

WINTER 2021

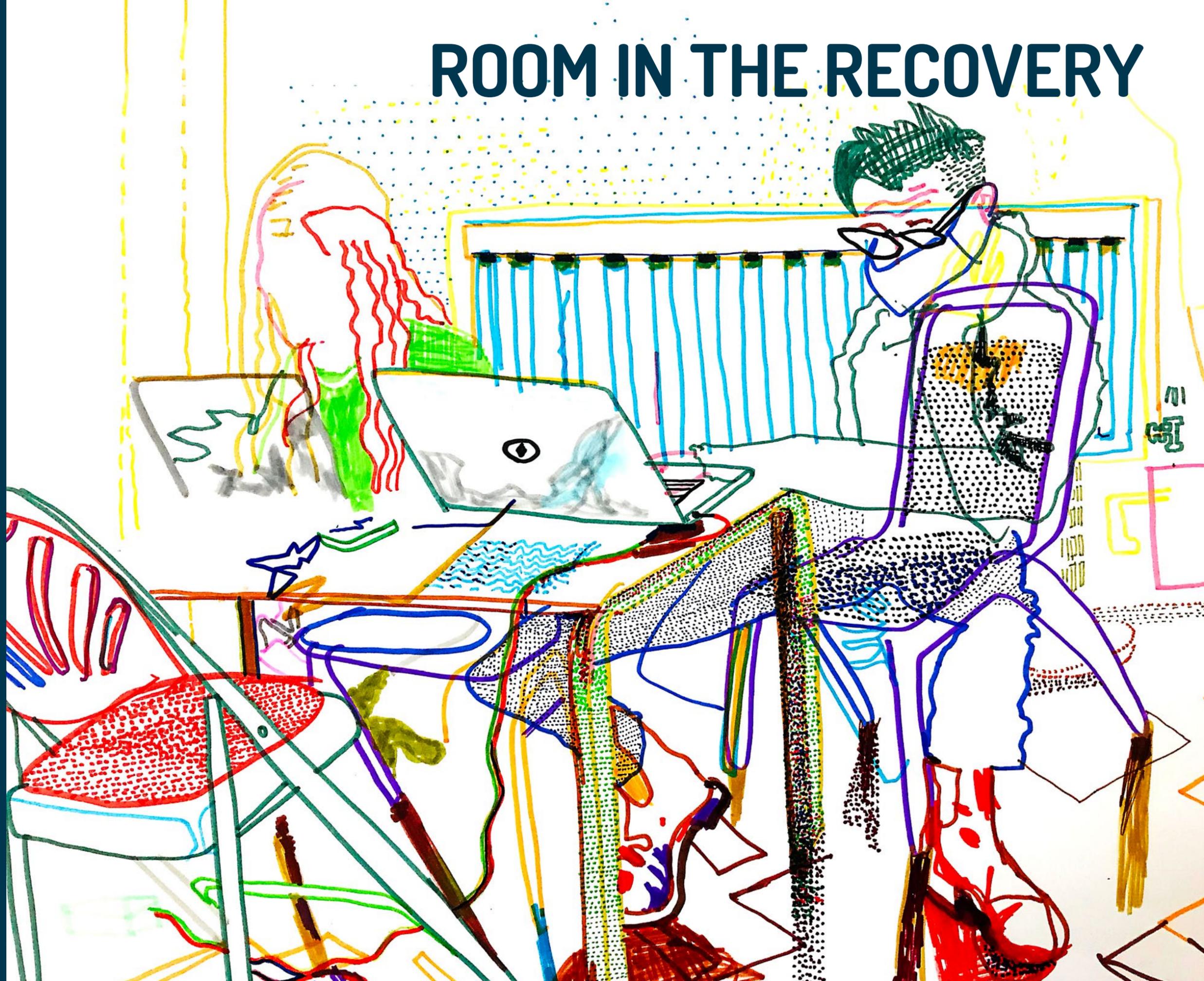
Homeless in Europe

A Magazine by FEANTSA



FEANTSA

ROOM IN THE RECOVERY



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At the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe in early 2020, public authorities acted quickly to implement measures that would protect their populations. Among these were measures intended to protect homeless people - a high-risk group in terms of both transmission and health impact of the disease. The conversion of some night shelters into 24/7 shelters, the effort to provide single occupancy rooms, and the use of hotel rooms to accommodate rough sleepers all contributed to preventing coronavirus outbreaks among homeless populations. Meanwhile, eviction moratoria, rent breaks, and furlough schemes were rolled out to prevent new inflow into homelessness.

While some measures were punitive or exclusionary - as Malgorzata Sienczyk illustrates in her article from Poland, the call to “stay home” could feel like a mockery to those without one - others had a positive impact and should be built upon in the medium and longer term to better address homelessness.

Beyond simply protecting homeless people from the virus, some measures provided better responses and solutions to homelessness than those that were being implemented before the pandemic. Take for example the case of Ireland; Focus Ireland is able to show in their

article that the number of homeless families dropped every month for which there was a moratorium on evictions. Similarly, Crisis points to the huge reduction in street homelessness that was achieved by removing eligibility criteria for accessing homeless services in the UK. The pandemic showed us that we could improve the way we addressed homelessness. Responding to this, FEANTSA released a statement in August 2021 entitled [‘The way we address homelessness in Europe must change in the wake of the pandemic,’](#) which put forward several recommendations for quick wins and longer-term changes that should (and sometimes could easily) be adopted by building on the momentum of pandemic policies.

By the summer of 2021, a large and growing part of the European population was vaccinated. Despite the double advantage for homeless people of many of the policies introduced in the initial phases of the pandemic, this gearshift saw many of these measures come to an end, or at least threatened their continuation. Deborah K Padgett describes how, in New York, “hotel residents were moved en masse back to crowded shelters in June 2021.” But it makes no sense to go back to the old normal. Reversing measures that have proven to benefit homeless people and reduce homelessness is counterproductive and, where retrogressive measures are prohibited, a violation of human rights.

EDITORIAL



By **Ruby Silk**, Communications and Information Officer, FEANTSA

In September 2021, FEANTSA launched our #RoomInTheRecovery campaign, with the aim of keeping pressure on national, local and regional public authorities to maintain effective measures for homeless people that had been implemented during the pandemic and to use their recovery plans and budgets as an opportunity to improve homelessness policies.

The campaign's central tool is the [Recovery Watch](#) monitor which tracks policy developments across Europe and holds them up as examples on social media, in addition to compiling them in our campaign page. The Recovery Watch tool has allowed us to expose some worrying developments - measures are often ended with much less fanfare than that with which they were introduced - and also to give a platform to those more promising.

While the Recovery Watch monitor is a useful way to flag the termination of individual measures, it isn't able (or intended) to give a comprehensive overview of the situation in any given country, or to illustrate the cumulative impact of measures and policy developments during the recovery period on homelessness or on the lives of people experiencing homelessness and working in the sector. We hoped this magazine - an extension of the campaign - could deliver broader insight into these developments and their impact, while allowing room for interpretation (there is room in the recovery for interpretation!) from our contributors. Indeed, the interpretation by our member Provienda of the impact of measures approved by the Spanish government to mitigate housing problems during the pandemic provides important

building blocks for the recovery, particularly in the light of Spain's new housing law and bigger than ever budget. Likewise, the analysis by Jules van Dam and Guusta van der Zwaard of how Covid-19 measures improved quality standards of homeless services in the Netherlands can feed usefully into a fledgling Dutch national housing first strategy.

Of course, no overview of developments across Europe would be complete without a pan-European perspective. This perspective is offered in our interview with the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, with which we close this issue. The recently launched (June 2021) European Platform for Combatting Homelessness and the Commission's recovery plans and budget provide plenty of scope for taking big steps towards ending homelessness. We spoke to the Commissioner to find out more about the Commission's ambitions in terms of homelessness, as well as whether he truly thought ending homelessness by 2030, as set out in the Lisbon Declaration which underpins the Platform, is possible.

While the future remains unclear, what is certain, as we head into 2022 with surging cases of the Omicron variant, is that there will be no going back to normal. A silver lining of the pandemic in its initial phases was seeing the progress that could be made in addressing homelessness when the issue was met with political will and a sense of urgency. We hope that this collection of articles is able to contribute to painting a picture of what works and what doesn't and to convince public authorities at all levels that there is room in the recovery to end homelessness.



In this article Provivienda discuss their recent report “COVID y Vivienda” [COVID and Housing] which analyses the measures approved by the Spanish government to mitigate housing problems during the pandemic. In the light of the new Spanish housing law and a bigger than ever budget, they hope the lessons learnt about the impact of measures can helpfully feed into longer term policy.

#STAYHOME:

THE SCOPE OF EMERGENCY HOUSING MEASURES ON RESIDENTIAL EXCLUSION IN SPAIN DURING THE PANDEMIC



By **Gloria Martínez Ábalos**, Communication and Advocacy Technician. **Natalia Palomar**, Legal Advocacy Officer, **Alberto García**, Research Sociologist, **Andrea Jarabo**, Communications and Advocacy Officer, Provivienda

The COVID-19 crisis has made it clear around the world that housing is key to protecting our health and public health. The quality of housing, its size, whether it has outdoor spaces, and the security with which one faces rent or mortgage payments, are key factors in the diversity of realities experienced during the hardest lockdown months. Meanwhile, the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic has accentuated the vulnerability of those already suffering from housing exclusion. In Spain, housing payment difficulties have increased by almost 10 points among people with the lowest incomes (LCS 2020, INE¹): 35% of people with the lowest economic capacity² had delays in payments related to their main dwelling in 2020.

It has been observed that income, occupancy type and other sociological variables such as age, nationality or household composition are linked in Spain to processes of residential exclusion, as shown by the latest ECV data³. According to the survey carried out by Provivienda “COVID y Vivienda”⁴ (2021), 20.6% of the people

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- 1 In addition, the National Statistics Institute’s 2020 Living Conditions Survey indicates that the percentage of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Spain (AROPE rate) increased to 26.4%, up from 25.3% in 2019. 7.0% of the population was in a situation of severe material deprivation, compared to 4.7% in the previous year.
 - 2 Group of people in the first income decile.
 - 3 <https://www.provivienda.org/la-exclusion-residencial-en-aumento-tras-la-crisis-de-la-covid-19/>.
 - 4 This article provides a preview of data from the “COVID y Vivienda” survey conducted by Provivienda in 2021, pending publication.

assisted by the entity during 2020 and 2021 (of whom more than half are migrants and, for the most part, between 31 and 40 years of age) were unable to pay rent as a consequence of the crisis.

