THE IMPACT OF THE EUROPEAN HEALTHCARE CRISIS ON THE HOMELESS AND THOSE FACING HOUSING EXCLUSION
It is vital that the unprecedented health crisis that the world has seen since the beginning of 2020 be viewed through the prism of its dramatic impact on vulnerable people who are deprived of dignified, adequate housing. This includes the homeless, individuals facing housing exclusion, refugees and asylum seekers. While it is too early for an exhaustive assessment of COVID-19 and its consequences, this pandemic represents an unprecedented collective challenge in terms of the right to life and the right to health for residents of the European Union. As Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, has stated, ‘housing has become the front-line defence against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation’.

The information set out in this chapter was collected up until 17 April 2020 and is therefore subject to change.
In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, ‘staying home’ and confinement is not an option for homeless people and poses a danger to the safety and health of those who face housing exclusion.3 This pandemic has made such people particularly vulnerable. Sleeping rough or staying in temporary or emergency accommodation (hostels, shelters, etc.) puts the homeless at risk of contamination, and makes it harder for them to access to hygiene services and places where they can self-isolate.4 These are people who are high risk in medical terms, and disproportionately affected by health problems and disabilities. The prevalence of respiratory disorders among homeless people is very high. Existing US studies of homeless populations have found a prevalence of obstructive pulmonary disease of 20-30%, compared to 10% in the general adult population.5 If homeless people contract COVID-19, they are far more likely to become seriously ill and die. In London, the coronavirus mortality rate of homeless people living in emergency accommodation is 25 times higher than the general adult population. In addition, the homeless face multiple barriers when it comes to accessing health care and public health information. Outbreaks among this high-risk group are also very difficult to contain, which means that protection of the homeless is critical to managing this public health crisis. Many of the measures aimed at the general public, such as self-isolation, strict hygiene measures, the ‘stay home’ order and social distancing, are not realistic for homeless people.

Homelessness must therefore be considered a public health priority in light of the current health crisis.6 A public health emergency requires urgent solutions and crisis management, like the initiatives described below. It is also a unique opportunity to review failed policies and adopt long-term action plans to ensure that housing exclusion is no longer systematic in our societies.
The measures taken in most European countries to isolate the population have had a direct effect on the living conditions of homeless people and the functioning of support services. Such services have had to adapt quickly to continue functioning and supporting vulnerable populations who are often deprived of their usual means of survival and no longer have access to shelter, food, water or health care. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing issued two statements detailing measures to be taken to ensure the protection of homeless people and individuals living in informal settlements during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 8 April 2020, three European Commissioners called on Member States to deploy ordinary and exceptional EU resources to protect vulnerable groups, including homeless people, Travellers and the Roma. We also call on public authorities at local, regional, national and European level to take seven measures to protect homeless people and public health:

- **Test homeless people**, as a medically vulnerable group, as a priority. By mid-April 2020, the only countries where testing was available for the homeless were Denmark, where it had been introduced in March (a testing bus was mobilised in Copenhagen), Portugal (Porto and Madeira), Ireland (Dublin) and Belgium (Brussels). In all other Member States, there was a shortage of screening tests and/or a lack of prioritisation of the homeless population at that time. Screening is also meaningless if the people tested cannot self-isolate in a safe place afterwards.

- **House homeless people**, enabling them to stay safe and self-isolate, and to have a private space for eating, sleeping and washing. All options including vacant housing and holiday/student accommodation must be considered in order to find appropriate solutions. In Barcelona, the local authorities have secured temporary accommodation for homeless families by making use of vacant tourist accommodation via short-term rental agreements. In Bucharest, places in centres for victims of domestic violence will be created with a new permanent shelter for homeless women set to open. European funds have been made available to respond to the health crisis: not only the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived but also the European Union Solidarity Fund – amounting to EUR 500 million per year – which has been adjusted to cover health emergencies caused by COVID-19,
the provision of temporary accommodation being a legitimate expense. This means that the fund can be used to pay for accommodation for homeless people so they can self-isolate safely in empty hotels, vacant accommodation, etc.

