FEANTSA POLICY BRIEF

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HEAT WAVES

The Impact on People Experiencing Homelessness

FEANTSA

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Introduction

According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), 2024 was confirmed to be the warmest year on record, based on data from six international datasets.[1] In many European countries, temperatures were above 40°C. For example, in Romania, 2024 marked the hottest year in the nation's meteorological history, with 15 red alerts issued for heatwaves and extreme thermal discomfort.[2] Spain also experienced extreme heat, with 2024 ranking as the third-hottest year in the country's recorded history.[3] According to the EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service and the WMO, people in Spain and Greece experienced ten times more stress with unusual temperatures above 47°C. Alarmingly, heatwave-related deaths in Europe have increased by approximately 30% over the past 20 years.[4]

This trend is closely linked to the continued emissions of greenhouse gases, which have caused a rise in global temperatures. As a result, the frequency and intensity of heatwaves and hot summers have increased significantly. Remarkably, the past ten years have all ranked among the ten hottest years ever recorded, illustrating a persistent and alarming trend that is expected to continue.[5]

The maximum temperature threshold varies across European countries. Thus, there is no standard definition of heatwave across Europe. However, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines a heatwave as a *period of abnormally hot weather, often characterised by temperatures above a relative threshold, lasting from several days to even months*.[6]

Among all extreme weather events, heat exposure is associated with the highest mortality rates. [7] This does not just represent a public health risk but also a burden to the already strained healthcare systems. As these events grow longer and more intense – according to the European Climate Risk Assessment - their health impacts are also expected to increase.[8] The impact on health of people experiencing homelessness is of particular attention as they will be disproportionately affected by the harmful impacts of heatwaves.[9] In the UK, The Dying Homeless Project,[10] implemented by the Museum of Homelessness, revealed that more deaths among people experiencing homelessness occur in the summer months, challenging the common perception that winter poses the greatest risk. Another study from the UK found that even moderate increases in temperature significantly raise hospitalisation risks for people experiencing homelessness.[11] The 2024 Italian report by FIO.PSD shows that the percentage of people dying in winter is similar to that registered in the summer months, with both periods recording the highest mortality rates compared to the rest of the year.[12]

News coming from the US confirms a similar situation: half of the deaths reported during the heatwave of 2023 were people experiencing homelessness.[13] Also in the US, in a qualitative study of 42 people experiencing homelessness, 88.1% had faced extreme heat. Many described severe physical and psychological impacts, worsened by being forced to leave shaded areas during summer.[14] The organisation Infirmiers de rue in Brussels also highlighted that heatwaves can have a significant psychological impact on people experiencing homelessness. The irritability and restlessness caused by the heat can increase interpersonal conflict, making life on the streets even more difficult.[15]

Traditionally, the winter period is considered the most dangerous one for people without safe housing and thus, most attention and protection measures are focused on this period.[16] However, recent findings underscore the urgent need to address heat-related vulnerabilities among people experiencing homelessness, which are often overlooked in comparison to cold-weather emergency protocols.

> **To prevent avoidable suffering and loss of life, public health and climate adaptation strategies at both EU and national levels must include heatwave response plans for people without shelter.**

Vulnerability factors

Vulnerability to the impacts of heatwaves is associated with three main factors: how much a person is exposed to heat (**exposure**); how sensitive a person is to heat, which can be amplified by socioeconomic conditions and interact with existing comorbidities (**sensitivity**); and finally, the capacity to cope with or recover from heat, which relates to the access and availability of structures and resources (**adaptability**). Below in the text we will further explore how heatwaves impact people experiencing homelessness based on these aspects of vulnerability.[17]

Exposure Vulnerability

People experiencing homelessness are at a heightened risk of developing heat-related illnesses due to constant exposure to harsh environmental conditions, as they are forced to spend prolonged periods of time in direct sunlight and on overheated concrete. This risk is exacerbated by pre-existing social and health vulnerabilities. Several factors contribute to this increased risk, including:

- **Lack of shelter or inadequate housing,** which means that people often spend extended periods outdoors, leaving them more exposed to extreme heat and without the means to cool down.
- **Criminalising policies** and restrictive urban regulations, which further intensify exposure vulnerability by limiting access to public spaces, making it difficult for people to find shade, rest, or access cooling centers.[18]
- **Limited access to hygiene facilities**, such as showers or toilets.
- **Restricted access to drinking water or public water fountains**, which impacts people's ability to stay hydrated during high temperatures.

