

FEBRUARY 2021

REPORT

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HOMELESS SERVICE PROVIDERS & HOMELESS PEOPLE: THE MIGRANT PERSPECTIVE





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1 Introduction



Introduction

Homelessness among migrants, both mobile EU citizens and non-EU migrants, has increased in the past years across Member States of the European Union. Migrants have been pushed to destitution and homelessness and they are often highly represented in the numbers of rough sleepers in the big cities of Europe.¹ Because of restrictive immigration rules, lack of access to housing and to the labour market, discrimination, or inability to access public funding, destitute migrants regularly turn to the homeless services who offer basic support and counselling. In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought further challenges and has affected migrants in specific ways, as they often experience challenges in accessing adequate housing and a lack of access to health care. The homeless services experienced challenges in this period as well: night shelters did not have the capacity to allow people to isolate, staff encountered limitations in their social work and confusion about the regulations regarding COVID-19 was experienced, at least initially.

At the same time, the pandemic has proved that achieving social rights for all it is not only possible but also economically feasible, as long as the political will exists. The public health threat posed by COVID-19 has highlighted governments' key roles in ensuring adequate living conditions for all, irrespective of people's immigration status. While the virus took hold, governments struggled to put in place initiatives to respond to the crisis. Successful practices have been implemented by governments who stepped up to support the most vulnerable in their societies. Big cities in countries such as Ireland, Denmark, Germany, Poland, the UK, France and Portugal have served as examples, allowing everyone to access accommodation during the first wave of the pandemic, either by opening extra night shelters or by facilitating access to hotels and hostels. While this was in itself an innovative and promising policy for tackling homelessness during a global health crisis, the added value was that

immigration status did not count as an excluding factor in several cases. This is to say that access to safe accommodation was not conditional upon immigration status, a measure that FEANTSA has advocated for when promoting the right to safe housing for all.²

With support from our FEANTSA members who worked as homeless service providers we collected information on developments throughout the initial lockdown and the immediate period after the first wave of COVID-19. In this report, we present our findings on the measures adopted by several Member States with a focus on the situation of migrants experiencing homelessness. We also analyse the impact that this period has had on these homeless service providers and their staff. The second part of the report is a compilation of statements from migrants who have experienced homelessness in the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Cases are also presented where migrants have suffered job loss and homelessness, including unsafe housing caused by the crisis.

The aim of this report is to identify the impact, both positive and negative, that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on homeless migrants and the services that support them. We also look at situations of potential human rights abuses. The data presented in this report will also serve to bring forward the topic of living conditions for migrants who continue to experience homelessness during the pandemic. With this data, we continue to support the claim that everyone should be allowed access to safe and adequate accommodation in general, and especially during a global health crisis, regardless of people's immigration status.

While second and third waves of the pandemic continue to unfold across Europe, the findings in this report refer to the first lockdown period. This analysis will be complemented by a follow up report in 2021 covering the developments after October 2020.

The data collected for this report was gathered over the summer of 2020 (July - September) in co-operation with Europa Brücke Münster and Project Frostschutzengel 2.0 (Germany), Praxis (UK), Project OUTSIDE (Denmark), St. Brother Albert Aid Society (Poland), and Saint John of God (Spain). Our members have conducted semi-structured interviews with migrants who lived in homelessness in the respective cities where they offer services. Consultations with staff were also carried out to collect further data on the impact of COVID-19 on homeless people and the personnel of the organisations. Information was also accessed from internal files of organisations doing case work to support homeless migrants in accessing their social rights. This information is presented in different case studies showing how the pandemic has affected people's lives. The testimonies and case studies have been collected with full consent from people themselves and in full anonymity. Furthermore, for the drafting of this report we also consulted country reports prepared by FEANTSA members and information from the websites of our members.

¹ "Fifth overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe", FEANTSA and Abbe Pierre Foundation, Brussels, July 2020 and "Effectively Tackling Homelessness Amongst Mobile EU Citizens. The Role of Homelessness Services, Cities, Member States and the EU", FEANTSA, Brussels, December 2018.

² Housing and Homelessness of Undocumented Migrants in Europe: Developing Strategies and Good Practices to Ensure Access to Housing and Shelter, joint report of FEANTSA, PICUM and EAPN, Brussels, June 2013.

2 Reactions to COVID-19 during and post first lockdown

Reactions to COVID-19 during and post first lockdown

2.1 Innovative measures for supporting homeless migrants

At the beginning of the pandemic, FEANTSA issued a statement calling for public authorities at local, regional, national and European level to adopt seven measures for protecting homeless people and public health.¹ Measure number two was to 'house homeless people' in a manner which would allow them to self-isolate and to have a private space where they could comply with the minimum prevention measures to protect from the new virus. To achieve this, a quick mobilisation and repurposing of the existing housing facilities was required, from vacant housing, tourist apartments and hotels to student housing, barracks, etc.

Public authorities in many MS have acted in this regard and have set in place new rules to allow for provision of shelter to the homeless population during the first wave of the pandemic. In Berlin, new shelters were established, amounting to a total of 450 new sleeping spots in services running on a 24/7 basis. As there are regularly no shelters opened 24/7 in Berlin, these spots were completely new in the city and have opened due to COVID-19. The use of hostels as new shelters for homeless people was organised as well. During the first wave of the pandemic, the Senate of Berlin instructed the district authorities to accommodate all homeless people regardless of nationality. Although the legal basis for this measure already existed, in practice this was regularly ignored before the health crisis.² The Senate also gave instructions upon the outbreak of the pandemic for the district

authorities to provide all EU citizens with welfare benefits, shelter, or temporary benefits if necessary, in a quick and easy manner. FEANTSA members in Berlin noticed a change in the willingness of authorities to provide welfare benefits and shelter for EU-citizens in general at the beginning of the lockdown. As a consequence of the instructions from the Senate towards the district authorities, these resources were available from the middle of March until end of June. Welfare benefits from job centres, temporary benefit for EU-citizens (called in German *Überbrückungsleistung*)³ and shelter were provided easily.