While the response to this crisis has been very different from that of the Great Recession⁵ (2007 – 2009) in terms of resource mobilisation and immediacy, not all situations of vulnerability have been addressed with the same attention. Since the publication of the “[Real Decreto Ley 8/2020, de 17 de marzo](#)”⁶, de medidas urgentes extraordinarias para hacer frente al impacto económico y social del COVID-19 [Royal Decree Law 8/2020, of March 17, 5 of extraordinary urgent measures to face the economic and social impact of COVID-19]”, the measures approved by the Spanish government to mitigate housing problems have gone in the right direction in terms of response and intentionality, but their scope and operability has been insufficient in practice.

The continuous updating of regulations (7 amendments to RDL 11/2020 to date), motivated by the uncertainty of the first months of the crisis and the publication of information on aid before regulations were finalised, has created uncertainty and led to the spread of misinformation. It has also caused problems of interpretation among legal actors, leading to difficulties in implementation.

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- 5 The Great Recession was a period of marked general decline observed in national economies globally that occurred between 2007 and 2009.
 - 6 Following the RDL 8/2020, the Real Decreto Ley 11/2020 of 31 March is approved, adopting urgent complementary measures in the social and economic sphere to address COVID-19: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2020-4208>.

People who were already in a situation of vulnerability and who, in one way or another, have also seen their daily source of income interrupted were left out of the programme.”

The suspension of judicial deadlines during the first “State of Alarm”⁷ provided respite for those who were in the process of losing their homes. However, after the resumption of these processes in April 2020, evictions in Spain increased by 413% comparing the second quarter of 2020 to the third.

In April 2020, the “Real Decreto Ley 11/2020 [Royal Decree Law 11/20]” came into force, which initially included the suspension of evictions derived from non-payment of rent, provided that the defendant was in a situation of vulnerability derived from the health crisis. Later, this protection was extended to all people in a situation of economic vulnerability, as well as to those who had their habitual residence in a

⁷ The State of Alarm is the legal tool that was implemented to limit mobility between the Spanish state’s different territories and establish house confinements. The temporary halt on evictions resulted from the suspension of court deadlines by the State of Alarm, rather than from an action by the government to protect the most vulnerable from losing their homes during the lockdown.

dwelling without a contract, rectifying the rule that excluded people in vulnerable situations that had originated before the COVID-19 crisis. Even so, the suspension had to be requested by the beneficiary, who had to prove their financial vulnerability following the established requirements. Moreover, for certain procedures, the suspension is not applied automatically after the justification of the economic requirements but is a decision taken by a court after assessing the specific case following the examination of a report submitted by the Social Services.⁸ These difficulties determine the limited scope of the measure and mean that, in some cases, suspensions are processed through other mechanisms, less specific and protectionist than those included in the “social shield”.

In the meantime, other measures were adopted to alleviate the financial burden on tenants, such as negotiated rent reductions or

⁸ According to RDL 11/2020, in order to request a suspension of evictions and evictions, a series of requirements must be met to prove “situation of vulnerability”: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2020-4208>.

payment moratoriums. Most of these, as well as direct assistance for housing payments, were targeted at individuals and families whose financial situation had been “formally” worsened by the COVID-19 crisis. In practice, this means that people who were already in a situation of vulnerability and who, in one way or another, have also seen their daily source of income interrupted were left out of the programme.⁹ The measures also exclude subtenants or tenants of rooms, who, paradoxically, are the most vulnerable. For example, 68% of Provivienda’s clients who participated in the survey have not applied for rent deferment, and 18% who did apply for it had it denied or granted under worse conditions¹⁰ (“COVID y Vivienda” Survey, 2021).

Regarding the possibility of requesting a [moratorium on the payment of rent](#), this is limited only to cases in which the property is owned by a large landlord.¹¹ The distinction between small and large landlords, although appropriate, has not been accompanied by effective mechanisms for citizens to consult the group to which their landlord belongs. Similarly, landlords can unilaterally and ultimately decide whether to reduce the monthly rent or to grant a moratorium, a power imbalance that underwrites the policy.

9 This is the case for people working in the informal economy who cannot prove that they lost their income.

10 The law RDL 11/2020 contemplates the possibility of private agreements between landlords and tenants, leading to private agreements in which the results are less favourable than if the measures had been applied as regulated in the law. For example: deferral of payment to be repaid in less than three years.

11 Spanish regulations refer to “large landlords” in the case of natural or legal persons who own ten or more dwellings.

Among the rental-oriented measures, [the only one that has a universal scope is the possibility to extend rental contracts for a maximum period of six months after the end of the contract](#). This has prevented people from being forced to look for new housing due to the termination of their contract during periods of restricted mobility. The design of the measure, however, could pose problems in its application, as it is not an automatic extension, but is based on a request to the landlord. The experience of Provivienda’s clients casts doubt on its effectiveness for people in vulnerable situations.. Only 7.4% of the people participating in Provivienda’s programmes who requested it were successful (Encuesta “COVID y Vivienda”, 2021).

Finally, the regulation includes the possibility for tenants to apply for [a public loan to cover their rent in case of loss of income](#), the interest and costs of which would be subsidised by the state. The deadline for the application and processing of the “[ICO credits or loans](#)”¹² has been extended on several occasions in order to temporarily maintain the “social shield”. Again, this resource is only aimed at people in a situation of vulnerability resulting from COVID-19. From an operational point of view, this measure showed certain weaknesses, as credit institutions were in charge of assessing tenants’ applications, refusing to grant the loan if they considered that there was a lack of solvency to repay it. Only 7.8% of the people assisted by Provivienda were able to apply for ICO loans and all of their applications were rejected (Survey “COVID y Vivienda”, 2021).

12 The last modification expired on 9 August 2021, according to the provisions of Oden TMA/498/2021 of 21 May: https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2021-8657.

One year and eight months after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the figures for housing exclusion in Spain show a worsening of the housing crisis, especially among young people, migrants, women and people with lower incomes, despite the efforts of the third sector and public authorities to mitigate it. However, some of the serious social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on housing will only be detected once the measures outlined above are no longer in place; it is due to end on [28 February 2022](#).¹³

In this scenario, the question is not only how the most vulnerable will cope with debt or with the lack of affordable housing, but also what policies and resources are needed to address it. The prospect of the first Law for the Right to Housing in Spain ([Ley por el Derecho a la Vivienda en España](#)) and the most expansive housing budgets in recent years encourage optimism. However, as with the measures discussed throughout this article, lessons learnt will be key to ensuring that new policies do not leave behind those who have the greatest needs and suffer the severest housing vulnerability.

¹³ For more information, see Provivienda's Urgent Guide: Housing measures until 28 February 2022: <https://www.provivienda.org/guia-urgente-medidas-vivienda-covid/>.

“The measures approved by the Spanish government to mitigate housing problems have gone in the right direction in terms of response and intentionality, but their scope and operability has been insufficient in practice.”

HOMELESSNESS IN POLAND IN THE TIMES OF THE PANDEMIC: FROM INNOVATION TO FUTURE PREPAREDNESS

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Poland shook homeless services awake, writes Malgorzata Sienczyk. In this anecdotal article the author considers the resilience of services, reflecting on how her own organisation, The St. Brother Albert Aid Society, adapted their services quickly in a crisis. The pandemic showed their strengths, but also revealed underlying weaknesses, areas these services could work on in the recovery period.

By **Malgorzata Sienczyk**, Director of the National Bureau, St. Brother Albert's Aid Society

No one was prepared for what was to come in early 2020 and continue into subsequent years. We were suddenly alienated from a once familiar world. Following the outbreak of the pandemic the stay-at-home order and social distancing became the norm... and endured. The new normal. Stay at home and do not go out! was heard on almost every TV or radio channel. Stay at home! Do not take risks! It was repeated like a mantra. Very well, we can comply, but what about people who do not have a home?

Mr Marian also asked himself this question, allowing himself to add a few harsh words. What home? What are they talking about? I live on the street; this is my home. From this corner to the entrance to the sewer all is mine. Here, on the street, he had spent most of his adult life. Marian, like many others experiencing homelessness at the time, found himself in a completely new reality. A reality for which nobody, including him, was prepared. Mr Marian's world was turned inside out. He felt trapped. He got locked into a systemic loophole that nobody at the turn of 2020 thought about. It is hardly surprising; the priority was to try to save the world that everyone, except perhaps Marian and people in a similar life situation to his, knew perfectly well. I'm done for, thought Marian, for it was the first time in his life when he really did not know what to do. Life was never pleasant for him, but he always found a way out of the situation. This time it was not going to work. I'm done for, it's over - it was going through his head. With this thought, he fell asleep in his "nook" in the canal, uncertain of the future and aware of the fact that on the surface the world is changing beyond recognition.

Boom! Crack! echoed throughout Marian's makeshift home. Hello, is anyone there? The voice came out of nowhere. It took Marian a moment to understand the situation. Ah, it has happened at last. I didn't even notice how this whole COVID had tired me out... I'm coming, Saint Peter...! He sighed under his breath, angry that he failed to open the bottle he had been keeping for years for a special occasion. What Saint Peter, man! I'm Grzesiek. From another saint. I'm from Albert!

Grzesiek has worked in the St. Brother Albert's Aid Society for a few years. Recently he started to work as a streetworker. It wasn't easy. The first weeks in the streets were especially difficult, but Grzesiek did not give up. The important thing was that he was helping, that he saw sense in it, that he could change someone's life. Or rather, he could restore that sense. Both the Society's streetworkers and the whole organisation were brutally and forcefully roused from their sleep by COVID. It turned out that after "waking up" it was *time* that was missing the most. Quick decisions had to be made. Isolate? How? Who? How not to let the invisible invader enter our shelters and services. Grzesiek's work took on a new meaning, a new shape. Not only did the priorities have to be changed, but also the very way of providing help. A new player appeared. A ruthless attacker. In all this disorder, however, Grzesiek never lost his sense of a certain social justice. *How can I help those who cannot help themselves in this chaos?* thought Grzesiek.

The St. Brother Albert Aid Society has been helping homeless people for over 40 years, regardless of their gender, age or any other detail. Providing security, however, for those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic required a new, unconventional approach. While residents of the Society's hostels and night shelters may have felt some security, the rules of the shelters had to be changed. Direct return to shelters was no longer possible because of the risk of the virus quickly spreading to other residents. The Society had to act quickly in other areas too. On the one hand, it was necessary to protect employees, on the other hand, to help and support those in need.