Sensitivity to the Heat

People who experience homelessness face profound social exclusion and marginalisation, leading to significant barriers within social and health systems. This contributes both to growing health disparities and the worsening of health outcomes. Research indicates that people who are homeless are more likely to suffer from physical and mental health issues, as well as an increased risk of premature death.[19] Thus, the prolonged exposure to heat can increase the potential of having heat-related illnesses (such as those mentioned below), which can be aggravated by other comorbidities.

Several factors intensify this vulnerability, including:

- Use of medications such as antidepressants and antipsychotics, which can impair the body's ability to regulate temperature.
- Social isolation, limiting access to support or assistance during extreme weather.
- Substance use, which can alter perception of heat and reduce heat tolerance.

As a result, people experiencing homelessness are **more susceptible to**:

- Heat rash
- Heat cramps
- Heat exhaustion
- Dehydration
- Heatstroke
- Worsening of cardiovascular, respiratory, and renal diseases
- Electrolyte imbalances and related disorders
- Premature death

Capacity to Adapt

People experiencing homelessness have a very limited capacity to adapt to or cope with extreme weather conditions. This is largely due to the lack of resources associated with their situation. Common-sense advice during heatwaves, such as seeking shelter or staying hydrated, is often not feasible for people without stable housing or financial means. In many countries, available homelessness services are limited, overcrowded, and frequently located in low-performing buildings without air conditioning, making them more prone to overheating. This reduces the possibility to find a temporary place to cope during a heatwave. Furthermore, when heat-related health issues arise, people experiencing homelessness face numerous administrative, social, and economic barriers that make accessing healthcare services difficult.[20] These obstacles can worsen existing health conditions and, in some cases, lead to death.

These factors highlight the heat vulnerability that homelessness implies. FEANTSA calls upon the EU institutions and EU Member States to take into consideration the need for sustained and targeted action that addresses the specific needs of marginalised communities, such as people experiencing homelessness, in all Heat-Health related strategies and/or national plans.

Recomendations

EU Adaptation Strategy and Heat-Health Action Plans (HHAPs)

On 24 February 2021, the European Commission adopted the Communication *"Forging a climate-resilient Europe – the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change"*.[21] The Strategy outlines a long-term vision for the EU to become a climate-resilient society, fully adapted to the unavoidable impacts of climate change by 2050, with one of its goals being "*a deeper understanding of the climate-related risks for health and greater capacity to counter them*."

The EU, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), has established Heat-Health Action Plans (HHAPs). While the EU Adaptation Strategy does not mandate specific HHAPs, it encourages Member States to develop and implement such plans as part of their national adaptation strategies to help mitigate the health impacts of extreme heat. Eight necessary elements have been identified for inclusion in the HHAPs: a coordinated plan; accurate and timely alert systems; a heat-related health information plan; reduction of indoor heat exposure**; particular care for vulnerable population groups;** preparedness of the health and social care system; long-term urban planning; and real-time surveillance and evaluation.[22]

A recent report released by the European Climate and Health Observatory (2024),[23] which outlines the status of surveillance for heat-related health impacts and heat-health action plans across 38 European countries, found that 20 of the EEA-38 countries currently monitor the health impacts of heat, and 21 have HHAPs in place. Heat-health action plans are more common in countries that monitor heat-related health impacts. While the EU and Member States may have developed overarching frameworks to address extreme heat and health risks, the specific needs of people experiencing homelessness are often not considered. Therefore, support for this group depends heavily on targeted local interventions—many of which are developed by NGOs and homelessness service providers. Some strategies, depending on the country, may also fall under broader national health strategies. For example, the UK Health Security Agency has released specific guidelines for heatwaves and people experiencing homelessness. [24,25]

People experiencing homelessness, besides being more vulnerable to heat, as previously explained, are often overlooked in policies and planning. This policy brief emphasises that people experiencing homelessness are at a higher risk of suffering health impacts from heatwaves, as well as a higher risk of death during extreme heat. Given existing challenges in accessing health care and limited preventive measures, specific attention needs to be conveyed to marginalised groups such as those facing homelessness in policies and measures addressing heatwaves.