In the UK, an unprecedented number of people who were usually sleeping rough had access to emergency accommodation. When COVID-19 hit the UK, to contain the spread of the virus the government decided to provide funding towards emergency accommodation for the whole of its homeless and rough-sleeping population, including people of migrant background usually prevented from accessing public support. This is the case for migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds⁴ (NRPF) either as a condition on their leave to remain or because they did not hold a visa. Local Authorities and Great London Authority (GLA) commissioned homelessness organisations to run hotels where in some cases over 50% of the new residents had NRPF.⁵ This measure eventually reduced rough sleeping by 90% - though the accuracy of this percentage is debatable, what has become clear is that the "Everyone In" scheme produced a record result never achieved before in cutting down rough sleeping.⁶ To this end, hotels have been repurposed to host people who would otherwise be rough sleeping or relying on night shelters which were eventually closed because of COVID-19. Immigration advice is essential

1 FEANTSA statement "Covid19: Staying Home Not An Option for People Experiencing Homelessness" and "7 measures authorities must take to protect homeless people from Covid-19", available online [here](#).

2 §17 I ASOG Berlin: <https://gesetze.berlin.de/bsbe/document/jlr-ASOGBE2006V3P17>

3 § 23 SGB XII: https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/sgb_12/_23.html

4 The No Recourse to Public Funds condition applies to people who are 'subject to immigration control' in the UK. This might include people who have limited leave to remain, refused asylum-seekers who are 'appeal rights exhausted', those with no status or no documents to prove their status or EEA citizens unable to pass the right to reside test. This condition bans immigrants to access certain benefits, homelessness assistance or a local authority allocation of social housing. More information [here](#).

5 It is very difficult to have accurate figures and a full picture on the level of entitlement to public support for the people hosted in hotels. This is due to the fact that the population of hotels' guests has been fluid throughout the pandemic – guest turnover has been quite high, and some might have left the accommodation before their immigration status could get assessed. However, in [a report](#) by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government on the housing of rough sleepers during the COVID-19 pandemic it is said that "(...) in London where, by the end of September, around 2,000 people (or around half of the 4,000 in total) who remained in hotels and other emergency accommodation were ineligible for benefits (paragraphs 2.10 to 2.13)."

6 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/17648/html/>

to lift the NRPF condition and gain access to mainstream support. Authorities have therefore been able to closely observe, during this period how access to immigration advice is key to move on from homelessness; once people are able to lift the NRPF condition or obtain necessary papers, they become able to access vital services that they were previously barred from, including healthcare, mainstream housing, and welfare support.

The UK central government did not initially provide clarity on continuation of funding towards emergency accommodation beyond the first COVID-19 wave, with hotels progressively closing down and the number of rough sleepers increasing again throughout the summer. With a second and third wave of the pandemic hitting hard especially in the UK, homeless organisations have asked for the extension of central funding and for a reiteration of the strict guidance adopted in March which required local authorities to ensure access to emergency accommodation for all. Following these calls for the continuation of the “Everyone In” scheme, the central government announced additional waves of short term emergency funding to support homelessness provision up until March 2021. Without this provision, at the end of the first COVID-19 wave many people would have faced return to the streets with winter provisions unlikely to be fully in operation.

In Denmark, the Parliament adopted an aid package of DKK 5.5 million (approx. 740,000 euro) for nine organisations in the homeless area who would directly use the funds to improve and fit their services to the new situation, rent rooms in hotels or distribute meals to homeless people. One of these organisations is Project OUTSIDE⁷, a FEANTSA member. The funds from the aid package made it possible for project OUTSIDE to intensify the support for their target group who are mostly rough sleepers, who often lack access to housing and who struggle with complex social problems, addictions, mental illness, and poor health. Among this group are also mobile EU citizens who have benefitted from these funds, as we can read on Project OUTSIDE’s Instagram page.⁸

The Danish authorities have also made it possible to test homeless people for COVID-19 and a mobile unit was established to do testing at the shelters that could reach everyone. For people who tested positive, including migrants, it was possible to isolate in a designated facility under medical surveillance. Unfortunately, as we will explain in the following section, this was a measure that in practice was only available for migrants with a regular status in Denmark.⁹ During the first lockdown the Municipality of Copenhagen opened an emergency hostel in record time with 32 beds available and where people could also receive a meal. The government funds and private donations have also helped organisations to support homeless people in other various ways, such as handing out lunch boxes and grocery gift cards.

In Poland, NGOs reacted quickly and efficiently. They started to provide food parcels, cleaning products, and other material support in a frequent and flexible manner. In that sense, the service called ‘Mobile Help Desk’, a bus delivering these goods, was remarkable for being particularly effective.

These examples show how the pandemic compelled authorities and NGOs to think creatively and come up with new solutions to help homeless people during lockdown and to avoid a public health crisis. The situation provided opportunities through which societies demonstrated their capacity to reimagine the ways in which we deal with homelessness. Innovative measures such as repurposing buildings and opening hostels and hotels for everyone to access safe shelter have become possible during the pandemic. In the case of destitute migrants, having unconditional access to safe housing and to public funds in this period has been crucial in preventing the infection with the virus and for saving lives. Though these measures were based on a response to a crisis, and so have a temporary nature, they reveal the importance of access to safe shelter and support, that is not conditional upon immigration status.