- **Make homeless services as safe as possible**, by allocating resources to facilitate social distancing, hygiene measures and the implementation of emergency plans, which must also protect the staff and volunteers working in these services. Temporary reception centres have been set up in gymnasiums, hotels, vacant buildings, etc., in order to ‘confine’ – albeit in shared accommodation – homeless people, especially those presenting COVID-19 symptoms or who have tested positive but whose state of health does require hospitalisation. In Brussels, directing the homeless to accommodation centres is centrally managed by Bruss’Help which deploys doctors to reception centres so that they can make diagnoses and decide whether confinement or hospitalisation is required. In France, a free hotline that can be reached seven days a week from 7 am to 10 pm was set up in mid-April to detect and refer homeless people affected by the coronavirus, and to provide the best possible care. In addition, 80 accommodation centres specialised in the reception of people suffering from the illness were opened. Social distancing measures necessitate a rapid and sometimes challenging adaptation of the reception conditions in pre-existing accommodation. The adaptation of the premises must allow individuals presenting symptoms to self-isolate. Working conditions must ensure continuity of services despite reduced staff and protective measures.

- **Ensure access to healthcare for homeless people**. Due to widespread confinement measures and shutdowns as well as a shortage of services, staff and volunteers, access to basic facilities has been severely hampered. In Dublin, a medical charity, Safetynet, has put together mobile teams within homeless services to provide general first aid and COVID-19 testing, underpinned by online and telephone services to meet the high demand. In France, regional health agencies (ARS) in conjunction with the public medical networks and Médecins du Monde (MDM) have organised community health visits, in order to diagnose symptomatic coronavirus cases and refer people to health services.

- **Ensure access to food and hygiene for homeless people**. Again, due to widespread confinement measures, access to food banks, hot-meal services and hygiene facilities has been drastically reduced. In France, a system of ‘lunch vouchers’ intended to benefit 60,000 homeless people was implemented by the government at a cost of EUR 15 million. In Spain, ‘community canteens’ (social comedores) have been set up to distribute take-away food.

- **Stop people becoming homeless**. The reductions in resources generated by the confinement measures for many European households are likely to result in an increase in rental or mortgage arrears. It is necessary to anticipate these situations as far in advance as possible in order to avoid many people being evicted from their homes when these measures come to an end.

- **Protect homeless people from punitive enforcement measures**. Several European states, such as France, Spain and Italy, have introduced forms etc. where a reason must be provided for why the person has left their home, with sanctions applicable where this is considered unjustified. By definition, homeless people should not be punished for non-compliance with confinement measures and should be offered safe alternatives. Collaboration between homeless services and police or civil protection services is key, for example, a protocol has been established between the police and social services of the city of Barcelona to identify and refer people at risk or in need of accommodation.
With personalised services being drastically suspended across Europe as part of the health crisis, asylum procedures and reception systems have also been affected by the quarantine measures, making people migrating to the EU even more vulnerable. On 16 April 2020, the European Commission adopted guidelines on the implementation of EU rules on asylum, return and resettlement procedures in the context of the pandemic, with the aim of ‘ensuring the continuity of procedures as far as possible while fully ensuring the protection of people’s health and rights’.