1. Explicit inclusion of people experiencing homelessness in HHAPs (or other relevant national/local strategies)

Heat-Health Action Plans should explicitly recognise people experiencing homelessness as a vulnerable group. This recognition must translate into the development of targeted, coordinated emergency responses and communication materials tailored and adapted to the specific needs of those who lack stable and safe shelter.

2. Establishment of clear emergency protocols for heatwaves

Local authorities and service providers should have clearly defined emergency protocols in place to respond swiftly and effectively to extreme heat events. These should include measures of support targeted at people experiencing homelessness.

3. Adaptation of existing winter action plans

Rather than creating entirely new systems, municipalities can adapt existing winter action plans to address extreme heat. Many of the logistical frameworks and partnerships used in winter planning (e.g. coordination with shelters, NGOs, and outreach teams or extending existing winter eviction bans to the summer period) can be effectively repurposed for heatwaves.

4. Inclusivity in Green Urban Planning

People experiencing homelessness spend a significant amount of time in urban environments, making access to public infrastructure and spaces—such as parks and shaded areas—critical for increasing their adaptive capacity to cope with the heat. However, access to these spaces is often limited by urban policies and designs that restrict their full use. This exclusion is further exacerbated by the eco-gentrification of parks, which can displace vulnerable populations. Green urban planning should be intentionally inclusive to enhance the resilience of all residents, especially those most exposed to extreme heat.[26] [27]

5. Inclusivity in Climate and Health Policy

Climate change and health policies, as well as related research, must account for the disproportionate impacts of climate-related events on marginalised populations, particularly on people experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, adaptation of homes and accommodation of vulnerable groups to extreme temperatures is crucial, and the implementation of the Energy Performance of Building Directive (EPBD)[28] and Energy Efficiency Directive (EED)[29] is particularly relevant in addressing these challenges.

6. Access to housing

As part of a holistic approach to the intersection of homelessness, health, and heatwaves, access to stable housing and safe shelter is a fundamental strategy to prevent the harmful effects of extreme heat on people experiencing homelessness. We therefore call for the clear recognition of the right to health for people experiencing homelessness and for services to be available on a year-round basis – not seasonally – and especially for housing-led policies that take people off the streets permanently.

Inspiring Practices

While witnessing the impacts of heatwaves on people facing homelessness first hand, several FEANTSA members have initiated work to prepare their services to better meet the needs of beneficiaries during extreme heat. Below is a non-exhaustive list of effective measures drawn from these initiatives, which can inform contingency planning for extreme heat events. These actions include:

- **Outreach teams** providing hydration support, sunscreen, and encouraging sun safety awareness among people experiencing homelessness.
- **Shelter provision,** particularly climate-adapted shelters activated during extreme weather emergencies.
- **Transportation** to safe, cool spaces for those unable to access them independently.
- **Opening of public spaces**—such as libraries, churches or community centres—as cooling shelters during heatwaves.
- **Mapping and dissemination of information** about the locations of public water fountains, toilets, and cool/shaded places, shared with relevant organisations and displayed in places where frequented by people experiencing homelessness.