⁷ <https://udenfor.dk/%ef%bb%bfprojekt-udenfor-faar-del-i-hjaelpepakke/>

⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-rhXEJhtvY/>

⁹ “COVID19 and homeless migrants, spring 2020 Kompasset testimonies”, Kompasset Kirkens Korshaer, Denmark, November 2020.

2.2 Potential dangers to migrants’ rights

Despite encouraging and innovative measures, challenges for migrants living in homelessness continued during the first wave of the pandemic. Authorities’ responses to the health crisis have meant that for many homeless people, having a safe shelter without having to worry about their administrative status in the host country. Nevertheless, on the less positive side of things many aspects of people’s lives worsened in this period and, as the initial wave of the pandemic drew to a close, access to safe shelter proved to be temporary. In the countries covered by this report, as soon as the restrictions were lifted, the situation went back to how it was before the pandemic, or in some cases, became even worse for migrants living in homelessness and destitution.

While the authorities responded to the outbreak of the virus by trying to provide accommodation solutions for everyone, some emergency shelters were simultaneously being forced to close. For example, though the number of beds in Berlin has increased, overall, in Germany there has been a reduction in the number of shelters. Small size shelters had to close because they could not provide enough space to allow for social distancing and will probably continue to be closed until the situation improves. Likewise, as the lockdown coincided with the end of the winter emergency programme, some of these emergency shelters closed during the pandemic. Some of the day centres also closed, or their capacity was reduced, with limitations or impossibility of counselling. In addition, two of the shelters specifically set up for the pandemic in Berlin stopped working after the end of lockdown and authorities went back to excluding practices and not accommodating mobile EU citizens in many cases. In the UK, while people moved into repurposed hotels in the first few weeks of lockdown, as time went by newly homeless people found it hard to get access to emergency accommodation.

The reasons were: resources became progressively scarce, public instructions on how to apply for this service were unclear and there were fewer opportunities for homeless people to access internet and interpretation, especially for migrant homeless people.

The innovative measures were not bound to last and as soon as borders opened again, the Berlin Senate went back to previous rules regarding access to accommodation and welfare benefits for EU (non-German) citizens. This meant in practice that it became even more difficult for people to access welfare benefits, which were in general denied. As soon as the lockdown measures eased and borders opened again, the authorities began to act in a repressive fashion, refusing to grant mobile EU citizens the welfare benefits known as “Überbrückungsleistungen”. Worryingly, to access this specific temporary benefit, German authorities requested mobile EU citizens to fill in a questionnaire, which, NGOs believe, aims to force EU citizens to return to their home countries. FEANTSA members in Berlin are concerned about the data that this questionnaire requests from people as this information could be used as a basis for withdrawal of the right of free movement and therefore reason to refuse welfare benefits and force a return to the home country.

This observation found consensus in network exchange with other professionals working with homeless EU citizens in Germany. In some cases, authorities seem to follow an even more restrictive policy than before the pandemic.

In Denmark, a serious problem concerning irregular migrants was the lack of official guidelines in the cases where people tested COVID-19 positive.¹⁰ In the beginning of the pandemic, staff at shelters, homeless hostels and other services did not know how to handle cases in which the migration status was unclear and ended up in situations where they could not guide people who needed support.¹¹ It was also reported that migrants who did not have regularised status were afraid to come forward if they had COVID-19

¹⁰ “COVID19 and homeless migrants, spring 2020 Kompasset testimonies”, Kompasset Kirkens Korshaer, Denmark, November 2020.

¹¹ <https://www.information.dk/indland/2020/04/praab-manglende-karantaeneplasser-migranter-covid-19-kan-faa-alvorlige-konsekvenser>

symptoms as they knew they risked deportation. While migrants had access to testing and to isolation facilities, in cases where the status was unclear, the immigration authorities requested to be notified. Undocumented migrants could go into quarantine at two asylum centres in the country, but after the quarantine period they would be faced with a deportation order. This condition was highly criticised by Danish civil society and has proven in reality to discourage people from asking for help when needed, which posed a big threat to both migrants' health and public health in general.¹²

During the state of alarm in Spain (March 14 - June 21), emergency resources were opened for homeless people in large cities such as Madrid and Barcelona, which has generated the displacement of people to those locations. After the closure of these places, people had to return to the streets and the numbers of those sleeping rough has again increased. Though authorities worked to offer solutions for this, concern for the situation of migrants remains pertinent among FEANTSA members in Spain, as well as other organisations, especially in the case of migrants coming from outside the EU. A recent study in Spain showed non-EU migrants suffer higher levels of exclusion than national citizens, including in the labour and housing market.¹³ Caritas notes that this has been escalated by the crisis. During the pandemic, one of our Spanish FEANTSA members also observed that widespread rejection of non-EU citizens, as a result of stigmatisation and xenophobia, appeared as well.

3 Impact on homeless service providers



¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://elpais.com/espana/catalunya/2020-11-19/barcelona-traslada-a-los-sin-techo-alojados-en-los-pabellones-de-la-fira-a-tres-hoteles.html?rel=listapoyo>

Impact on homeless service providers

The pandemic has also brought challenges and restrictions to the work of the services who support homeless people in fulfilling basic needs as well as in obtaining legal and general counselling. After an initial period where closing of shelters happened, which was in itself a shock for many users and staff, the managers and the staff had to find ways of adapting to the situation created by the health crisis.