The aid strategy itself was divided into two main pathways - basic and special. The basic path involved providing staff and volunteers, i.e. those directly involved in providing aid, with the necessary personal protective equipment. This option was used by 54 of the Society's Circles (branches) across Poland. The special path required changes in the way of providing assistance and adaptation to new conditions. Due to the high risk associated with the introduced changes, high

costs and risk of failure, the new solutions were implemented as a pilot project in five cities - Gdańsk, Gliwice, Jelenia Góra, Warsaw and Wrocław. Due to the differences and specificity of each city or the level of epidemiological threat, the introduced changes were of a slightly different nature in each of them. Nevertheless, the common denominator was the isolation of residents from potential sources of infection.¹

The night shelters in Gdańsk and Wrocław were transformed into 24-hour centres, which reduced the need for residents to migrate. In the 24-hour centres, residents were encouraged to stay for the whole time; they were at the same time provided with all necessary personal protection means, food and leisure time activities. The possibility of visits by outsiders was also suspended. New residents had to undergo a fourteen-day quarantine in specially opened additional buffer facilities before admission. These were completely independent, fully equipped quarantine centres where care was provided by specialist staff. In addition, to minimise the risk of residents developing infections, the staff shift system was changed from 12 hours to 7 days.

Grzesiek's face was lit with a smile when he first saw the Mobile Aid Bus. *It will be easier to reach everyone*, he thought. Mobile aid stations appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic in three cities in which the 'special path' was implemented: in Gdańsk (SOS Bus), Warsaw (Mobile Counselling Point) and Wrocław (Street Bus). Social workers, streetworkers and medical rescuers reached people living on the streets, offering them warm meals, food, hygiene products or personal protection means. Buses ran every day in the evening and at night on strictly defined routes, stopping in places where people in need stayed most often.

¹ Developing and testing procedures for streetworkers and the way they provide assistance to homeless people in public spaces in crisis situations, including the COVID-19 pandemic – dr Paweł Jaskulski.

The initiatives undertaken by the Society made it possible to successfully survive the first wave of the epidemic - in the five cities participating in the special path, no case of coronavirus infection was recorded among either residents or staff. It is worth stressing here that in the same period, apart from the mentioned institutions, 58 cases of coronavirus infection among homeless people were recorded in Poland, of which unfortunately one case was fatal. The solutions proposed by the Society proved to be effective and can certainly be implemented if needed in the future.

Although the numbers do not reflect the extent of the help that the Society provided to those in need during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, nor do they illustrate the enormous effort the staff and volunteers put into this help, it is perhaps worth presenting them, albeit in general outline.

- 20,000 people (both the homeless and our staff) received personal protective equipment (e.g. several dozen thousand face masks, several dozen thousand disposable gloves, visors, thermometers, protective suits).
- 1,166 persons were accommodated in our institutions through the possibility of quarantine in buffer facilities.
- 11,516 overnight stays were offered as part of the buffer facilities.
- 372 persons in crisis of homelessness benefited from night shelters in Gdańsk and Wrocław.
- 5,471 overnight stays were offered to persons in need in Gdańsk and Wrocław.
- 2,417 people were offered help by streetworkers.
- 75,571 people were helped by Mobile Aid Stations (Mobilne Punkty Pomocy, MPPs).
- 90,268 meals were served in Mobile Aid Stations.

- 8,729 items of clothing were issued at the Mobile Aid Stations.
- 160,525 social services (in total) were provided to people in crisis of homelessness.

The unique situation of homeless people makes them particularly susceptible to the danger of infection, rapid development of new outbreaks of the disease in the assistance centres, and due to high mobility in urban spaces they may quite significantly increase the propagation of the virus. That is why, institutional support for this group by specialised and experienced units of the social assistance sector, especially non-governmental organisations focused on helping people in situations of homelessness, is so important. Homeless people don't have the resources (the main one being a home) to cope with the virus and the attached risks on their own. It is therefore crucial to create, in pandemic conditions, an airtight system of isolation and quarantine of wards located in assistance centres and to provide all the necessary personal protection means, both for people who are regularly helped by services and those outside the centres.

Although difficult and demanding, the work of streetworkers is irreplaceable. Every day they support people in need not only by providing them with necessary materials, but also by educating them about emerging threats and directing them towards support services. During the pandemic, mobile aid stations and 24-hour aid facilities with low admission thresholds proved to be a novel solution.

The first wave of the coronavirus pandemic was a serious test for the social assistance system, including assistance to people in experiencing homelessness. It showed our strengths, but also revealed any weaknesses, gaps in the system or lack of preparedness for dynamically changing conditions. And although it was a painful lesson for the Society in coping with unprecedented conditions, we are better prepared for the challenges of the future. The rapid adaptation of existing solutions to changing needs while limiting administrative procedures to a minimum has made it possible to protect those in need from the surrounding invisible threat.

“The initiatives undertaken by the Society made it possible to successfully survive the first wave of the epidemic – in the five cities participating in the special path, no case of coronavirus infection was recorded among either residents or staff.”

The pandemic saw hotels across the US transformed into accommodation for homeless people. In this article, Deborah Padgett travels from New York to California to compare the processes of these states' hotels-to-homes transformations and explores what "the American Way" has to do with the future of these transformations.

THE AMERICAN WAY!

RECKONING WITH HOMELESSNESS IN THE ERA OF COVID



By **Deborah K. Padgett PhD MPH**, New York University

When anthropologist Kim Hopper wrote a landmark book about “reckoning with homelessness” (2002), none of us could have predicted how much more needed reckoning with two decades later. And yet, as the COVID pandemic swept across the globe in the spring of 2020, two crises serendipitously combined to create an opportunity. The most enduring of these crises—homelessness—had ceased to be an ‘epidemic’ and was now endemic to most Western nations. Despite having an effective solution in the form of Housing First,¹ various obstacles to systemic change have ensured that shelters and temporary solutions are far from obsolescence.

The second crisis—COVID 19—resulted in empty hotel rooms by the tens of thousands, an unprecedented availability of accommodation ranging from the modest hostel to the luxury boutique hotel—tourism was at a standstill indefinitely. Homelessness organizations seized on this opportunity to move adults and families from crowded shelters into these hotels to prevent COVID transmission. In the United States, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) guaranteed payment for the hotel rooms in the name of COVID relief.

California was among the first states to use hotels for this purpose along with New York City (the two epicenters of homelessness in the U.S.). Hotels were similarly repurposed in London (under the “Everyone In” initiative) and elsewhere in Europe². By any comparison, the extent of homelessness in the U.S. is enormous—annual point-prevalence counts are over 600,000 homeless with millions falling into this benighted state each year. Thus, the solutions have to be scaled accordingly.

1 Full disclosure: the author has a lengthy history of research on (and advocacy for) Housing First and thus is biased.

2 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/12/pandemic-empty-paris-hotel-shelters-homeless-covid-coronavirus-lockdown/>

The prospect of turning hotels into permanent housing seemed to be a realizable goal as many vacant hotels would not survive the prolonged economic downturn in tourism wrought by the pandemic (Padgett & Herman, 2021). Moreover, it turned out the transferred shelter residents found the hotel experience revelatory—a good night’s sleep, a bathroom, privacy, safety, hygiene—all in direct contradiction to life on the street or in a shelter where COVID could intrude along with other dangers. Preliminary findings from a Seattle study of hotel residents found not only better health and mental health but progress made in seeking employment and permanent housing (Colburn et al., 2020).

Here I wish to pose a few distinctions of the American³ way of becoming homeless, being homeless and ending homelessness vis-a-vis this ‘pandemic opportunity’. First, descending into homelessness in the U.S. is three times more likely for African Americans, the result of decades of systematic segregation and denial of home ownership rights which has resulted in a wealth differential of one-tenth that of White Americans (Rothstein, 2017). Structural racism is baked into the American Way, and ending homelessness through hotel transformations (or—even better—through building more affordable housing) must reckon with this barrier to acceptance of a large proportion of the homeless population resettling in urban business district hotels or suburban motels.

NIMBY (not in my backyard) reactions against housing the homeless in the U.S. may not be couched in racial terms but the historic implications lurk barely beneath the surface (intersectionality of racism and classism can fuel powerful emotions in White Americans). When the luxury Lucerne hotel in New York City’s affluent Upper West Side became home to 283 men from a single shelter at the height of the

3 Apologies to my Canadian colleagues for using this term for the U.S. only.



“It turned out the transferred shelter residents found the hotel experience revelatory—a good night’s sleep, a bathroom, privacy, safety, hygiene—all in direct contradiction to life on the street or in a shelter where COVID could intrude along with other dangers.”

COVID pandemic, local residents flew into a stunned rage and quickly filed a lawsuit that captivated local media for weeks (other residents countered with a welcoming committee). The men were eventually moved back to city shelters⁴.

Lingering evidence of American-style racism can be found in the hurdles that must be jumped to transform hotels or build affordable housing—zoning restrictions favoring single-family dwellings throughout much of the country outside of cities (areas previously excluding African American homebuyers) and the privatization of housing construction, i.e., new building is left to high-end developers who can afford the extensive wait times, costs of building permits, etc.

Despite the widespread endorsement of Housing First, being homeless in the U.S. typically means staying in a shelter or on the streets—for many only a few days but for others this can extend into years. To be clear, HF was established for homeless persons with serious mental illness, and the rapid expansion of permanent supportive housing (which may or may not adhere to the HF model) took place within separate funding and oversight jurisdictions compared to the vast network of crowded shelters for non-disabled homeless adults, families and unaccompanied youth. In New York City, the entirety of homeless services, a \$3 billion-plus enterprise annually budgeted to the Department of Homeless Services plus a multitude of non-profit agencies on contract with the city, constitutes a ‘homeless shelter industry’ with seemingly untouchable durability (Padgett, Henwood & Tsemberis, 2017).

⁴ <https://www.westsiderag.com/2021/06/28/the-lucerne-saga-ends-as-the-last-men-leave-to-return-to-traditional-shelters>

By comparison, California's homeless had been predominantly living outdoors and largely ignored, many corralled into a 52-block area in downtown Los Angeles known as Skid Row where rescue missions provided assistance (but rarely housing access). Taking note of the seriousness of the crisis, and perhaps seeking to avoid starting a 'shelter industry' of its own, the state began aggressively dealing with COVID and homelessness in 2020, eventually pledging \$12 billion to build housing and transform hotels under "Project Homekey"⁵. Meanwhile, the rest of the U.S. was dealing with homelessness in varied ways, drawing on expanding Federal funds and local donations to build shelters and transitional housing (time-limited and rule-bound) and, in some cities, also implement HF. Although new infusions of Federal funds from the Biden Administration and newfound political will give cause for hope, the precedent—committing large-scale funding to temporary solutions that achieve modest to poor results in ending homelessness—is all too typical of the American Way.