Belgium
Infirmiers de rue

Map of Free Public Water Fountains and Toilets

Source: *Infirmiers de rue (2025)*

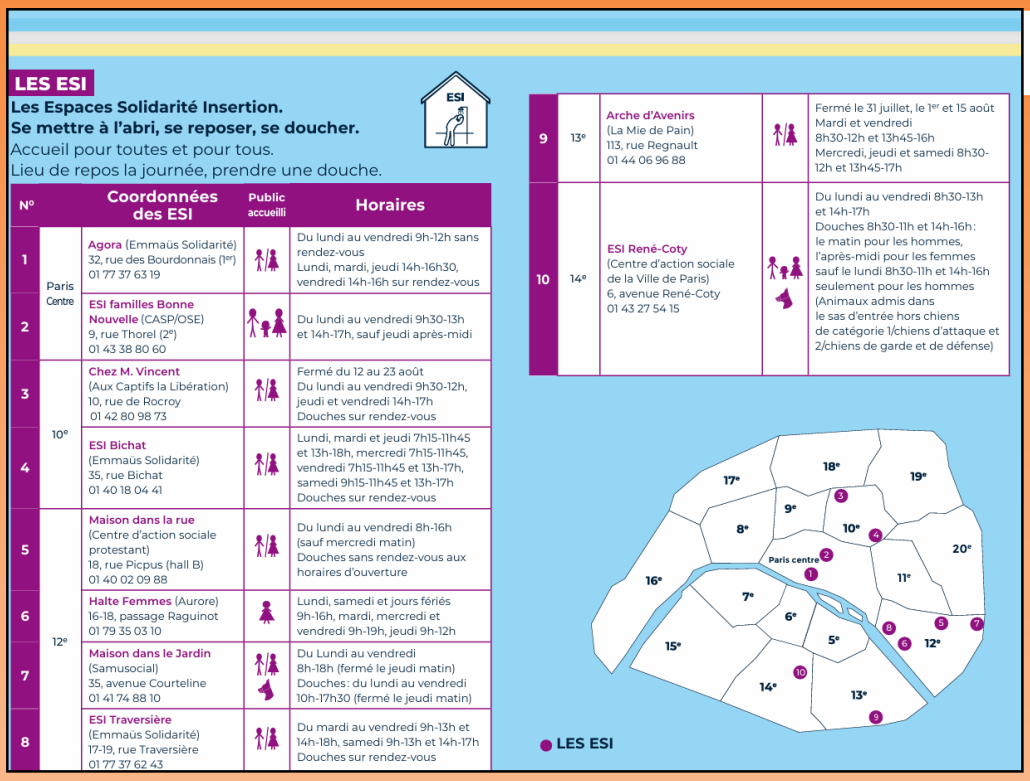
Information and advice for people who use substances (e.g. increased dehydration risk with alcohol use)

Source: *Infirmiers de rue (2019)*

France
Ville de Paris

Information on available shelters and places to have a shower

Source: Ville de Paris (2024)