Hygiene and prevention measures

After the initial period of closure, the staff in shelters came back to work and learnt that they needed to implement new rules and ways of working with clients, for everyone's safety. As staff returned to work, a common uncertainty was observed by several of the organisations consulted for this report about the implementation of hygiene and infection control measures, as there were no clear instructions available from the authorities. As a result, similar organisations were working quite differently, not offering standardised services and sometimes with poor quality accommodation.

However, after the shock of the forced closure of many shelters, they began to be equipped with disinfection products and to implement health measures, with the aim to respect social distancing rules and follow authorities' guidelines as much as possible. Another issue for services was the already insufficient infrastructure for hygiene or cleaning services for homeless people, which was even weaker in this period. Only a few places could still offer services like laundry or showering, and the number of people allowed to enter facilities had to be reduced according to government guidelines.

The conditions of the shelters were not always compliant with the regulations in place, as many shelters did not have enough space to give separate rooms to people who needed to go into quarantine. Even if they had, toilets were not in these rooms, which was dangerous since it was not always possible to disinfect the area after each use. In Poland, our FEANTSA member reported that the homeless people they worked with and who were in quarantine initially reacted positively and were

attentive to each other's needs. However, after some time they were tired with the situation and

could not cope with being inside all the time. Some of them ran away from the isolation rooms through windows. This created additional challenges for the service providers as they did not have enough staff or lacked competencies to deal with this type of situation. The quality of the accommodation and support offer has not been consistent across all local authorities in the UK either, and in some cases, people did not have access to food or specialist support. This could be particularly hard for those with health needs or lacking support networks, common experiences for homeless migrants.

Specifically worrying for migrants regarding prevention measures in this period was the language barrier, which could become an obstacle to respecting regulations and applying prevention. However, shelters quickly realised this and adjusted to the need by translating information into the languages that homeless migrants spoke, thus facilitating access to information about coronavirus and related measures. Additionally, from the consultations conducted over the summer with homeless migrants we also found out that people have obtained information about the virus by following the news in their home country or from friends and family. Having access to a smartphone or computer and an internet connection proved important in this sense.

"I have friends who are sick in my home country.

"I use disinfecting gel, but now it is finish [shows empty bottle]. I buy when I can, but often no money.

"No information in my language, friends tell me little. From English to [native language, ed.]. I want to stay here and work and then go home to family."

- homeless migrant, male, rough sleeper in Denmark, age category: 30-49

Staff

Issues such as stress, burn out or insufficient funding for salaries and staff development were already present among staff working in homelessness services in countries where resources dedicated to this field were scarce.¹

During the first wave of the pandemic these issues deepened, and other challenges appeared as the staff were directly affected both on a personal and a professional level. As the initial response to the pandemic across the EU was to close public services (including kindergartens and day-cares) part of the staff at the shelters had to stay home to take care of their young children, a phenomenon reported to us by our Danish and Polish members who participated in this report. Others were afraid of the virus: contracting it themselves as well as infecting others in the shelters, so they decided to remain in their houses as a measure of protection. A lack of staff was an additional problem for many NGOs in Poland, as well as in other countries where many volunteers are people over the age of 60 and so part of the at-risk group.

After a period of adjustment to the restrictions and an introduction of preventive measures, the staff in most shelters returned to work with a better understanding of the new conditions. To protect themselves and the users of the services, staff adjusted their lifestyles and limited their travels, going out only for work and doing shopping once a week. Even so, it was often challenging for accommodation providers to support their guests as the roles of the personnel at some shelters had changed in this period. Many guests having complex needs and being used to living outdoors needed support to adapt to the new conditions. The staff felt it was challenging to help people adhere to lockdown measures and stay indoors, often confined to a single hotel room, as in the case of the UK service providers.

In some shelters in Poland social workers were perceived by service users as oppressive at times because, initially, it was believed closure and isolation was their decision. In Germany, the staff felt that it was hard to reach out to all potential clients and work towards their objective, as the access to services was not possible as intended.

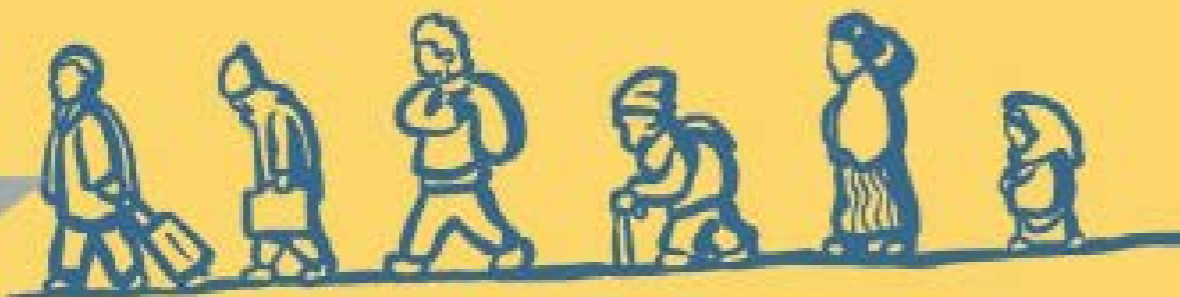
Facilitated co-operation and shedding light on immigration issues

A positive effect of the crisis in the UK was that homelessness organisations worked more closely together than ever before in getting people off the streets, and new inter-sector partnerships were established. Also, having most rough sleepers housed gave social workers and the staff at the shelters the opportunity to better assess people's needs and quantify them – in particular, it became clear that NRPF is a condition all too often shared by people usually sleeping rough or being homeless in the UK, and that immigration advice is key in providing pathways out of homelessness. As a main provider of immigration advice to rough sleepers and destitute migrants in London, Praxis used the situation created by the pandemic as an opportunity to showcase their Street Legal model of immigration advice with rough sleepers across the GLA commissioned accommodation.² Furthermore, the crisis allowed the local authorities in the UK to see the impact of No Recourse to Public Funds on the migrant homeless population. This condition too often prevents migrants in the UK from accessing public services and benefits, including access to food and phone credit. Many people had previously relied on charities to fulfil these needs, but with many centres shut down because of COVID-19, the Local Authorities had to fill an overwhelming gap. New partnerships were built by the GLA with homelessness organisations that they did not work with previously.