The last element of the American way, specific to one important subgroup of homeless persons, is laudable yet underused. It is the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which ensures that persons with disabilities have legal rights to accommodations to facilitate access to public spaces and to live in the least restricted manner possible in the community⁶. Given the powerful legal mandate of the ADA, local governments and businesses have enacted profound changes in public spaces for wheelchair access. A welcome byproduct of the ADA was the U.S. Supreme Court's 1999 Olmstead decision—extending ADA's legal protections to persons with psychiatric disabilities in the form of mandating against institutional care as opposed to 'normal'

5 <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-05-11/california-governor-proposes-12b-to-house-states-homeless>

6 www.ada.gov

community living. What an incredible gift to homeless mentally ill persons crowded into adult homes and congregate shelters! Alas, enforcement of Olmstead has been disappointing⁷, but it stands as a beacon of hope (and an unintentional endorsement of HF's scatter-site living philosophy) in an era of re- or trans-institutionalization.

What has this to do with a promising future of hotel transformations? A hotel could just as easily become a rundown institutional facility in defiance of Olmstead as it could bring autonomy and comfort similar to a well-kept apartment building. This is where the American Way is put to the test to ensure that funding formulas include building upkeep and adequate support services. In other words, adhere to evidence-proven best practices such as Housing First. 'Housing only' may be the answer for homeless persons whose needs are purely economic. But for a sizeable (and complexly needy) subgroup, support services are critical to helping the resident live independently and recover a new life. Funding must be in accordance with needs.

As California and several American cities are moving ahead with hotel purchases and conversions, optimism was premature here in New York City where hotel residents were moved en masse back to crowded shelters in June 2021—only two hotels were retained for emergency quarantine purposes. This forced transfer of thousands back to crowded shelters seemed cruel given the continued threat of COVID 19 and the fact that FEMA funding was available until the end of 2021. The 'shelter industry' must share responsibility. Indeed, the care and feeding of this industry absorbs the bulk of New York City's public funds dedicated to homelessness. It also stands as a reminder of the urgent need to get governments back in the business of building affordable housing.

7 <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/briefs-filed-three-states-enforce-supreme-courts-olmstead-decision>



The move to privatization of home-building in the U.S., solidified during the 1980s Reagan administration, has become an unwelcome addendum to the American Way. It promotes ‘market-based solutions’, a far cry from honoring the social contract that housing is a right. Thus, local developers earn generous tax credits rewarding them for reserving a small portion of their shiny new apartment buildings for the working poor. More ominously, capital investments in U.S. housing under the protective guise of “LLCs” (limited liability corporations) are predatory acts, buying up attractive properties not for public habitation but for squeezing profits from them and leaving them worse for the wear (Ross, 2021).

The American Way of spending large⁸ yet reaping too little for those most in need continues to be viable, but hope remains that we have reached an inflection point in the U.S., if not here in New York City. In what seems the perfect negative counterpoint to the hotels-as-homes aspiration inspired by the COVID pandemic, New York City recently opened a men’s shelter in a hotel on “Billionaires’ Row” after years of lawsuits from surrounding luxury tower residents.⁹ The hotel had sat vacant for four years.

8 Spending large, in American budgetary priorities, should be put into context in a nation that spends over \$700 billion annually on its defense budget (<https://www.defense.gov/>)

9 <https://www.thecity.nyc/housing/2021/11/8/22771214/manhattan-billionaires-row-homeless-shelter-opens-after-legal-battle>

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HOTELS AS ACCOMMODATION FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE IN BRUSSELS:

A TEMPORARY SOLUTION OR A HERALD OF LONGER-TERM CHANGES?

Originally intended as a temporary solution, the use of hotels is currently still an integral part of the offer of assistance to homeless people in the Brussels-Capital Region. In this article, Mauro Striano gives an overview of a new report by Bruss'Help which analyses the use of hotels, trying to understand the benefits and drawbacks of this prominent solution.

Since the beginning of the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, various reception solutions have been deployed in Brussels to compensate for the reduction in the capacity of homeless services and provide shelter to people who were sleeping rough. In April 2020, several hotel structures were made available to accommodate homeless people or allow them to confine. At the beginning of June 2020, no less than 840 people were being taken care of in these emergency structures. On the evening of November the 9th, during the last homeless count carried out by Bruss'help, 622 people were accommodated in five hotels and a former nursing home converted into a women's shelter. Despite their success, several projects came to an end at the end of June 2021. In September, approximately 200 people were still accommodated in hotel rooms and a couple of additional hotels are planned to be used during winter. The use of hotel rooms, which was initially offered as a temporary solution, has therefore continued over time and is currently an integral part of the offer of assistance to homeless people in the Brussels-Capital Region.

Initially, the hotel projects represented an opportunity to offer emergency solutions with a low threshold access: people accommodated were not required to have an income nor to be regularly residing. The need to act quickly and the lack of perspective in relation to the actual duration of the crisis period, did not initially make it possible to plan how the services would evolve, nor to set objectives on the medium and long term. When it became clear that the use of hotel rooms to host homeless people would continue, social inclusion and access to housing began to take a predominant place, leaving less space to low-threshold access. Indeed, this shift towards social inclusion implied a change in terms of the profiles of people accommodated, with an increase, in proportion, of people with a relatively less precarious living situation, meaning people with an income, an access to social rights, or at least a possibility of regularising their administrative situation.

The use of hotel structures in their entirety has made it possible to provide accommodation 24 hours a day, larger spaces with single rooms or to be shared with a limited number of people, private bathrooms, and an offer of on-site social support. Compared to conventional emergency services, the hotel is a better-quality solution that guarantees privacy, a certain level of comfort and security, and a form of autonomy. The use of hotels is advantageous for the staff, since having a team permanently on site allows a constant follow-up and to advance more quickly on files which normally require more time when the support is provided in the street. Moreover, having a hotel room obviously has a positive impact on the quality of life of people who were sleeping rough. Hotel projects have been fundamental, at least initially, in providing shelter to particularly vulnerable categories of people, such as women victims of domestic violence or irregularly residing migrants. Beyond respite, stability, and the creation of a bond of trust, the use of hotel rooms made it possible to take care of more disparate needs: obtaining access to emergency healthcare, recovering frozen unemployment rights, obtaining a minimum income or other allowance or indemnity, finding a job, re-establishing contact with the family, engaging in debt mediation, obtaining legal assistance, applying for asylum. In particular, the operational involvement of public actors, such as the municipalities and the Public Social Services Centres, has helped to unblock administrative procedures for a number of beneficiaries. In addition, a significant proportion of people staying in hotel rooms have been able to find an adequate exit solution, including housing.

That said, the hotel solution is not a panacea and does not seem to be able to resolve more complex situations, especially with regard to people with a precarious administrative situation and those who have very serious problems, in particular in terms of mental health or addiction. On the one hand, the use of hotel rooms made it possible,

during the first and second lockdowns, to shelter and provide respite to people who were sleeping rough or had access only to emergency services, regardless of their administrative situation. On the other hand, as soon as the temporality and objectives of hotel projects have evolved, several hotels have chosen to focus on people for whom it is possible to quickly move on. Some projects, which in the first phase mainly accommodated people in an irregular situation, decided to limit the number of people from this category during the second phase, at the end of 2020. This was mainly due to the fact that irregularly-residing migrants, including mobile EU citizens, tended to stay in the hotels for longer since they had little chance to solve their administrative status issues. Another type of follow-up that seems to cause difficulties for most of the mobilised structures concerns the support of people

with serious mental health or addiction problems. Due to the absence of multidisciplinary teams, the hotel projects in place do not seem equipped to deal with these issues, although they are increasingly confronted with them. Moreover, living in the constraints of a hotel and in a community context is very complicated for those who suffer from serious mental health or substance abuse problems. Hotel project workers, most without adequate training to deal with these issues and with work contracts renewed for short periods, find it difficult to cope. The reorientation towards adapted devices is sometimes also a rather challenging exercise given the lack of available places in these structures. The consequence is that hotels tend to exclude people with mental health or addiction problems. There is, therefore, a real risk for this public to lose the connection and drop out.

“The use of hotel rooms, which was initially offered as a temporary solution, has continued over time and is currently an integral part of the offer of assistance to homeless people in the Brussels-Capital Region.”



The financial question also arises. If at this stage it is difficult to compare in a coherent way the costs of the hotel projects with other homeless services such as emergency accommodation centres or shelters, we can nevertheless see that the cost can be quite significant. For four out of eight projects of which the budgets are known, the cost per person per day is between 75 and 85 Euros. We observe particularly reduced prices (around 43 Euros) for two hotels, but these accommodated hundreds of people. We also notice the use of a particularly expensive hotel, with a budget of more or less 100 euros per person per night. These costs include accommodation, which is often very expensive due to the hotel rental, social support and other staff costs, meals, and administrative fees.

To conclude, the use of hotels to host homeless people is a valuable alternative to big emergency shelters. In the short-term, this solution was paramount to protect homeless people, regardless of their administrative status, during a serious health crisis. It made it possible to provide quality accommodation 24/7 and for many it has been an intermediary step to a durable solution. In the longer term, however, if the use of hotels becomes part of the set of solutions provided to

homeless people, further reflection is needed to identify which needs can be met and, therefore, which groups can benefit from temporarily residing in hotel structures. In the Brussels context, characterised by a significant proportion of people sleeping rough who are irregularly-residing migrants or affected by serious mental health or addiction problems, it is important that the needs of these groups are taken into account. This implies that the resources allocated to the use of hotels - which as we have seen might be particularly significant - must not be detrimental to services that are more adequate for these groups, such as temporary occupancy agreements that allow mobile EU citizens to register to a municipality, or Housing First projects that generally are the best option for people who suffer from mental health problems or substance abuse.

This article is based on a report the Bruss'Help report, Évaluation des dispositifs hotels/Evaluatie van de hotelvoorzieningen. Find the full report here in [French](#) or [Dutch](#).

WHY EU CITIZENS ARE MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS IN BRITAIN

EU citizens living in Britain are overrepresented in the homeless population and, on top of this, often barred from accessing mainstream support because of where they are from. The response to the pandemic offered a glimpse of what is possible when barriers are unlocked and everyone can access accommodation and support to move out of homelessness. Crisis argue that there is an opportunity, coming out of the pandemic, to make sure that protection from homelessness is there for everyone who has made their home in Britain.

By **Francesca Albanese**, Head of Research and Evaluation, Crisis and **Laura Payne**, Senior Media Officer, Crisis

TEMPORARY POLICY MEASURES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Over the past decade, the scale of homelessness and housing difficulties among EU citizens across Britain has become a growing concern. These concerns have been exacerbated by the twin challenges of Covid-19 and the end of EU free movement rules.

As part of the response to the pandemic we have seen an unprecedented and immediate transformation in national governments' approaches to homelessness across England, Scotland and Wales. At the start of the pandemic governments announced emergency accommodation (known as 'Everyone In' in England) would be provided for people sleeping rough or in unsafe accommodation where self-isolation wasn't possible. Temporary protective measures were put in place which saved lives and temporarily stopped homelessness going up.¹ These included the pause on evictions, raising the Local Housing Allowance (LHA)², £20 per month uplift in Universal Credit and the furlough scheme.

