearly 500 people in families sleep in a Samusocial bed. Mothers who have just left maternity wards with their newborns, young children and adolescents, often accompanied by a lone mother: this increasingly prevalent reality is part of the daily experience faced by Samusocial teams.

With a capacity of 564 places for families (as of 23 July 2026), provision remains far from sufficient: during 2025, 7,203 people in families could not be accommodated due to a lack of places. At times, this figure reaches 100 people per day, and it is increasing exponentially, causing growing concern.

"We are not able to accept every request for accommodation. We are supposed to deal with emergencies. But when everything is an emergency, how do you decide what comes first? It's hard, especially when there are children. These children didn't ask for any of this."

Emie, social worker in an emergency accommodation centre for families.

While emergency accommodation centres are tasked with providing shelter and supporting families towards a pathway out of homelessness, they cannot erase the consequences of instability. A lack of privacy disrupted schooling, difficult life circumstances and exposure to violence all contribute to an environment in which children grow up without their fundamental needs being fully met.

Protecting children therefore requires a more comprehensive approach. Although emergency accommodation remains essential, it is crucial to adapt support to children's specific needs in order to provide an environment conducive to their development. Protecting children means, above all, guaranteeing their fundamental right to a stable and fulfilling childhood.

I. Lone mothers, often victims of intimate partner and/or domestic violence

“My father had hit my mother on the head, and she started bleeding, so we decided to leave.”

Omar, 10 years old.

At Samusocial, almost 70% of families accommodated are lone mothers with children. More than one third of these women have fled intimate partner and/or domestic violence, losing their home overnight and, in some cases, their right to reside.

They are then forced to turn to Samusocial's already saturated emergency services, which are often ill-equipped to meet their needs for safety and stability. These family ruptures, frequently marked by violence, profoundly weaken the parental unit and disrupt children's lives, undermining their emotional security and wellbeing.

In situations of acute distress, these mothers must shoulder sole responsibility for their children while also dealing with complex administrative and legal procedures: filing a complaint, looking for housing, renewing or regularising their residence permit, and so on. Many of these children, forced to take on significant responsibilities, grow up too quickly: they accompany their parents to administrative appointments, act as interpreters and take on responsibilities far beyond what would be expected for their age. Women and children therefore need specific forms of reception and support, which can sometimes be difficult to provide in an emergency accommodation centre.

II. Growing up in emergency accommodation: conditions that are not suited to children

Emergency accommodation centres, originally designed to provide temporary shelter, sometimes become places where children live and grow up – and, in some cases, are even born. Yet these spaces are not designed to accommodate families over the longer term.

“I don't want to stay here for the rest of my life, actually.”

Sofia, 9 years old.

Children's daily lives are profoundly disrupted: they cannot invite friends over or celebrate their birthdays with their peers. There is no accessible kitchen where they can prepare their own meals, and no evening bath. This fragmented daily life affects the parent-child relationship, particularly for younger children, for whom such rituals provide essential anchors.

This is compounded by structural instability: frequent moves, changes of school, and the regular departure and arrival of new friends. These repeated disruptions deprive children of a reassuring routine, which is nevertheless essential to their wellbeing. In this temporary and cramped environment, where communal living is imposed and family life is disrupted, children lack stability and privacy, while opportunities to flourish are restricted.

Other fundamental needs are also difficult to meet. Communal meals do not always reflect families' habits or needs, while snacks, which are an essential part of children's daily routines, receive no structural funding. Every year, Samusocial therefore spends more than €25,000 (excluding VAT) on purchasing snacks for children accommodated in its centres.

Early childhood is a particularly sensitive issue. The “first 1,000 days” are a crucial period for a child's physical, emotional and social development, with lasting consequences for their future. Yet emergency accommodation conditions often struggle to meet the specific needs of very young children. In 2025, 353 babies under one year old were nevertheless accommodated by Samusocial.

To respond to these needs, Samusocial has established a dedicated Early Childhood Unit to support parents and promote young children's development. Its work includes facilitating access to childcare, monitoring vaccinations and preventing health problems, providing occasional childcare and distributing appropriate equipment such as pushchairs, cots, bottles and clothing.

Beyond issues relating to accommodation conditions, some children have specific needs that cannot be adequately addressed: physical or mental health issues, discharge from hospital, autism spectrum disorders, Down syndrome or physical disabilities, among others.

III. School: a constant thread in an unstable daily life

In Belgium, education is compulsory from the age of five, including for children in an irregular administrative situation. Children accommodated in Samusocial's family centres therefore attend school.

“We're afraid people will make fun of us. That's how it is.”

Cristiano, 9 years old.

In a daily life marked by instability, school often represents a stable and structured point of reference, as well as a source of social connection. It can even become a driver of solidarity and collective mobilisation when networks of parents come together to support families experiencing hard-

ship, for example by providing school materials or organising transport.

However, living in emergency accommodation can undermine children's educational pathways. Uncertainty, frequent moves and the difficulties they experience on a daily basis affect their concentration, emotional wellbeing and sense of security, increasing the risk of disengagement from school. Many children are also reluctant to talk about their situation for fear of how others may perceive them. Some pupils feel embarrassed or even ashamed to discuss their circumstances, which can undermine their self-esteem.

Moreover, despite compulsory education being free of charge in Belgium, many costs continue to place a heavy burden on families experiencing poverty, including those accommodated in emergency centres: school supplies, school meals, extracurricular activities such as cultural outings, school camps and trips, lunchtime supervision, sports equipment and so on. According to the Ligue des familles, these costs amounted to several hundred euros for a primary school pupil and could exceed €1,000 for a secondary school pupil at the start of the 2024–2025 school year.

Transport costs are also a barrier. Because they are unable to provide the required administrative documents (identity card, passport or temporary residence permit), many children are not eligible for reduced fares. For just one Samusocial accommodation centre, these costs amount to more than €30,000 per year (excluding VAT).

As a result, the most vulnerable children – for whom school should provide a fundamental point of stability – paradoxically find themselves furthest from fully enjoying their right to education.

Not having the required school materials, missing out on a school trip, a hot meal or an educational excursion is not simply a financial difficulty: these forms of deprivation contribute to a sense of exclusion and injustice that can have a lasting impact on children's self-esteem and educational trajectories.

IV. Samusocial calls for urgent and structural measures

Because no child should ever have to sleep on the street, emergency accommodation remains essential. However, in its current form, it cannot

provide an environment conducive to children's development.

Beyond the need to address the root causes of exclusion by strengthening prevention policies – including simplifying asylum procedures, strengthening social support and investing in a structural policy for affordable and sustainable housing – it is also essential to guarantee dignified accommodation and support adapted to children's needs.

In light of these alarming findings, Samusocial Brussels calls on public authorities to:

- **Strengthen support for women experiencing violence and their children, including effective access to psychological care;**
- **Adapt accommodation to children's needs and provide appropriate psychosocial support;**
- **Provide appropriate support for early childhood, including suitable accommodation for mothers and newborns leaving maternity wards, and ensure structural funding for existing services;**
- **Support the education of accommodated children by ensuring free access to education, school meals and transport.**

Protecting children is not simply about providing them with a roof for the night: it means guaranteeing the stability they need to develop, enabling them to learn in good conditions, ensuring access to adequate food and allowing them to grow up in a safe and secure environment.

Tackling child homelessness therefore helps lay the foundations for a healthier, fairer and more inclusive society.