¹ Staffing Homelessness Services in Europe, European Observatory on Homelessness, Brussels 2020.

² For more information on the Street Legal model: Page 9 of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Ending Homelessness 2018 report: https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/242248/appg-for-ending-homelessness-report_final_may2020.pdf

4 Impact on homeless people



Impact on homeless people

4.1 Main Findings

Homeless people were affected in multiple ways by the pandemic. The exclusion to which they are normally subjected deepened during the first wave and as a result, access to information and consequently their ability to take prevention measures against the new virus was hindered. As discussed, a language barrier or lack of knowledge about the system in the host country can serve to exclude migrants even further. Many migrants who experience homelessness and destitution in the EU have declared that a main objective of their travels abroad is to look for jobs and better income opportunities.¹ This is also confirmed by FEANTSA members who work as homeless service providers. With a health crisis that locks societies down, these goals become even harder to achieve. For those migrants who were forced to accept informal jobs or who relied on daily part-time jobs for income, it became even harder to earn money as these offers became increasingly scant.

With a closed society and a lack of access to social rights, homeless and destitute migrants have experienced a new level of exclusion. In the following pages we present several case studies collected by our FEANTSA members which illustrate how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted homeless migrants' access to the labour market during the first wave.

"People are afraid to touch money, the paper, or to get close to me."

-homeless migrant, male, rough sleeper in Denmark, age category: >50

In Poland, the first weeks of the lockdown were particularly hard for people experiencing homelessness as many of them did not know why some shelters and social kitchens were closed

and why there was no one on the streets (hence, begging or recycling of beverage containers became impossible too). Most of those living in homelessness had no information about what was going on in the beginning and why social life had suddenly disappeared. Later, when people were accommodated in shelters for isolation, many of the residents started to feel frustration or discomfort and they found the situation hard to accept. In the shelters, the residents' nervousness increased significantly, and more frequent quarrels and conflicts occurred. Some people who did not accept isolation left the shelters, despite the prospect of living on an empty street. For those who had alcohol addictions it was even more difficult to cope with being inside 24/7 – the felt need for alcohol was increased by feelings of confinement and loneliness.

FEANTSA's Spanish member reiterates that the feeling of abandonment and loneliness had a huge impact on homeless people they met during this period. Faced with empty streets, people declared that "we have lost human contact with others," "we have lost access to food, drinks, shower, and to collect pocket money from passers-by." A big problem for many of those living in homelessness is mental health.

A lack of emotional support and impact on the mental health of migrants and especially asylum seekers were noted by Groundswell in the UK in their data collection.² The lack of information and advice was even more acute in this period, because of financial reasons and no access to online tools/computers/internet, which led to increased feelings of loneliness among the asylum seekers supported by the team of Groundswell. The great impact of the first lockdown on the mental health of homeless people has also been observed in Denmark by our members at Project OUTSIDE and demonstrated in testimonies collected from homeless people over the summer.

¹ Intra-EU migrants experiencing homelessness in Brussels. Analysis of field data gathered by DIOGENES street outreach workers, Mauro Striano, Brussels, December 2020.

² "COVID-19 Fortnightly Briefing 9 - 28.08.2020 - homelessness & immigration", Groundswell, UK, November 2020.

Many were surprised or even in shock to hear about the lockdown. Confronted with the official announcement that everybody should “stay at home” homeless people wondered where that was for them and how they would manage to comply with the recommendations from the authorities.

Additionally, public institutions such as libraries and churches, where many homeless people stay during the day, had to close and homeless services were noticeably reduced (at least initially), leaving people in confusion and uncertainty. Feelings of loneliness, marginalisation and depression deepened for people living in

homelessness as they were constantly reminded that they were alone with no safe place of their own where they could be socially distanced and sheltered from the virus.

"I go to Shopping centre [mall, ed.] and get disinfecting gel every day. I don't have bag, I carry my stuff in my pockets, so I don't have room for gel.

"I get information about Corona everywhere. Everybody tells me, all the time. People die, people get sick. I do not want to know, you know. I have enough. I get depressed from this.

"I don't use public transportation; I have no money for mask (...) There are signs all over and they yell it out crazy loud all day and all night at the stations. There is really no way of escaping information about Corona all the time. It's depressing actually.

"I remember watching the Queen [respondent is probably referring to the Prime minister, ed.] speak on the screen at the station that night. I was all alone. They told everybody they had to go home, to go inside, to stay inside. I was thinking: 'where is that for me? Where do I go?' I was all alone; I was in shock man."

- homeless migrant, male, rough sleeper in Denmark, age category: 30-49

The impact on basic needs of homeless migrants was also reported during the first lockdown. Closing of all public toilets (in shopping centres and public spaces), lack of food, clean water, or lack of access to services such as laundry and inability to afford face masks for prevention were some of the issues.