Importantly for people experiencing homelessness and the dangers of the virus, the emergency response did not apply eligibility criteria or impose further barriers because of where they were from. People who had previously been locked out of most support were able to get vital help to move out of homelessness.

1 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wood, J., Watts, B., Stephens, M. & Blenkinsopp, J. (2021) The Homelessness Monitor: England 2021. London: Crisis. <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/england/the-homelessness-monitor-england-2021/>

2 Local Housing Allowance is the name for Housing Benefit in the private rented sector

However, as the pandemic has continued the 'Everyone In' message has become less clear and we have seen increasing numbers of people struggling to access this support. Research conducted by Heriot-Watt University and IPPR for Crisis³ has uncovered the scale, causes and impact of homelessness amongst EU citizens both before and during the pandemic. It highlights some stark trends and new evidence to make the case for why protection from losing your home should be there for everyone.

SCALE AND CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS AMONGST EU CITIZENS

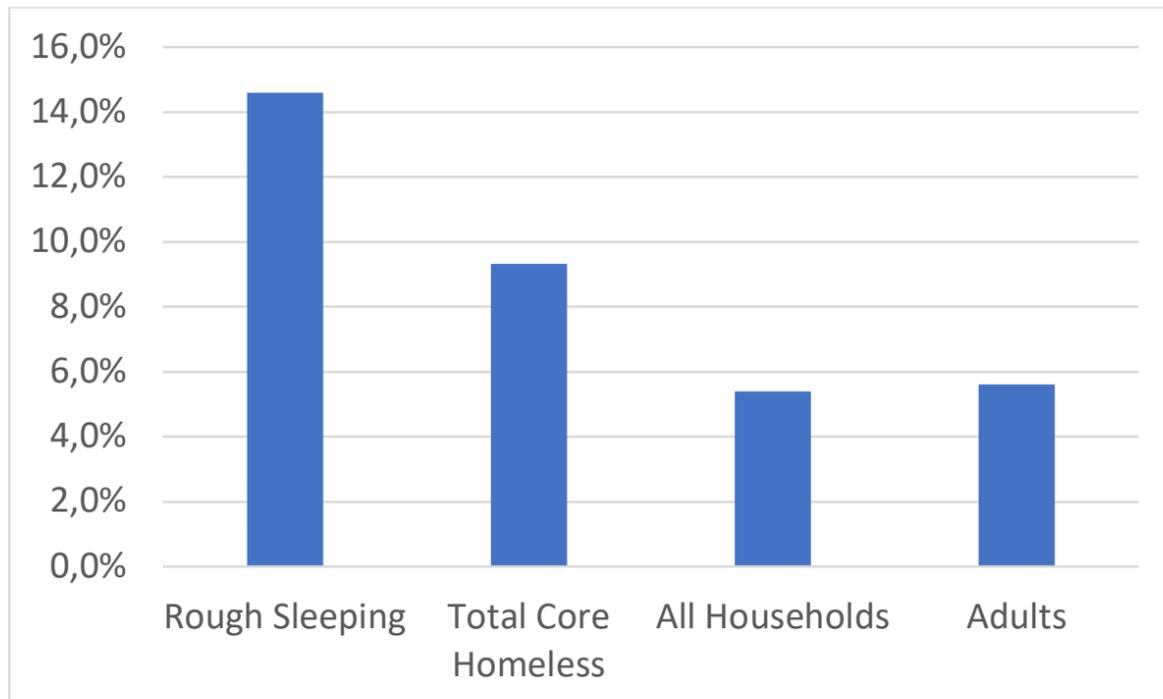
EU citizens living in Britain are disproportionately affected by homelessness and housing insecurity. They are almost twice as likely to experience the worst forms of homelessness and almost three times as likely to experience rough sleeping in comparison to the general adult population in Britain. Restrictions in place before the pandemic have contributed to this trend but EU citizens have been especially hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

On any given night in Britain in 2019 around 22,000 EEA national households were experiencing the worst forms of homelessness (rough sleeping, living in unconventional accommodation - including cars, sheds and garages - living in hostels, night shelters, unsuitable temporary accommodation such as B&Bs and sofa surfing). This represents about 9% of the total number of people experiencing

3 Bramley, G., Morris, M., Mort, L., Netto, G., Sosenko, F., and Webb, J. (2021) The scale, causes, and impacts of homelessness among EEA Citizens, Heriot-Watt University and IPPR <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/types-of-homelessness/the-scale-causes-and-impacts-of-homelessness-among-eea-citizens/>

homelessness across Britain. Indicative modelling during the pandemic shows a slight decrease in scale of EU citizens to an estimated 20,500 households on any given night in 2021, following the trends of core homelessness overall.

Proportion of EU citizens experiencing types of homelessness, total adults and all households across GB



Job loss is one of the key drivers of homelessness amongst EU citizens and people have been disproportionately affected by unemployment during the pandemic. In March 2020, our research showed 25% of people recently experiencing homelessness who are originally from EEA countries, were unemployed. This increased to 52% by winter 2020. For those recently experiencing rough sleeping, job loss and financial difficulties were cited as the most frequent adverse experiences (51%

and 49%). This was over other common pressures that can push people into homelessness, regardless of their background, such as health problems or a relationship breakdown. Many people we spoke to also had experiences of insecure and exploitative work and reported not being paid enough to live on or, in some cases, not being paid at all.

While job loss and individual factors such as health concerns partially mirror causes of homelessness experienced by the general population, they are compounded by the barriers people face because of where they are from. In many cases people who faced a loss of employment and challenging financial circumstances were left without anywhere to turn which worsened and prolonged their housing difficulties.

Sometimes this was due to language or cultural barriers that made it harder for EU citizens to access mainstream support that should have been available to them, while others were unable to get help for their housing situation – in particular, through welfare benefits – as a result of rules restricting EU citizens’ access to support. This left people in extended periods of limbo while they tried to resolve their accommodation and employment issues, without any support to help them in the interim.

A significant number of EU citizens are at greater risk of homelessness and are at risk of losing their rights to live and work in the UK, because they have not successfully secured status under the EU Settlement Scheme. Of those who have got status, many only have pre-settled status, so in the next five years they will need to make a new application for settled status before their temporary leave runs out. At a point 3-6 months before the deadline for registering under the EU Settlement Scheme, less than half of people we spoke to who had recently experienced homelessness had obtained settled or pre-settled status.





Coming out of the pandemic there is an opportunity to make sure that protection from homelessness is there for everyone who has made their home in Britain.”

A HOME FOR ALL?

Coming out of the pandemic there is an opportunity to make sure that protection from homelessness is there for everyone who has made their home in Britain. Extending eligibility to benefits and homelessness assistance for EU citizens with pre-settled status would ensure that support is there for people if they experience life events that put them at risk of losing their home, whether that is a loss of employment, bereavement or a relationship breakdown. This would strengthen the safety net and ensure that people can get help when they face difficult times, so that fewer people end up being pushed into homelessness.

In the short-term, there are actions that can be taken now to provide immediate support for EU citizens who are struggling to access mainstream support in Britain and are currently sleeping rough or in temporary accommodation and facing returning to the streets. We are recommending that the Westminster Government bring forward

funding for a bespoke package of housing and employment support for EU citizens whose needs are not being met by current programmes. This will make a real difference for people who are sleeping rough now.

The pandemic emergency response gave us a glimpse of what is possible when barriers are unlocked and everyone can access accommodation and support to move out of homelessness. We need to go further to ensure everyone experiencing homelessness has a route to move into safe and stable housing.

This article draws on two reports; Jacob, R. (2021) Home For All: Why EU citizens are more likely to experience homelessness - and why it matters, Crisis and Bramley, G., Morris, M., Mort, L., Netto, G., Sosenko, F., and Webb, J. (2021) and The Scale, Causes, and Impacts of Homelessness Among EEA Citizens, Heriot-Watt University and IPPR.

In Ireland, it has been possible to observe the direct impact of measures introduced during the pandemic on the number of homeless people, which decreased substantially during the initial phases of the pandemic. These measures, introduced quickly and effectively, are demonstrably feasible and should shape future policy, argue Focus Ireland.

LEARNING FROM THE PANDEMIC: BUSINESS AS USUAL WON'T SOLVE THE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS CRISIS IN IRELAND



By **Emma Byrne**, Communications Officer and **Haley Curran**, Research Officer,
[Focus Ireland](#).

WHO IS 'HOMELESS' IN IRELAND?

The pandemic has shown that a home of one's own is necessary not only for shelter, but also physical and mental wellbeing. As of September 2021, there are 8,475 people classified as officially homeless in Ireland, however, within Ireland there is a narrow concept of what is meant by homelessness. A person must declare that they are homeless and if it is considered by their local authority that they fulfil the criteria of the legal definition of homelessness, only then will they be counted as such. The official figures only record those in state emergency homeless accommodation, but discounts those that are in 'own-door' temporary accommodation, domestic violence refuges, asylum seekers, and the very many who are 'hidden homeless' and living with family or friends in insecure housing, sleeping rough or living in mobile homes or caravans. The broader ETHOS definition of homelessness and housing exclusion is therefore not used, meaning the true extent and experiences of homelessness in Ireland are not fully captured.

While Ireland has no constitutional or legally established right to housing, it is unique in that official homeless figures are published monthly which allows people working in the sector to track this issue. The numbers do point to certain trends and patterns and have been useful in understanding some of the scale of homelessness in Ireland since a housing 'crisis' was first declared in 2014.

Since 2014, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Ireland has increased by 150% and we have seen a surge in the number of families and children presenting as homeless during this period. Research

on homeless families carried out by Focus Ireland in 2019¹ found that 68% of families reported that their last stable home had been in the private rented sector, with most of these tenancies ending due to rent affordability issues, landlords selling up, landlords renting property to a family member, and renovation. These reasons are often referred to as 'no fault' evictions and are responsible for most families becoming homeless in Dublin, where 70% of people experiencing homelessness in Ireland are located.

IMPACT OF TEMPORARY PANDEMIC MEASURES ON HOMELESSNESS

At the outbreak of the pandemic, concerted efforts were made to rehouse those individuals and families who were already homeless and living in temporary emergency accommodation, into more suitable accommodation. New 'shielding' accommodation was established between homeless and health services in Dublin for the most vulnerable people and rough sleepers. These quick and innovative actions meant that Dublin homeless services had some of the lowest rates of cases and deaths from COVID-19 compared to other European capitals.