– Border closures and suspension of access to protection. The EU banned all non-essential travel to the region and locked down its external borders for a minimum of 30 days until mid-April. It called on Member States to extend these measures until 15 May, with internal border controls being reintroduced in Schengen until further notice. The European Commission, however, asked that these border controls be implemented ‘in a proportionate manner’ and that they be ‘based on scientific advice and risk assessment’. It also clarified that people in need of international protection could be exempted from the travel ban – with health checks for those entering the European Union. On 17 March 2020, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) announced that they were temporarily suspending resettlement of refugees. Several countries have suspended procedures for the submission of asylum applications, consequently hindering access to the material reception conditions which applicants are entitled to. In Greece, the filing of asylum applications was suspended for the whole of March 2020. Initially, this suspension followed Turkey’s declaration that it would open its borders so that migrants in the country could get to the EU. The Greek Asylum Service has temporarily suspended all administrative procedures (registering applications, asylum interviews, submission of appeals, etc.) until 10 April. In Hungary, the government suspended asylum applications indefinitely as of 1 March, stigmatising migrants and accusing them of having introduced coronavirus into the country. In Spain, asylum applications have also been suspended.
However, since it is not possible at present to request international protection, those seeking access to reception centres must apply directly to the first reception entities in each province, where they must sign a declaration of intent to continue the asylum application procedure when normal activity is resumed. Other Member States have implemented more lenient measures, but which still have the effect of severely restricting access to international protection. In Belgium, for example, the Immigration Office has stopped physically registering new asylum seekers at the arrival centre indefinitely since 17 March; the aim being to prevent people from gathering in groups outside the centre or in waiting rooms. However, applicants are invited to register their applications online. In France, the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFPRA) suspended all public reception procedures outside the asylum procedure on 16 March. Although it is still possible to submit an asylum application to OFPRA by post, it is almost impossible to register it beforehand, since most of the physical reception services responsible for this task are closed (with only 600 registrations a week, compared with 3,000 in normal times). In Germany, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) remains open for the processing of asylum applications and decisions. However, it has altered its policy of accepting applications in person to comply with the need to avoid contact and is currently only accepting applications in writing. Asylum applications are only accepted and interviews conducted if applicants either test negative for COVID-19 or observe a 14-day isolation period prior to the application or interview. In addition, the humanitarian reception programmes for refugees from Turkey and Lebanon have been frozen. By way of example, Germany’s commitment for 2020 was to take in 5,500 people, the majority of whom were Syrians. In Italy, despite the temporary closure of immigration offices for the renewal and issuance of residence permits, a facility for the submission of applications for international protection remains open. In Sweden and the Netherlands, despite some operational changes in its services, asylum applications can still be made. To date, Portugal is the only Member State to have adopted an ambitious comprehensive policy to protect refugees in this health crisis – on 28 March 2020 the Portuguese Government adopted a series of social and economic measures to offset the effects of the lockdown. First-time asylum seekers can register to submit their application – their appointment is automatically postponed, and individuals with pending applications are temporarily resettled and considered permanent residents until 1 July 2020. They are given the same rights as Portuguese citizens, both in terms of access to health care and financial support. On a positive note, France has also automatically extended residence permits expiring on 16 March 2020 by three months, in order to avoid any threat to the rights of people holding residence permits, in particular the right to work and to benefit from labour rights.

- The clear danger to migrants living in unfit conditions. For refugees accommodated in emergency or temporary reception structures, health and social distancing measures are very difficult to implement. This endangers the health of refugees and staff who come into contact with them. In several countries, some migrant accommodation centres where a coronavirus infection was detected took quarantine measures, turning the centres into coronavirus clusters. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Agency for Asylum Seekers (COA) halted the entry of newcomers to its accommodation centres from 15 March, but instead opened an emergency shelter for them.

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Hygiene measures are impossible to implement in places where living conditions were already unsanitary – this is the case of the Greek Island ‘hotspots’, where overcrowding and lack of access to hygiene and basic care had already led to drastic consequences before the pandemic. Twenty-four human rights organisations have collectively called for the urgent repatriation to the mainland of those left stranded on the Aegean Islands as have the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE).

At the end of March 2020, the Greek government was still refusing to implement this – citing the absence of coronavirus cases in the camps and announced the opening of three emergency medical care centres near the camps of Lesbos, Chios and Samos to detect coronavirus cases. According to a Human Rights Watch report of 31 March 2020, the Greek authorities also arbitrarily detained around 2,000 newly arrived asylum seekers in particularly appalling conditions in closed centres where the spread of the virus was exacerbated by overcrowding, lack of hygiene facilities and lack of basic food, even though the population in question was already extremely vulnerable.