3 Ibid.

In Germany, this especially affected homeless people outside the social work circuit. In their analysis, Groundswell also draw attention to authority's failure to ensure the right to adequate and sufficient food during the pandemic for people living in homelessness, destitution or with no access to public funding. They identify that these situations, in which people do not have financial support and all their means of subsistence are cut off, can push those in destitution into criminal activity, such as selling drugs.³ The right to access clean drinking water was also a concern as closing of water tap posts happened in Copenhagen, Denmark. During spring 2020, as a response to COVID-19, Copenhagen Municipality shut down water posts as well as public toilets, initially without providing alternatives. Toilets reopened later, and the municipality explained (upon request) that water was available in the reopened toilets and that these would be cleaned more often. An answer was never received on whether the municipality found it safe to drink tap water from toilet facilities.

As we show in the cases presented below, some mobile EU citizens lost their jobs in this period as they were working in the hospitality industry which was heavily impacted by the pandemic. Obtaining welfare benefits was another major challenge for mobile EU citizens because of difficulties with bureaucracy and contacting authorities determined by a lack of digital or linguistic competencies. As the physical offices of public authorities were closed, people had a hard time accessing their services. Cases where people were at risk of homelessness or became homeless during the first wave of the coronavirus were also registered, as their income was cut, and they could not afford to pay rent.

There were also situations in which individuals' accommodation was bound to the employer, as is common for migrants working abroad, so once the employment was terminated, they were also threatened with homelessness. Finding a new job after the lockdown has been another challenge that migrants encountered. Businesses did not recover entirely and attitudes towards migrants in this period deteriorated.

Despite the severe depreciation of the economy during the first wave of the pandemic and a reduction in economic opportunities abroad for mobile EU citizens, this has not translated into a complete return of destitute mobile EU citizens to their home countries. The homeless service providers in Germany have reported that only a few people from those they work with have expressed a will to return to their home country, although there is no clear data on how many may have returned before the borders closed.

At the beginning of the pandemic, media reported waves of migrant workers returning to their home country, hoping for a better protection against the new virus. However, they soon realised that their home countries would also suffer from the crisis and that from an economical point of view they had better chances if they stayed abroad. Those who returned have also stated that they were concerned by the lack of income in their home country and hoped for borders to open so they could travel again for work. In response to the voluntary returns, an increase in hate speech and raising wave of discrimination against and condemnation of migrants have been witnessed. Particularly in Romania, people were judged for returning and were blamed for bringing the virus into the country.⁴

Accounts of homeless mobile EU citizens who remained in host MS during the pandemic have been confirmed by several FEANTSA members and partners in the last two editions of our Homeless in Europe magazine dedicated to the impact of COVID-19 on homeless⁵ people and respectively, to the Roma experiences of homelessness across Europe.⁶ Both issues relay information about the struggles of homeless migrants during the pandemic in countries like Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden or the UK. Migrants living abroad in homelessness during the pandemic confirmed a reduction in the money they could earn under the lockdown and not being able to

comply with preventive measures such as staying inside or washing hands properly. Despite these difficulties and a clear lack of protection against the virus, migrants also talk about the need to travel abroad in the search of an income, as they stand more chances than in their home country.

Interviewer: Can you describe your current situation?

"I sleep in a shelter for homeless (...) I am trying to get a job in Denmark, then an apartment, and so on."

Interviewer: How is the Corona pandemic affecting your everyday life?

"At the beginning of the pandemic in Denmark, I was sleeping at an emergency hostel for homeless people.

"But while I was there, I was infected with Corona, along with 10 or so others. So, I was sent in isolation for a long time. Since then, everything has been quite normal."

- homeless migrant, male, rough sleeper in Denmark, age category: 30-49

4.2 Case studies revealing the impact of COVID-19 on homeless migrants⁷

Loss of Job means Loss of Access to Shelter: Single mother of two children from Greece living in Germany

Andrea is a single mother with two children, one attending kindergarten and the other one attending primary school. They are living in an emergency shelter for homeless families in Germany. All of them are Greek nationals. Before the pandemic, Andrea had a part-time job as a cleaner, which allowed the family to have a small, but steady income. To supplement the money, the family applied for welfare benefits; having worker status, Andrea was entitled to them. This income also allowed the family to stay in the

4 <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-romania-shuns-its-diaspora-in-fight/>

5 FEANTSA Homeless in Europe magazine autumn edition themed The Impact of Covid-19 on Homeless People and Services available [here](#).

6 FEANTSA Homeless in Europe magazine autumn edition themed Roma Experiences of Homelessness in Europe available [here](#).

7 The information presented in this section is collected under total anonymity and the names are fictive in order to protect the identity of people who shared their experiences with homelessness during the first wave of the pandemic.

emergency shelter where they were living, as they fulfilled requisites established by the German law. Shortly before the outbreak of the corona pandemic, the mother was fired from her part-time job. As the loss of the job was involuntary, she could retain her worker status, which entitled her to receive welfare benefits for six months more. The six-month period has already expired, and the family does not receive welfare benefits anymore. Since the mother is not German, under the EU free movement law she can only regain entitlement to welfare benefits by having a worker status, which means finding a job.

The mother has actively been looking for a job in the past 6 months, but job supply has shrunk because of the pandemic and it is being extremely difficult for her to find a new job. As the family receives no income either from work or welfare benefits, they were informed they must leave the emergency shelter after a grace period, so the mother is at risk not only of destitution, but also of street homelessness with her two small children.