1 Long, A.E., Sheridan, S., Gambi, L., and Hoey, D. (2019) Family Homelessness in Dublin: Causes, Housing Histories, and Finding a Home. Available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Research-Briefing-No-1-Interactive.pdf> (Accessed: 3rd November 2021)



By the time the last lockdown in Ireland ended in April 2021, numbers for single adult homelessness were at their lowest since August 2018.”

To prevent people becoming homeless during the pandemic, a range of temporary policies and measures were introduced by Government in March 2020 to protect those living in the private rented sector. The two major measures that were introduced were the moratorium on evictions and a rent freeze for the private rented sector. The moratorium, or ban on evictions, came into effect every time Ireland went into a strict lockdown and a 5-kilometre limit was set for all citizens. The ban on evictions prohibited the ending of rental tenancies on all grounds between March and August 1st, 2020. Evictions were permitted under limited circumstances during the 2nd and 3rd lockdowns, from October 2020 to November 2020 and from January 2021 to April 2021 respectively.

The official monthly figures make it straightforward to track the impact of these measures and policies on the number of people entering homelessness. During these months, numbers for homeless families either went down or stayed the same, the only months in which the numbers went up slightly were those where the eviction ban had been lifted. April to June 2020 saw the biggest drop in numbers, 324 for families and 506 for single adults. While the numbers of homeless families had been on the decline since September 2019, numbers fell further between March 2020 and March 2021, reducing dramatically by 39%. The same applied to the numbers for single adults, and this number dropped by 10% during the same period, with the only exception being January 2021 when there was a slight increase for this group.

By the time the last lockdown in Ireland ended in April 2021, numbers for single adult homelessness (n=5899) were at their lowest since August 2018. The reduction for homeless families for this same month (n= 925) was more impressive with the figures being their lowest since June 2016.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Research from Focus Ireland² shows that the protections for renters introduced in Ireland during the pandemic are both feasible, and effective at preventing and reducing homelessness.

² Focus on Homelessness- Adult-Only Households (2021) O’Sullivan, E., Reidy, A. & Allen, M. https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Focus_On_Homelessness-Single-0221.pdf

However, the Government has decided to not continue many of the policies that were so effective in helping to cut the number of people homeless by nearly 2000 people. The idea of a rent freeze has been controversial in Ireland for some time, with successive Governments hesitant to introduce protective measures for renters beyond rent caps due to fears of legal challenges from commercial landlords and landlords leaving the market.

The pandemic challenged our thinking of what was possible and what can be done to prevent the trauma of homelessness from occurring. Incredible work was achieved during the pandemic to keep the most vulnerable protected, but we are now starting to see a steady increase in the number of adults and children becoming homeless in Ireland again. The progress made during the pandemic is now being lost because we have stopped the measures and policies that were working - protecting renters from eviction and freezing rents.

To prevent homelessness in the first place, we need to protect tenants from “no fault” evictions in ‘buy to rent’ properties where the landlord is selling the property. It is common for commercial properties to be sold with tenants not affected and the same protections now needs to be given to tenants in their rented home. More effective measures aimed at curbing rising rents also need to be urgently considered as supply of rental homes is now at an all-time low³ which is driving up cost.

3 Daft.ie (2021) The Daft.ie Rental Price Report. An analysis of recent trends in the Irish rental market 2021 Q3. https://mcusercontent.com/7dc574a8b74605f879edb49d5/files/e06cf4fc-e85f-9aed-21d2-7b0e4da0ab9b/Daft_Rental_Price_Report_Q3_2021.pdf

We need to make sure that the people who do experience homelessness have the trauma of that experience minimised, including reducing reliance on unsuitable emergency accommodation. In Dublin, the drop in family homelessness coupled with an increase in more short-term lets, like AirBnB rentals, coming to the market at the start of the pandemic has led to a significant reduction in the number of families relying on commercial hotels for emergency homeless accommodation. There were only 67 families in commercial hotels in August 2021, down from a high of 871 in March 2017.⁴ However, the increasing homeless numbers and returning demand from the tourist market could reverse this very positive development.

Finally, we need to recognise that there is no ‘one-size fits all’ approach to ending homelessness. The measures introduced by Government during certain periods of the pandemic show us that family and child homelessness can be tackled very effectively by increasing protections for households in the private rented sector. However, it also shows us that there is no ‘silver bullet’ for preventing homelessness. The rate of single adult men experiencing homelessness remained steady during the pandemic as their needs and pathways into homelessness can be different to those of families. Alongside increased protections for renters, we need to ensure that tools like Housing First, a proven approach for supporting individuals with complex needs out of homelessness, are better utilised to address single adult homelessness in Ireland. While there are currently approximately 500 Housing First tenancies in Ireland, and the promise of an increase of 1,200 Housing First tenancies over the next five years, this does not stack up against the current numbers of single homeless adults which stood at 4,447 individuals

4 Dublin City Council (2021) Housing Delivery Report – October 2021 <https://councilmeetings.dublincity.ie/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=34194>

in December 2020.⁵ These targets need to be more ambitious, and a supply of affordable accommodation made available to single people. Greater consideration also needs to be placed on what happens to single adults who don't qualify for Housing First programmes.

While the COVID-19 pandemic brought enormous stress, it also provided opportunities to shake up the status quo. Government and

society came together in a shared vision of protecting and providing for everyone, including those that were homeless, or at-risk. Business as usual won't solve the housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland and the lessons learned from this pandemic should be kept. Ironically, it took a massive upheaval to provide some form of stability and security to the most vulnerable in Irish society and there is no valid reason why these measures should not be retained into the future.

5 Focus on Homelessness- Adult-Only Households (2021) O'Sullivan, E., Reidy, A. & Allen, M. https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Focus_On_Homelessness-Single-0221.pdf

“However, the Government has decided to not continue many of the policies that were so effective in helping to cut the number of people homeless by nearly 2000 people.”

HOMELESSNESS IN THE NETHERLANDS: A HOUSING-LED STRATEGY WITHOUT HOUSES

“In the Netherlands, we have a good vision, we have plans. What is holding us back from achieving them?” ask Jules van Dam and Guusta van der Zwaard in their article. While trying to answer, they consider how Covid-19 measures improved quality standards of homeless services and how these should feed into the approach to ending homelessness in future.



By **Guusta van der Zwaard** and **Jules van Dam**, Boardmembers, Stichting De Tussenvoorziening

In recent years, there have been several developments relating to the housing of homeless people in the Netherlands that are worth sharing. Since the publication of the latest figures on homelessness in September 2019, we have seen a revival of interest from central government in tackling the problem. The message that homelessness had more than doubled in 10 years, from 18,000 in 2009 to 39,000 in 2018, got the much-needed attention of the government. With constant public focus on the subject, and with the good will of the state secretary and advice from the RVS (the government advisory council), a policy turn was made.

The RVS explored strategies to help tackle homelessness and advised using homes to end homelessness. This was a turning point in the chosen strategy that had previously mainly been based on healthcare or social care solutions. A housing-led strategy was born. The secretary of state for social affairs decided that 10,000 extra homes should be made available for homeless people within a few years and extra funding became available to support them: €200 million for 2020/21. Extra funding was also provided for alternative housing solutions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became abundantly clear that government advice to stay at home and avoid public places was impossible for homeless people. This underlined the need for housing solutions. The result of providing extra shelter spaces in hotels during COVID-19 proved that homeless people could recover more easily in a comfortable and suitable environment. One of the very few good things that resulted from COVID-19 was the provision of extra funding to improve the shelters. Night shelters became places where you could stay 24 hours a day. Dormitories were sometimes refurbished to accommodate 1 or 2 people. Fewer people were allowed in each shelter due to social distancing rules, and more shelters were opened to get everyone in. The extra money came from central government's

COVID health funding. Unfortunately, this was not structural, but ad hoc funding. Most cities could not and would not reverse most of these improvements after the temporary decline in homelessness during the first phase of COVID, because of the effect on homeless people.

The extra measures showed that if they were treated well, in a peaceful environment, people started making plans for their future themselves. The conclusion: a helpful environment helps.

It is now more accepted that recovery starts with a home and customised care. Following the example of central government, local governments are adopting the housing-led strategy and making plans for their cities. So far so good, you might say. Unfortunately, in 2021, because of the large number of homeless people and the blocked housing market, new shelters are needed and being opened. They are considered very temporary, and are therefore sometimes low quality, with the excuse that 'we now have a housing-led strategy'. This situation forces us to look at the 'housing-led' plans we made earlier in 2020, and why they are currently not delivering.

In a recent study (by Guusta van der Zwaard, *Escaping the maze of homelessness*),¹ the central research question was just that: we have a good vision, we have plans. What is holding us back from achieving them? A comparative case study of the four main cities in the Netherlands (G4) presents the reasons behind this. The main conclusion is that we are tackling homelessness from the wrong governmental domain. Housing solutions cannot be provided through the health departments of local or central governments. This is where we made a fundamental mistake, which needs to be rectified. Rules,

1 Uit het Doolhof van Dakloosheid, 2021.

regulations and building planning is lagging behind for this group, because housing-led strategies are not integrated in the right domain. Homeless people are not considered a significant group and restrictive legislation on sharing homes is being maintained.²

Another problem is the overall shortage of houses in the Netherlands. The latest figures show that in Holland we need at least another 1,000,000 houses for the next 10 years, including 300,000 for social housing and 40,000 for homeless people. An important lesson from recent years is that you cannot have a housing-led strategy without enough houses and the right focus. It's as simple as that. You cannot solve homelessness with social programmes alone. We must focus on housing, so we need the Department of Housing to be involved. In fact, this department should be driving the solution.

We see two other things occurring. Lack of focus: in the Netherlands, many of the government's tasks are implemented decentrally. This means that each local government can make their own plans as they see fit. This results in huge differences between cities with respect to policy and outcomes. We see that housing-led solutions are not the core of most policies. Furthermore, there is no such thing as a right to housing linked to ending homelessness. In most governmental housing visions, this group is therefore not included, or only as a vulnerable group that is given a house in combination with care. Some homeless people need the last option, but it does not apply to everyone.

² The main restriction is the so-called 'woningdelerskorting' (home share discount). When two or more people are sharing a house and are both living on social benefit, they must face a serious reduction in the benefit, because they are considered to split the costs and need less money. Experts in Holland see this as an important reason behind the growing number of homeless people. Parents are sending their children out of their houses.

“Shelters must be considered an emergency measure, not a permanent strategy and the quality standards that proved so helpful during COVID must be maintained!”

The development in the homeless population in the Netherlands shows a shift for part of the population from the 'care' group to a group that needs little support, just a room or an apartment. We see more and more working people in our shelters, who have become homeless because of a divorce, a problem with their parents, or because there is a waiting list of over 10 years for social housing. They also need a

home to restart their lives, some help and supportive communities to get them back on their feet. This just requires good housing planning. Year after year. For years to come.