LES ESI

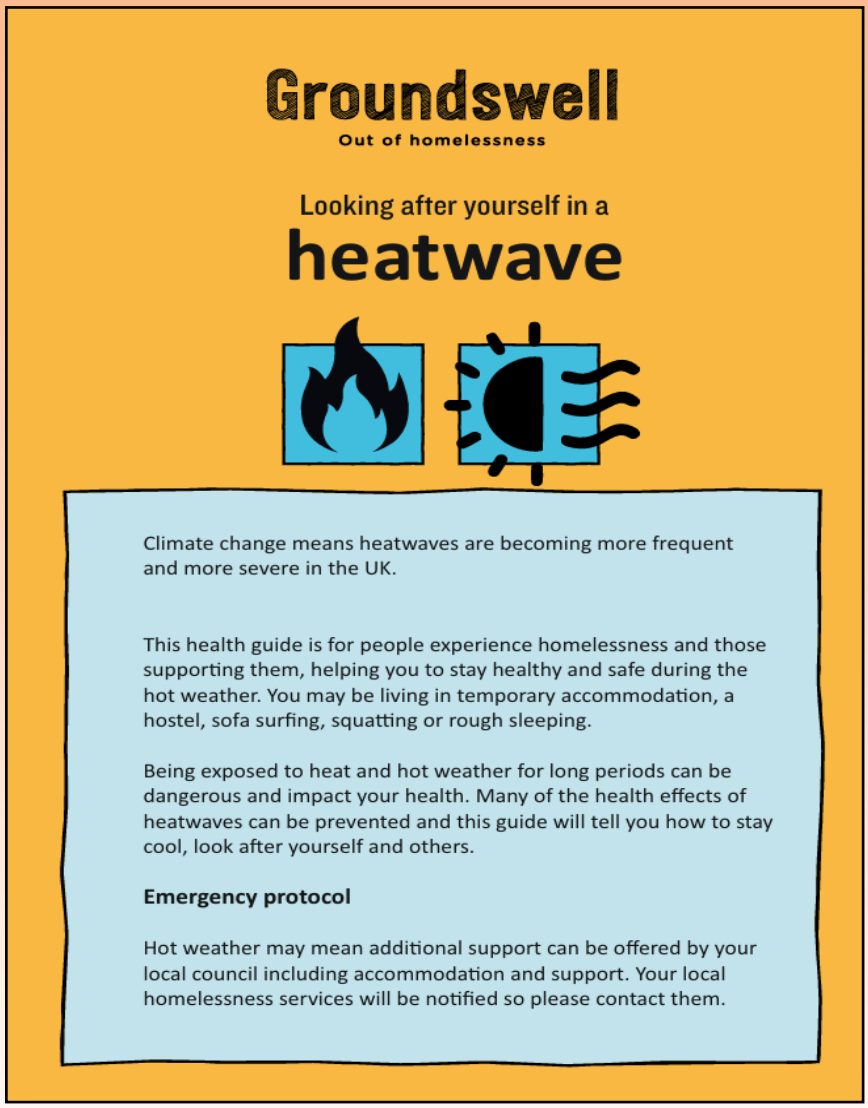
Les Espaces Solidarité Insertion.
Se mettre à l'abri, se reposer, se doucher.
Accueil pour toutes et pour tous.
Lieu de repos la journée, prendre une douche.

N°		Coordonnées des ESI	Public accueilli	Horaires
1	Paris Centre	**Agora** (Emmaüs Solidarité) 32, rue des Bourdonnais (1er) 01 77 37 63 19		Du lundi au vendredi 9h-12h sans rendez-vous Lundi, mardi, jeudi 14h-16h30, vendredi 14h-16h sur rendez-vous
2		**ESI familles Bonne Nouvelle** (CASP/OSE) 9, rue Thorel (2e) 01 43 38 80 60		Du lundi au vendredi 9h30-13h et 14h-17h, sauf jeudi après-midi
3	10e	**Chez M. Vincent** (Aux Captifs la Libération) 10, rue de Rocroy 01 42 80 98 73		Fermé du 12 au 23 août Du lundi au vendredi 9h30-12h, jeudi et vendredi 14h-17h Douches sur rendez-vous
4		**ESI Bichat** (Emmaüs Solidarité) 35, rue Bichat 01 40 18 04 41		Lundi, mardi et jeudi 7h15-11h45 et 13h-18h, mercredi 7h15-11h45, vendredi 7h15-11h45 et 13h-17h, samedi 9h15-11h45 et 13h-17h Douches sur rendez-vous
5	12e	**Maison dans la rue** (Centre d'action sociale protestant) 18, rue Picpus (hall B) 01 40 02 09 88		Du lundi au vendredi 8h-16h (sauf mercredi matin) Douches sans rendez-vous aux horaires d'ouverture
6		**Halte Femmes** (Aurore) 16-18, passage Raguinot 01 79 35 03 10		Lundi, samedi et jours fériés 9h-16h, mardi, mercredi et vendredi 9h-19h, jeudi 9h-12h
7		**Maison dans le Jardin** (Samusocial) 35, avenue Courteline 01 41 74 88 10		Du Lundi au vendredi 8h-18h (fermé le jeudi matin) Douches : du lundi au vendredi 10h-17h30 (fermé le jeudi matin)
8		**ESI Traversière** (Emmaüs Solidarité) 17-19, rue Traversière 01 77 37 62 43		Du mardi au vendredi 9h-13h et 14h-18h, samedi 9h-13h et 14h-17h Douches sur rendez-vous
9	13e	**Arche d'Avenirs** (La Mie de Pain) 113, rue Regnault 01 44 06 96 88		Fermé le 31 juillet, le 1er et 15 août Mardi et vendredi 8h30-12h et 13h45-16h Mercredi, jeudi et samedi 8h30-12h et 13h45-17h
10	14e	**ESI René-Coty** (Centre d'action sociale de la Ville de Paris) 6, avenue René-Coty 01 43 27 54 15		Du lundi au vendredi 8h30-13h et 14h-17h Douches 8h30-11h et 14h-16h : le matin pour les hommes, l'après-midi pour les femmes sauf le lundi 8h30-11h et 14h-16h seulement pour les hommes (Animaux admis dans le sas d'entrée hors chiens de catégorie 1/chiens d'attaque et 2/chiens de garde et de défense)