Sex Worker at Risk of Homelessness: Romanian woman practicing sex work in Germany

Eva is a Romanian woman who worked and lived in a brothel in Germany. Because of the pandemic, all brothels had to close down, and prostitution was forbidden, leaving Eva homeless and without any income. Eva was able to stay with an acquaintance, who put her in a 'very uncomfortable dependent relationship' (in her own words). Later on, she reached a counselling centre for women working in prostitution, which informed her that she was entitled to receive welfare benefits if she proved she had lost her job and her accommodation. They also helped her to open a bank account, which is a requisite to receive the welfare benefits. They lost contact with Eva after that, so they do not know if her application to receive these benefits was successful. This case is an example of how the pandemic has affected women working in prostitution in Germany. Accommodation in emergency shelters is not available for most sex workers because of legal barriers, so, given the lack of options, they often end up in dependent relationships which can harm their physical and mental health. With very limited options, some continue engaging in prostitution despite the coronavirus-related bans and risk getting arrested and fined by the police.

Unsafe Housing: Bulgarian family living in Germany

Maria and Viktor are a couple from Bulgaria living in a German city together with their 15-year-old daughter. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, both adults were employed in the cleaning industry and their daughter attended secondary school. They rented a one-room flat, located in an inadequate building where many residents live in poverty or destitution. However, they were happy with their flat and did not complain about living there. Because of the corona pandemic, both Maria and Viktor lost their jobs. They were entitled to welfare benefits because they lost their jobs involuntarily, but in the end, they could not receive these benefits because of excessive bureaucratic hurdles and language barriers, even with help from social counsellors. As a result, the family received no income anymore and they had to spend their savings on food, so they stopped paying rent. After three months without paying rent the landlord asked them to hand in the keys and vacate the flat. In Germany, this is illegal since the landlord needs a court order to make an eviction. However, the family did not know their rights and handed in the keys, finding themselves roofless suddenly. They contacted the local welfare centre responsible for housing homeless people. However, as the family without an eviction order, they were considered 'voluntarily homeless', so they were not entitled to any accommodation. Instead, they were informed they could re-enter the flat even if the landlord did not allow it. The family has been living in the flat since then. For now, they avoided rooflessness, but they are facing insecure housing and will keep facing it as long as they do not pay rent and they do not take bureaucratic or legal action. In the long term, if they cannot prove their efforts to maintain housing, they will be regarded again as 'voluntarily homeless', without access to public-funded accommodation and hence be at risk of rooflessness.

Offering Shelter During the Pandemic: Denmark, man aged 33-49

"Before the corona outbreak in Denmark, I was sleeping rough in a park in Copenhagen. I was drinking too much, and I was admitted to hospital, where I got help to stop drinking. When I was discharged from the hospital, I was offered a two-week stay in a rehabilitation facility run by the Red Cross. But I only got to stay there for a couple of days because they had to close when the Danish government "shut down" Denmark, because of the outbreak. I was back on the street. Luckily, a social worker from Project OUTSIDE that I have known for some years offered me to stay in a hotel instead. I stayed there for almost two months, until the social worker offered me a place in the homeless hostel where I am now. Part of the deal at the hostel is that they help me to apply for residency, seek jobs, learn Danish/English. I follow the instructions from the government online, some information is in [native language]. But not all information is in [native language, ed.], and I do not understand English or Danish so well. I also speak with other homeless people that I know about the guidelines from the Government."

*Note: The person in this case received support with accommodation in a hotel using the government funds (the Corona aid package), proving to be a great example of how the pandemic produced positive outcomes and engaged NGOs in new activities.

Job Loss and Delay in Receiving Benefits during the Pandemic: Olga, Polish woman in Munster, Germany

Olga is a single woman from Poland living in Münster. She has experienced destitution already several times in her life and she has been homeless in Germany. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, she was working as a chambermaid in a hotel where she was granted a room to live as part of her work contract. When the pandemic began to spread more widely in Europe, Olga was fired from her job and consequently given a notice to leave her accommodation. The additional welfare benefits she received from local authorities also expired in March 2020. Suddenly, Olga was unemployed and with no source of income, as she had to re-apply for the welfare benefits. Luckily, she was able to

find an apartment in a short time and move in there. However, the chances of finding a new job were very low because of the pandemic, and with no income she was at risk of homelessness since she could not pay rent. The only option she had left was to try to apply again for the welfare benefits.

The application process for the benefits turned out to be very difficult because of the lockdown. Since offices were closed, no appointments were being made and everything was delayed and done electronically. Olga faced language barriers as well as digital ones, so she had to submit the documentation in paper only. She had to ask for help to communicate with the authorities and the situation became even more complicated when she had to quarantine for two weeks. During this time, Olga could not pay rent, so after three months her new landlord sent an eviction notice. In addition, the landlord lived in the same house as Olga, which put her under pressure and in a dangerous and difficult position on more than one occasion. Finally, after four months from the date of the application, the welfare benefits were approved, and Olga could pay her rent.

Fortunately, this second threat of rooflessness was averted at the last minute but it was only possible with the support of the counselling centre and with the help of a tenant's protection association. After receiving the welfare benefits, Olga could move to a new apartment.

The Risk of Family Homelessness During the Pandemic: Bulgarian Family Living in Germany

Georgi lives with his wife, son, and father in Germany. They all come from Bulgaria. In the past, they experienced homelessness and had to stay in an emergency shelter for families, but since 2018 they were living in their own flat with a reasonable rent.

Georgi's employment had been the main source of income within the family for many years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic he was working in a hotel as a cleaner, but he was fired because of the lockdown. He tried to register at the job centre to receive the unemployment benefits he was entitled to but was not successful: the closure of the office as well as language and technical problems when trying to

register online were the main barriers. He then asked for help at the Social Welfare Office where he applied for some welfare benefits and was helped in his registration for the job centre, too.