The Netherlands was once a leading example in Europe with 30% of all new houses being reserved for social housing. Holland did have a problem with homelessness, but fortunately it was less serious than in most other European countries. We think our large stock of social housing is certainly an important reason for that. Unfortunately, over the last 10 years the government implemented a market strategy in the field of housing, which neglected social housing and resulted in a loss of focus. This meant there was hardly any space for new social housing. Our Ministry of Housing was abolished and central planning and objectives on housing were abandoned. This is an important reason for the doubling of the number of homeless people in the same ten years.

The final conclusion from this study is that executing plans is difficult in the Netherlands. This is because of our decentralised government, as described earlier. Working in network structures slows us down. The homeless problem is fragmented and scattered over variable government domains, causing loss of focus on the problem. One respondent said: 'Every opinion slows us down'. This is a good illustration of the current situation in the Netherlands.

So, what can we do about it? It's not rocket science. Firstly, the lack of focus on social housing is the cause of many of the problems. We need to restore our focus and strategy. Because 30% of no housing is nothing. Secondly, we must make sure that vulnerable groups are considered a main concern in the housing strategies. Make it part of the agreements, regulations and plans. Find a way to incorporate

the right to housing in the approach to homelessness. And provide a sufficient budget for housing solutions and support for homeless people. Thirdly, the different government domains should connect so that the problem can be effectively tackled. The government must strive for a comprehensive vision and a Ministry that really has the power to coordinate. This could be the new Ministry of Housing. At the start of this century, we managed to get more than 10,000 people off the streets in just a few years, coordinated by the Ministry of Finance. Central focus and steering help.

Fourthly, the housing-led vision tends to slip away under the pressure of the housing crisis. We see that vulnerable groups in need of housing are quickly compared and seen as competing with each other. For example, refugees and homeless people. This is not helping. Housing is needed for everyone. We need a good housing strategy for all.

For the homeless, a housing-led solution must be prioritised by all NGOs and government authorities, local and central. Until we have enough new homes for the homeless, we will unfortunately need extra shelters for the next few years. However, they must be considered an emergency measure, not a permanent strategy, and the quality standards that proved so helpful during COVID must be maintained! Fortunately, NGOs are speaking up about this. Nobody wants to return to the large dormitories we had before. In some cities, plans are therefore being made for temporary houses instead of shelters, which is even better.

We were able to get most people off the streets at the beginning of this century. We did it with focus and a central campaign. Let's just do it again.



This three-part article from Italy looks at the impact of the initial lockdown on homeless people – the “emergency within an emergency,” the adaptation of homeless services and their coping strategies, and gives a useful account of practical measures, including national funds and strategies, that have since been introduced in a renewed bid to tackle homelessness.

POST-PANDEMIC POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN ITALY: HOUSING FIRST BUT NOT ONLY



By **Caterina Cortese**, Social Policy and Research Officer, fio.PSD and **Alessandro Pezzoni**, Coordinator of the Severe Marginalisation Section, Caritas Ambrosiana, and Vice President, fio.PSD

Homelessness “finds its home” in the European and national programming of the next seven years. As emerges from the numerous recent reports, the pandemic period and the consequent social, health and economic crises have mainly hit the most vulnerable people (FEANTSA 2021; Gaboardi et al. 2020; Stefani 2021; Licursi 2021; Cortese et al. 2020).

PHASE 1 - LOCKDOWN AND PANDEMIC CRISIS

The Covid-19 pandemic represented for homeless people what since the beginning has been called “an emergency within an emergency.”

Homeless people have experienced the tragedy and fear of not knowing how to protect themselves from infection and how to survive facing the restrictions of many services and, even worse, the closure of spaces, places and links that until the day before represented opportunities for integration and daily survival. For more than 50 thousand homeless people living in Italy, “staying at home,” or accessing the vaccine or soup kitchens are still not plausible options and so the most vulnerable await a significant protection intervention made up of rights, access, responsibility, and innovation.

Due to the lack of recovery places or due to the difficulty of getting people to accept to enter 24-hour shelter in an unfamiliar place, the most fragile and most vulnerable people have remained in the street. For roofless people it became hard to respond to basic needs, find food, reach a bathroom, track down their social worker, while, most difficult of all, **“not having a home” had become a punishable condition** by the police. Only a few weeks after the first lockdown began, volunteer activities, street units, support networks and public social services were able to partially stem the risk of complete isolation.

For other homeless people, the lockdown meant staying inside recovery services and facilities usually used for a few hours of the day or night. However, staying in the same place for a long time and sharing spaces with other people has brought out unusual aspects of coexistence. If before the pandemic interpersonal relationships between homeless people were limited to the time of meals and before going to sleep, sharing times and spaces of everyday life has led to a redefinition of interpersonal relationships.

The forced closure has modified in some ways social relations and has activated processes of awareness and reflexivity with repercussions both on operators and on homeless people, who had the opportunity to discover personal and relational aspects driving change, especially related to addiction or deviant behaviors.

PHASE 2 - ADAPTATION OF HOMELESS SERVICES AND COPING STRATEGY

Without clear indications from the competent institutions, the homelessness sector in Italy has reacted by reorganizing its services in collaboration with other “third sector” entities or in some cases with local administrations. The services that had not been forced to close due to the stringent measures imposed to deal with the pandemic or due to a lack of staff, have adopted a “coping strategy” (Cortese et al. 2021), a rapid and necessary reaction to guarantee the continuity of sheltering, protect people hosted from the risk of contagion on the street and ensure greater safety in the workplace for the operators themselves.

Night shelters, above all larger ones, **often extended their opening hours and allowed hosted people to spend the daytime hours in**

the structures (24/7). For some shelters, this meant transforming themselves into “homes”, remodeling spaces and guaranteeing a qualitatively different usability. From the emergency merging of day centers and dormitories, hybrid structures were also born, which had to deal with the management of time and internal activities. As mentioned above, cases of tension or apathy have occurred in some structures. In others, a good climate of collaboration has been established between operators and people hosted. Others had to limit or deny new entries, with the consequence of leaving out those living on the streets, as highlighted above.

One of the recurring problems was also that of having to reshape the interventions that took place in person. In order to reduce the risk of contagion, services that included job support, internships and other paths of social inclusion, suspended these activities by favoring low-threshold services that met basic needs. The same problems were

also encountered in counselling centers, in social secretariats and in all those services based on face-to-face encounters. These services reduced or completely canceled face-to-face meetings using phone calls or receiving by appointment, an operating mode maintained and adopted even in phase 2 of the emergency.

One of the most difficult issues was **the management of virus positivity and quarantines.** Where there have been cases of positivity, suspected or overt, the management difficulties have been many, with solutions sometimes completely borne by the operators, without any support from the public health services and thus highlighting **the issue of the fragility of socio-sanitary integration.** The reaction of the services was, however, rapid and adaptive and led to the adoption of “do-it-yourself solutions”, such as the use for the isolation of offices closed to the public, hotel rooms, former assisted residences, accommodation reserved for social housing and the like.

“If before the pandemic interpersonal relationships between homeless people were limited to the time of meals and before going to sleep, sharing times and spaces of everyday life has led to a redefinition of interpersonal relationships.”

PHASE 3 - POST PANDEMIC POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

The national government, since the first months of the pandemic, has managed to adopt anti-crisis measures (reprogramming and simplified procedures for the use of structural funds, especially for the distribution of material on FEAD resources). At the same time, in some regions (Piedmont, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Veneto, Puglia ...), some projects or good practices have spread in the sector of services to homeless people such as extraordinary investment in **shelters open 24/7** (City of Turin), **socio-health protocols for the prevention of contagion** (Milan, Genoa), extraordinary night shelters for highly vulnerable groups (Palermo, Livorno).

The pandemic has shown that **it is possible to find alternative solutions to night only shelters** favoring the participation of the service users (the successful case of self-managed shelters in Savona is emblematic).¹ It has also highlighted the strong limitations of a traditional and emergency system that requires a sustainable and long-term reprogramming with the introduction of new cultural models of intervention, innovations, approaches and dimensions of social work that aim at the prevention of severe deprivation and housing poverty. The issue of social inclusion rights, access to housing and a fair system of protection, must become the main focus.

1 <https://www.comune.savona.it/it/aree-tematiche/assistenza-sociosanitaria/servizi-di-pronto-intervento-sociale/accoglienza-notturna-per-adulti-senza-dimora.html>

A further aspect of post-pandemic policy development that we want to underline concerns the new opportunities that are opening to tackle homelessness, in part thanks to the new European and national programming for the next seven years.

Among planning documents and dedicated funds we highlight:²

Three National Funds:

- National Fund for Social Policies
- The Poverty Fund
- Fund for non self-sufficient people

Three national plans:

- the National Social Plan
- the Plan for interventions and social services to combat poverty
- the Plan for non self-sufficiency

In addition to these there are:

- *The Recovery and Resilience National Plan* - 450 million for extreme poverty (2021-2026)
- *React EU 2020-2023*
 - 90 million for extreme poverty (non-food), aimed at financing social emergency services, access to the registered residence and the right to receive any kind of mail.
 - 190 million in food aid

2 <https://www.mef.gov.it/en/focus/The-National-Recovery-and-Resilience-Plan-NRRP/>

The RRNP, in particular, provides for a series of interventions aimed at contrasting serious adult marginality (homelessness), which we can summarize as follows:

- MISSION 5 - Inclusion and social cohesion

Investment 1.3: *“Temporary housing and one stop shops”*.

This proposes the implementation of housing and work measures, and access to low-threshold multifunctional services.

The intention is to give a strong boost to activities aimed at projects linked, above all, to the **“housing first” model**. To this end, both the resources provided for in the Poverty Fund component intended to combat extreme poverty, and the RRP resources, for an expenditure of approximately 175 million aimed at activating 250 interventions for a unit value of over 700,000 euros, mostly for the necessary investments.

Furthermore, it is intended to encourage the creation of service centers to combat poverty - “One stop shops” - in every social area concerned, with a total allocation of 275 million.

- MISSION 6 - Health

Investment 1.1: *Community houses and the “take charge”*

With a view to **social and health integration**, which is increasingly urgent and necessary, in particular, for homeless people, the project aims to create Community Homes (health facilities, promoters of a multidisciplinary intervention model, as well as privileged places for the planning of social and socio-sanitary integrated interventions).

This would make it possible to enhance and reorganize the services, improving their quality. Through the Community Houses all the services will be coordinated, in particular, those designed for the chronically ill. The investment provides for the activation of 1,288 Community Houses by mid-2026, using both existing and new structures. The total cost of the investment is estimated at 2 billion euros.