Several Member States (Germany, Luxembourg, France, Ireland, Finland, Portugal, Croatia, Lithuania, Belgium and Bulgaria) have undertaken to accept 1,600 vulnerable children – unaccompanied minors under 14 years of age or in need of medical care – currently living in Greek hotspots. Germany has pledged to take in fifty children immediately, with the city of Berlin talking approximately 350 to 500 relocated children in the next few weeks. However, honouring these commitments has been slow due to disagreements between politicians, bureaucratic delays and the request by some authorities to carry out additional health checks which only serve to add further delays. In the absence of dignified and adequate accommodation solutions in Greece, including on the mainland, other EU Member States must come to the assistance of the Greeks to distribute the urgent care of people stuck on the Aegean Islands among other countries and to avoid a large-scale health disaster.

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In Belgium, due to the risks linked to overcrowding in detention centres, the Immigration Office decided to release 300 undocumented people with an order to leave the country, in order to comply with the measures undertaken in the health crisis.
With housing inequalities being greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, confinement measures are causing feelings of ‘entrapment’ for people living in inadequate and unsanitary housing. Poor households overburdened by housing costs are extremely vulnerable now – in contrast to the financial crisis of 2008, in which the commodification of housing played a central role; the economic recession is now being driven by protective measures to cope with the epidemic, with a huge number of jobs either disappearing or becoming very difficult to do. In the United Kingdom, a study has shown that income loss caused by the coronavirus crisis has had a varying impact depending on the occupancy status of the housing: 79% of social housing tenants are seeing their work hours strongly impacted, compared to 59% of tenants on the private market and 50% of home owners with a mortgage. As a result, a significant number of tenants could find themselves in rent arrears. The implementation of strong government measures and genuine solidarity on the part of landlords are therefore necessary to prevent an increase in homelessness.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing has issued two statements detailing measures to be taken to ensure the protection of tenants and people in debt. On 6 April 2020, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights called on State Parties to the ICESCR (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) to impose moratoriums on evictions and foreclosures during the coronavirus crisis.

Moratoria on rental evictions, of varying durations, have been announced in Hungary, Germany, France (where this took the form of an extension of the winter ban on evictions until 31 May 2020), Belgium, Austria, Ireland, Italy, Croatia, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Luxembourg. As regards housing costs, moratoria on mortgage payments have been introduced in some countries, including Ireland and Belgium. In Spain, this has been introduced for people considered vulnerable, but only 10% of those applying for this aid are eligible for it because of the very strict access criteria that have been introduced.

Measures to top up household incomes and provide financial assistance for the payment of rent with have also been implemented various degrees of ambition and protection. In Greece, in addition to a financial aid of EUR 800 for the period from 15 March to 30 April, an official rent reduction of 40% on an individual’s primary residence during the crisis period is granted to employees who have had to stop working in the sectors affected by the health crisis following a government decision. In Ireland, a rent increase...
which should have been entered into force during the emergency period (currently three months) cannot be applied, and the tenant is now not obliged to pay the difference later.43 In the Netherlands, debt collection fees are being waived for tenants in rent arrears due to the health crisis.44 In Luxembourg, some tenants can apply for a subsidy for the payment of their rent during the crisis. In Austria, tenants affected by the crisis can defer payment of rent for the months from April to June 2020 until 31 December 2020.46 In Spain, tenant households whose income has been reduced to less than EUR 1,600/month can apply for a rent reduction or a loan to cover six months’ rent with no interest.47 In Germany, the Berlin Senate is ensuring that public landlords do not increase rents during the crisis and is urging private landlords to do the same. The Senate is also working towards implementing a widespread ban on disconnections by gas and electricity companies.48 This same measure has also been extended in France until 31 May as part of the winter ban on evictions. The reform of the housing subsidies calculation method planned by the French government, which would have led to a reduction in benefits for many households, has been temporarily suspended and some social landlords have also proposed deferring rent payments.49