He had no feedback from the Social Welfare Office or the job centre for several weeks. It took two months for the former to approve his application, and four months for the job centre to grant the unemployment benefits. During this time, as the family could not pay the rent, they were sent an eviction notice. Furthermore, the Social Welfare Office could not give Georgi's family a loan to pay rent for the next months because they already received a loan in 2019, which was not yet repaid as they had not earned enough to do so.

In the long run, the family will lose the home and will have to move back to a homeless shelter. As there is no income from work at the moment and there is a notice of termination due to rent debts, finding a new home in the given time does not seem possible. Unfortunately, the pandemic has put the family in a situation in which they will have to leave their home.

The Importance of a Support System in Avoiding Homelessness: Family in Munster, Germany

Karl lives in Münster with his wife and their four children, having moved to Germany from Bulgaria. They all live in a flat of two rooms only, but with its own toilet and kitchen.

Karl's job has been the main source of income in the family for many years, but he was fired because of the coronavirus outbreak. Due to the loss of his job, the family was not covered by health insurance for a short period of time. Luckily, a counselling centre helped them to obtain health insurance through a personal consultation, independent from work, so they regained access to medical services quickly. During the months where any of the parents had a job, they could receive some income from welfare benefits, since the parents had applied for them and fulfilled the requirements before lockdown. While in lockdown, the cramped conditions in their accommodation made it even more difficult for the family to cope and they were concerned in particular about their psychological situation and feared long-term consequences of isolation. The lockdown also affected the children's education,

since the family does not have a computer with access to internet.

Fortunately, both parents found a job again after lockdown was loosened and they can take turns caring for the children, as the schools and day-care centres opened again. However, without external help to overcome language and technical obstacles (internet, telephone), they would not have been covered in the event of an acute illness, like a complicated COVID case.

A Lack of Emergency Aid During the Pandemic: an elderly Romanian man living in Germany

Mihail is an elderly Romanian man who lived in a winter emergency shelter in Germany. His age comes with health complications - he has some cardiovascular pathologies. Before the pandemic outbreak, his income came from begging. Once lockdown started, he was left without his source of income and in addition he found that all food distribution centres for homeless people in the city were closed.

He tried going to a counselling centre, where they were able to give him some canned food and noodles for a few days and to help him to apply for welfare benefits and health insurance. The lack of the latter was particularly worrying amid the pandemic, given Mihail's cardiovascular problems. Before, he could access medical services and day-care centres for homeless people, but all these facilities closed during lockdown. His application for welfare benefits was rejected, however, after an agreement with a lawyer, the counselling centre helped Mihail to take legal actions against this decision. Meanwhile, Mihail was sent to some new temporary food distribution centres where meals cost more than Mihail could afford to pay.

After several weeks of waiting for a response to his legal complaint, and when borders reopened again, Mihail went back to Romania. He could no longer withstand living without any income and having to explain constantly his situation to authorities, while not receiving any assistance. Despite having lost contact with him, it is assumed that Mihail is now living much worse off in Romania than in Germany.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations



Conclusions and Recommendations

The pandemic has aggravated the vulnerable living conditions of migrants across Europe. Situations of overcrowding, unsafe and unhygienic conditions have increased the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The shutdown of businesses has left many migrant workers in precarious jobs vulnerable to homelessness, as accommodation is often tied to their work contract or simply because they could not afford to pay rent anymore.

This report, together with the testimonials collected from migrant people living in homelessness and the different cases presented above, aims to shed light on the ways in which people with an uncertain migration status can be impacted during a global health crisis. Furthermore, the services and the personnel who work to support homeless people, migrants included, have also been challenged in this period and they have had to adapt the services they offer and the way they work. Often, these services are the only option for homeless and destitute migrants to receive support as well as counselling. This comes with great responsibility, which the staff has felt more strongly throughout the pandemic, along with the pressure to implement governments' restrictions and rules.

The pandemic has also proved that it is possible to ensure social rights and especially access to safe accommodation for all, irrespective of people's immigration status. As we know, this status influences and limits a person's access to basic services, which is why during a pandemic it is even more important that authorities ensure that everyone is protected. And it has been possible, it is possible. UK organisations have underlined the need for counselling people so that they can exit the No Recourse to Public Funds condition, and the recommendation is that this condition should be done away with. **Instead, during the pandemic and beyond, everyone in need should be allowed to access adequate housing.**

Governments should allocate more funding to supporting migrants in destitution and establish clear guidelines to ensure that no one becomes homeless, both during the pandemic and afterwards, including asylum seekers, refugees, and mobile EU citizens. Especially, authorities

should make sure that people's rights are respected when they reside abroad and in no case should a crisis be used to attempt to violate people's right to free movement in the EU.

Making sure that everyone is safe during the pandemic, without connecting this to people's immigration status, is essential. This includes securing access to safe housing and sanitary measures for prevention and ensuring that everyone has access to clean water, food, and sufficient resources, including disinfectants and masks which allow them to comply with prevention measures. **Places for self-isolation as well as free testing and treatment in cases of COVID-19 infections need to be provided for people who are destitute and on the move.** Furthermore, access to vaccination for migrants in destitution and homelessness should also be made available without conditionality based on people's immigration status. **Equally important in this period is that authorities pay attention to increasing waves of discrimination, hate-speech, and xenophobia,** as we see that these issues persist and continue to contribute to the exclusion of migrants who are destitute and experience homelessness.

Funding and aid should also be ensured for the service providers who work to counsel and support homeless migrants. Unstable funding and fluctuation of staff was already reported in the past and the situation has only become more precarious throughout the pandemic. There is a need to evaluate how COVID-19 will change the ways these service providers function and investments in training staff and securing jobs in the field should be realised.