By the first quarter of 2022, the Ministry of Health and the entities it supervises, as the authority responsible for the implementation and involvement of regional administrations and all other interested bodies, will define a negotiated planning tool.

These and others will be the challenges that await the Federation (fio.PSD), the members and the territories that work with homeless people every day.

fio.PSD remains open to dialogue by relaunching the need to work in synergy with local areas, even the smallest ones, strengthening community ties with **proximity and widespread hospitality services** and, above all, **updating knowledge of the homelessness phenomenon with new data** also in light of the pandemic crisis we are experiencing.

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“The pandemic... has also highlighted the strong limitations of a traditional and emergency system that requires a sustainable and long-term reprogramming”

How has the pandemic impacted the European Commissions approach to issues of homelessness and how does the Commission plan to support Member States to tackle this issue? FEANTSA's Communications Assistant, Rocio Urías Martínez, speaks to the European Commissioner for jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, to find out the answers to both of these questions and more.

INTERVIEW WITH COMMISSIONER FOR JOBS & SOCIAL RIGHTS, NICOLAS SCHMIT



By **Rocio Urías Martínez**, Communications Assistant, FEANTSA

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic offers us a unique opportunity to change the way we address homelessness. Moreover, the European Platform for Combating Homelessness, which is currently under construction, provides the structure with which to implement this new approach. FEANTSA's Communications Assistant, Rocío Urías Martínez, speaks to the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, about the impact the pandemic has had on EU intervention on issues of homelessness, what happens next, and if we can really end homelessness by 2030.

FEANTSA: Homelessness was one of a few topics you added to those set out in your mission letter from President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen. Why did you make it a priority as Commissioner?

Commissioner Schmit: First, I must say, before becoming a Commissioner, I had a meeting with FEANTSA. They came to me to see me to talk about homelessness. So I was made aware of the problem which is increasing: 10% of households in the EU already spend an important portion of their income, 40% and sometimes even more, on housing costs; More than 15% live in overcrowded conditions; And the number of homeless people is increasing – nobody knows exactly [how many people are currently homeless], and that's one of the issues – to have better data – but we estimate that about 700,000 or even perhaps more people are sleeping on the streets. So, I was made really aware of the scale of the issue by FEANTSA who came to my office when I was a member of the European Parliament.

The second element was that we had a debate in the European Parliament on [homelessness]. And so I really said that we cannot

stay inactive. We have to do something about it. Certainly, it was not in my mission letter, but well, the letter is not everything. In the mission letter there is a clear provision that other issues can be dealt with and I thought that it was very important to do something about homelessness because this is also part of our strategy on fighting poverty. It is the most extreme form of poverty – once people end up experiencing homelessness, it is very difficult for them to come out. And that's why I was quite motivated to [work on] it. And I am especially happy that the Portuguese presidency immediately took this issue up and we could do something together.



FEANTSA: In June, the Commission, along with representatives from other European Union institutions, national ministers from all 27 member states, civil society organisations and social partners came together to launch the European Platform on Combating Homelessness. What happens next?

Commissioner Schmit: Well, first, together with the Portuguese Presidency [of the European Council] and especially Minister [for Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, Ana Mendes] Godinho, we reflected, “What can we do? How can we approach the problem?” because there is no explicit competence for the Commission on this particular issue, and there is no particular tool also to address this issue. So we came to the conclusion that this idea of a platform could

be a good instrument to deal with homelessness. And therefore, we launched this idea alongside the Lisbon Declaration on Homelessness.¹ I must say, I enjoyed very much the large support from Member States, but not only Member States, all kinds of stakeholders; the European Parliament was certainly a very important partner in that, but also the Committee of Regions, and I recently had an interesting debate with them on this issue. So our idea was to develop, in a European framework, an integrated approach with very concrete proposals and actions. Then, I was lucky to get the support from Yves Leterme who was ready to work with us, to chair the Platform and to be extremely involved in working on the work programme, which soon will be adopted. He is still working on it and we had the first meeting of the platform recently, two weeks ago. So this is a work in progress. Now we are working with a lot of stakeholders. I mentioned regions, cities, Committee of the Regions, but also the Economic and Social Committee, the European Parliament. And obviously, we need strong support from Member States. Now the process has been launched and we have to identify the right approaches in our work.

FEANTSA: Following up on my previous question, we have seen a huge political support for the Platform. How do you plan to capitalize on this support?

Commissioner Schmit: Well first, there is a momentum and we have to keep this momentum, which is awareness, because people suddenly started to say yes, there is a big problem in cities all over Europe. It might be a national problem in all the Member States, but it is has grown to be a European problem. We are now aware of the scale of this problem and it is now in the framework of our ambition to fight

¹ <https://www.feantsa.org/en/press-release/2021/06/21/press-release?bcParent=27>

poverty. We are now looking at what kind of concrete actions can be launched together with cities, what kind of actions are already operating. And how can we how can we scale them up? How can we also learn from them? And this is the dynamic now which we want to develop, and we want to use the Platform precisely for this political action with a European dimension.

FEANTSA: Your mandate ends in 2024. What would you like the Platform to have achieved by then?

Commissioner Schmit: Firstly, I would like the Platform to have grown, to have become stronger, to have made obvious progress in fighting homelessness. I want to see that tens of thousands of homeless people have been led back to a normal life, that we managed to stop the increase in homelessness. I would say that now all European citizens, not just cities and regions and Member States but citizens, are aware of the problem and that they support actions to reduce and to combat homelessness. So homelessness is on our political agenda.

FEANTSA: That is true, thank you. How do you think FEANTSA can be useful as a partner of the Commission on the European Platform on Combating Homelessness?

Commissioner Schmit: FEANTSA has been a strong lobbyist - and here I use the word lobbyist, not in a negative sense - for people who normally have no lobbyist, who are forgotten in our society because they are on the streets and nobody cares about them so much. FEANTSA has become their defendant, their lobbyist, and I must say, quite successfully. The Commission already had a very good relationship with FEANTSA even before the Platform and I'm sure that FEANTSA, by developing its own actions, and actions on the basis of the Lisbon Declaration, will play a central role in the Platform and on developing the Platform (because the Platform is work in progress.)

FEANTSA: In your 2020 joint op-ed with Ana Mendes Godinho and Yves Leterme, you wrote, “COVID has demonstrated beyond all possible doubt how essential a decent home is to health and well-being.” Has the pandemic made the intervention of European Union institutions even more important?

Commissioner Schmit: Yes, absolutely. COVID-19 has given to the issue of homelessness a much broader dimension because somebody said, “Well, if during the lockdown we told people stay at home, what could we tell those who have no home? Because they cannot go home and cannot stay at home.” So, I think it has become a health issue. How can we vaccinate those who are living in the streets, who sometimes have no identity cards or have lost their papers? The COVID crisis has amplified the problem and the necessity for action.

FEANTSA: Yes, that is true. Likewise, the fallout from the pandemic could lead to a massive rise in homelessness over the years to come. How does the Commission plan to support Member States to safeguard against this?

Commissioner Schmit: This is about how we want our society to function. We have gone through decades where social issues have not been so much at the core of our policies, where we thought that markets would solve all of our problems. We have forgotten that markets do not solve all the problems, but they also create problems. They can also be the cause of exclusions, of failures, of people being left behind. And therefore, we have to, first, reconstruct an economy that works

for people, that gives opportunities to everyone. We have to make sure that our social policies are designed in a way that does not exclude some people and let them fall into a black hole like homelessness. Because homelessness is in a way a social black hole. So, there is a need for redesigning our social policies, employment policies, and housing policies, [which are] fundamental.

Housing has become not any more what it should be, on the basis of our own human rights or citizens’ rights, and on the basis of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Every human should have a right to decent housing, but housing has now become an object of financial speculation. And more and more people, 10% of households in the EU, already spend 40% of their income on housing costs. This is something which is not acceptable. There has to be a very active policy on housing. Not just on housing, but to give people who have difficulties in their life some help. Therefore, minimum incomes plus social integration policies are key. That’s what we are working on for next year, especially minimum income, which should precisely prevent people from becoming homeless. This is an overall approach in social policy, employment policy, housing policy, and finally the idea we have of the future of our society.

FEANTSA: The Multiannual Financial Framework and the Recovery and Resilience Facility present an unprecedented financial opportunity to tackle homelessness over the years to come. How does the Commission plan to support Member States to cease this potential to finance and fund efforts to address homelessness?



Now we have to be very active: to invest money, to increase awareness, to mobilise all the stakeholders with the objective of having a real turning point.”

Commissioner Schmit: Well, we certainly discuss with Member States how they use their funds and, through the country specific recommendations, whether they have particular difficulties. Housing has become a real issue in many Member States, and we can only address housing through investing more in housing, but not *just* housing. It's about affordable housing. It's about what we call social housing. I noticed that, for instance, in Germany now, the new government has announced that they will make a very special effort to invest in affordable housing. They even announced a quite ambitious figure. They have appointed a minister in charge of that. That's a very good signal. But we have to convince Member States, especially those who have more financial problems, to take European resources to invest in housing, but also to invest into social programs, for instance, to promote inclusion, to combat exclusion and especially also to prevent homelessness.

FEANTSA: In signing the Lisbon declaration, the Commission pledged to end homelessness by 2030. Do you believe this is possible?

Commissioner Schmit: Well, I have to bring in a slight nuance. We did not say we would end homelessness by 2030. We said we will work towards ending homelessness. In any case, we want to drastically

reduce the numbers of homeless people in Europe. If we can achieve there being no homeless people in Europe by 2030, I would be the first to be very happy about that, but I am always a bit cautious to announce very ambitious objectives which are difficult to reach. And then [if we didn't meet the target] we would say it's not possible to end homelessness and our drive to work on this would be weakened or stopped. So I think now we have to be very active: to invest money, to increase awareness, to mobilise all the stakeholders with the objective of having a real turning point, where numbers decrease, which will already be a success, and then really try to come to the lowest possible number by 2030. If it's zero, fine, but the important objective is it should be much lower than the current number.

FEANTSA: Onto our last question: our *Homeless in Europe* magazine is widely read by organisations providing services on the ground. Do you have any message that you would like to share with them?

Commissioner Schmit: Well, I would say you are not forgotten. We have understood your difficulties and we are at your side. We stand by you and we will try to help. We are committed to this.

Cover image by Sean Griffin

The drawing emerges from my interest with the world on an atomic level, working from the constituent smaller shapes into something larger, the space where a thing becomes another thing, something recognisable. Inspired by Roger Penrose, Richard Feynman and Stephen Hawking, I work along the line of transition, tipping points, the fluid dynamics that make up the world. The [240 Project](#) offers a space to work amongst others, there is a comfort in making art with other people.

Via [Cafe Art](#)

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