United Kingdom
Groundswell

Self-awareness leaflet titled Looking After Yourself in a Heatwave

Source: Groundswell (2023)



Groundswell
Out of homelessness

Looking after yourself in a
heatwave

Climate change means heatwaves are becoming more frequent and more severe in the UK.

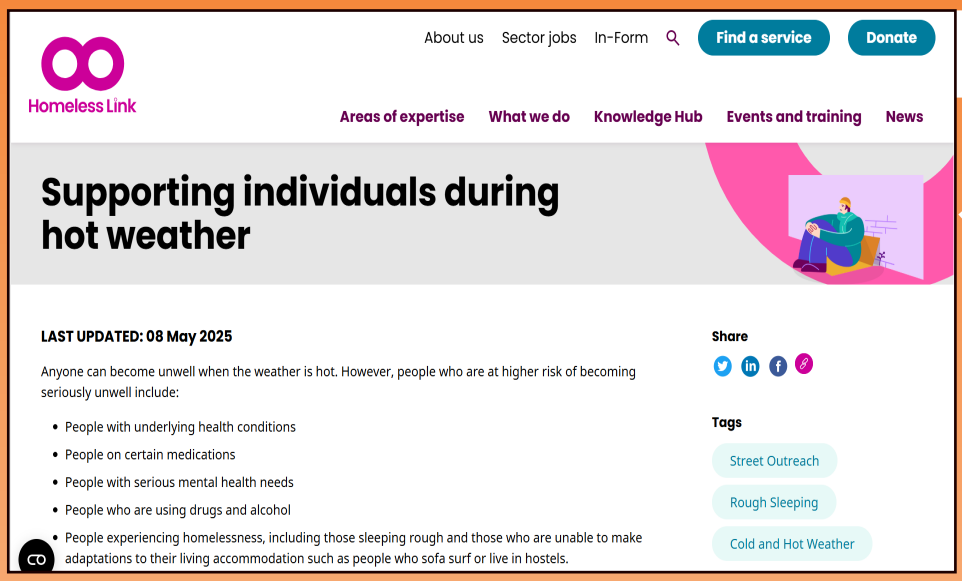
This health guide is for people experience homelessness and those supporting them, helping you to stay healthy and safe during the hot weather. You may be living in temporary accommodation, a hostel, sofa surfing, squatting or rough sleeping.

Being exposed to heat and hot weather for long periods can be dangerous and impact your health. Many of the health effects of heatwaves can be prevented and this guide will tell you how to stay cool, look after yourself and others.

Emergency protocol

Hot weather may mean additional support can be offered by your local council including accommodation and support. Your local homelessness services will be notified so please contact them.

United Kingdom
Homeless Link



Summarised key information in their article *Supporting individuals during hot weather*

Source: *Homeless Link (2025)*

Belgium
Samusocial

Published a statement titled *Heatwave plan for homeless people, increased vigilance for the most vulnerable*

Source: *Samusocial (2022)*

Spain
HOGAR SÍ

Published a statement titled *Imagínate que vivir los 365 días del año fuera tan duro como sobrellevar esta ola de calor*

Source: *HOGAR SÍ (2022)*

Endnotes

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