The importance of having a safe place to live has never been more evident. The increase in domestic violence is a dramatic example of this.50 This fact should lead public authorities to, alongside confinement measures, increase funding and efforts to protect victims who are not safe in their own homes during the pandemic by providing accommodation or alternative housing for perpetrators of violence or, failing that, for their victims. Overall, although it is still too early to assess the consequences for housing markets, some economists expect Europe’s economy to shrink by more than 10% in the first half of this year as a result of the pandemic, raising fears of exploding unemployment, bad debts, asset deterioration and falling stock prices.51 Faced with this unprecedented situation, it is not yet clear whether the measures taken after 2008 to protect the European banking system from crises will work. The real estate bubbles, inflated in recent years in tight housing markets, threaten to burst, forecasting even greater and more long-term price deflation than the last recession heralded. Although this represents a real danger of property being accumulated by vulture funds – which are already circling,52 it is nonetheless a historic opportunity for public authorities: the EU’s institutional and political responses after 2008 neither took into account nor respected - never mind protected – human rights and the right to housing.53 Responses to the current crisis will need to acknowledge these shortcomings and prioritise access to dignified, adequate and affordable housing.


9. As of April 2020, Iceland is the country where the number of people have been screened, with screening widespread, regardless of whether people have symptoms or not [see https://www.who.int/csr/don/22-january-2020-covid-19-iceland-tests-symptoms-tests-aleatoire-lay-et-lay]

10. In France, on 12 April 2020, 163,000 emergency accommodation places were announced, 9,000 spaces have been made available in hotels, 13 ‘centres de decesmoration’ (temporary confinement centres) have opened accommodating 100 people, with 66 potential sites having been identified. See https://www.20minutes.fr/politique/3421534-france-163000-lits-restauration

11. Greek Refugee Council appealed against the relevant decision of the Council of State, but the decision handed down was favourable to the government.

12. 15,000 people have been tested for Covid-19 in France, of which 37 were positive.

13. Viktor Orban was quoted as saying: “We are fighting a war on two fronts, migration and coronavirus, in which the countries are linked because they both spread with displacement” [in French] https://liberation.fr/2020/04/01/le-prime-ministre-hongrois-contre-covid-

14. All temporary shelters were turned into emergency accommodation or, in the case of a centre with a capacity for 150 individuals at the end of March 2020 in Luxembourg, Medical Services du Monde has kept its health centres open for this purpose. In Italy and the Netherlands, some regional and local authorities made vacant apartments and buildings available for temporary accommodation. In Barcelona, a conference centre was used to urgently accommodate 150 people and three new shelters were opened. In London, 30 hotel rooms were made available to homeless people for 12 weeks under an agreement between the local authorities and the InterContinental Hotels Group.

15. A prerequisite for submitting an application form is that applicants are registered at an initial reception centre in the federal state, where proof of arrival is also issued. The application form is then sent to the Federal Office, which issues residence permits and sends them to the applicant with written instructions on the asylum application. The Federal Office is currently concentrating its asylum efforts on making decisions, if possible, without conducting interviews. It handled down 11,000 decisions in March 2020. The Federal Office is in the process of setting up interview facilities in its branches where possible, in accordance with infection protection regulations. The BAMF has suspended interviews in cases part of an application review procedure.

16. The submission of applications, including the first stages of the asylum process, with the exception of security and medical checks, has been suspended https://www/coronavirus.aspx/en/press/concerns/coronavirus-crisis-migrant-tents.html


18. see https://www.gcr.gr/el/news/1624956


23. In March 2020, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary completely closed their borders.


25. https://www.migrationsverket.sv/English/About-the-Migration/Procedures-in-Gibraltar (in English)


29. #CHAPTER 2


37. https://today.it/l/corriere/italia/2020/04/02/migranti-campi-tutte-closed

38. https://www.today.it/l/corriere/italia/2020/04/02/migranti-campi-tutte-closed


41. https://www.vrtnotev/2020/04/29/department-of-home-affairs-decrees-on-corrallent-border-posts-


45. https://today.it/l/corriere/italia/2020/04/02/migranti-campi-tutte-closed


50. The Catalan regional government lamented a 20% increase in calls to the emergency hotline during the early days of the lockdown in Spain. In the rest of the country was observed in just one week: https://www.lemonde.fr/actualite/le-catalan-missionnaire-libere-300-1357074.html


