

In February and March 2020, Europe was hit hard by the coronavirus. Italy was the first EU country to experience high numbers of cases. Within a few weeks, a largely unprepared Europe became the epicentre of the global pandemic.

One trait shared by all national guidelines in the early stages was the message: Stay home. Authorities were instructing people to work from home, public areas were shut down, events were cancelled, parks were closed. The hashtag #StayHome has been used over 4.5 million times on Instagram alone – people were holding “watch parties”, applauding on their balconies, proudly reminding their peers to wash and disinfect their hands, and the already omnipresent digital world became the centre point in everyone’s lives to stay in touch and stay safe and sane.

But Staying Home was evidently not an option for people experiencing homelessness. If everyone was to stay home, what, then, was to happen to those people who did not have a home, those who had previously been considered too marginal to address in social and health policies? By revolving public health advice around the notion of “home”, EU States involuntarily highlighted the flaws of their own homelessness policies.

In this context, it seems crucial to highlight that people experiencing homelessness are an especially vulnerable group. Sleeping rough or staying in temporary or emergency accommodation puts them at high risk of transmission and compromises their access to hygiene and isolation spaces. Homeless people are a medically high-risk population disproportionately affected by poor health and disability, with a high prevalence of respiratory disease. If people who are homeless contract Covid-19, they are more likely to become seriously ill and to die. Furthermore, people experiencing homelessness face multiple barriers to accessing healthcare as well as public health information.

As confinement started in many countries, people experiencing different forms of homelessness were faced with even more difficulties.

Rough sleepers, sofa surfers, and people using shelters (among others) no longer had access to their usual food supplies, washing facilities, or even a safe place to stay, as public restrooms and services in general were closed down. Restrictions were being forced on homeless people despite the fact that they were not in a position to follow them, and social isolation increasingly affected people experiencing homelessness as city centres emptied.

EDITORIAL



By **Laura Rahman**, Communications and Information Officer, FEANTSA

At the same time, vulnerable groups were even more exposed to the risk of becoming homeless, either due to the looming threat of eviction as their income decreased dramatically, or due to the dangerous situation the pandemic placed them in.

With this in mind, we found it crucial to collect experiences and perspectives from different groups amongst the homeless population in an attempt to highlight some of the issues that arose for homeless people, services and policies during the pandemic: and that, precisely, is what this edition of the Magazine is aiming for.

Shelters across Europe reported a lack in protective equipment, sanitation products, and testing materials. People experiencing homelessness - who are statistically more prone to health risks and most in need of medical attention - found the already difficult task of accessing medical care even more of a struggle.

In Denmark, reports show that although infections amongst migrants were relatively low, the lack of situation-specific measures make services for homeless migrants a ticking timebomb should the country be hit by a second wave.

Vulnerable groups living in an unsafe environment, such as women and LGBTQI people experiencing domestic abuse, were cut off from their support systems. As a result they were faced with the choice between staying at "home" where their mental health, physical wellbeing and in some cases their lives were in even more danger than before, or leaving the abusive home with nowhere to go.

People in inadequate or unstable housing found themselves at immediate risk of homelessness, such as sex workers, who often live in their place of work, and whose means of survival was taken away from them as they were instructed to cease all activities.

Asylum seekers in Greece were faced with even harsher restrictions than the wider Greek population, further alienating them and endangering their lives, as shown by the recent campfires in Moria and Vathy, where they were already living in inhumane and overcrowded conditions.

Migrants and asylum seekers of colour are also affected by blatant and structural racism, which pervades decision-making authorities to this day and ultimately also plays a role in the handling of their housing situation, amongst many other things. In Europe, we still have comparatively little work on the subject, with some exceptions (such as akt in the UK, who for a while now have been analysing and denouncing the situation of young LGBT people of colour experiencing homelessness). In the USA, organisations such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness have been studying the links between racial disparities and housing inequality for a few years now. In a context where Black people are dying of the coronavirus at twice the rate of Whites in the US, and in which Black people represent 40% of the homeless population, one cannot help but wonder what impact the pandemic is having on this already highly marginalised group, and what can be expected in the future if nothing changes.



In a nutshell, both services and beneficiaries struggle(d) with the increased difficulties a pandemic entails, something that was confirmed in the findings of surveys that were led during that time. One of those surveys, summarised in this Autumn issue, not only highlights both the social and medical vulnerabilities homeless people faced, but also what practices were suggested by services to better counteract the negative effects of both the pandemic and some of the destructive measures that were put in place.

On a more positive note, after calls for urgent action from Civil Society and social services across Europe, some governments, whether local or national, acted swiftly in an attempt to protect homeless people from Covid-19, as they were both at higher risk of getting infected and at higher risk of transmitting the disease. Without these quick reactions from authorities, the already deadly spread of Covid-19 might have been even more catastrophic.

In the UK, for example, the government partnered with Charity organisations to provide people who were sleeping rough with accommodation during lockdown, although concerns now arise about what will happen next.

The one thing that can be said is that the Covid-19 pandemic has certainly put homelessness policies in the spotlight. This issue of our Homeless in Europe Magazine attempts to take an intersectional approach when examining the impact of the current pandemic on the homeless population. Marginalised groups such as migrants, asylum seekers, survivors of domestic violence, LGBTQI youth, Black and brown communities, and sex workers have one major element in common, however diversified they may be - their social exclusion and the subsequent systemic disregard for their basic rights, of which housing is a major constituting element, particularly given the current health crisis.

The Covid19-related crisis has shown that housing is a key determinant of health. We are now at a crucial moment: is it going to be “back to business as usual” from now on, or will the EU and its Member States use this opportunity to build on their efforts deployed during the pandemic to ultimately make sure no one has to be homeless again? We at FEANTSA hope for the latter.

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