Youth Homelessness in Generation Covid19

How does Covid19 impact on vulnerable and already marginalised young people experiencing homelessness?

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Illustrations by Coline Robin

As a starting point we have to agree a definition of youth homelessness. FEANTSA, the umbrella group for homeless services across Europe, has recently published a European Framework for defining youth homelessness. Our framework is designed to be flexible enough to be adapted to different European contexts.

Youth homelessness is commonly referred to as hidden homelessness. Young people favour sofa surfing to rough sleeping and use emergency shelters as a stop gap when sofa surfing becomes impossible. Youth who sleep rough are also more likely to hide themselves in parks or stations. Therefore when we think about homelessness, we do not think of young people. Generally homeless policies are not tailored to the needs of young people and are insufficient to prevent and end youth homelessness, highlighting the importance of a clear definition of youth homelessness.

In the past decade youth homelessness has risen across Europe as a legacy of austerity and research consistently shows us that young people's causes, exits and experiences while homeless differ from adult homelessness. With another European recession on the horizon, this brings fresh concerns about how we prevent and reduce youth homelessness. If we have learned anything from the past decade, we need youth-oriented solutions, tailored to the needs of young people.

> *"Youth homelessness occurs where an individual between the ages of 13 and 26 is experiencing rooflessness or houselessness or is living in insecure or inadequate housing without a parent, family member or other legal guardian."*
>
> European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness

It is also important to highlight the diversity of youth homelessness, not all young people are the same. For example, the needs of a person aged 13, 18 and 26 are very different. Additionally young people leaving state care and those identifying as LGBTIQ are disproportionately at risk of experiencing homelessness. Young people also suffer from poor mental health and use substances differently to general population. Young women also experience home lessness differently, sex work

tends to be more prevalent for women and LGBTIQ youth & young people face discrimination in accessing housing. Strategies targeted at young people should be flexible enough to address the multiple and complex needs of young people.
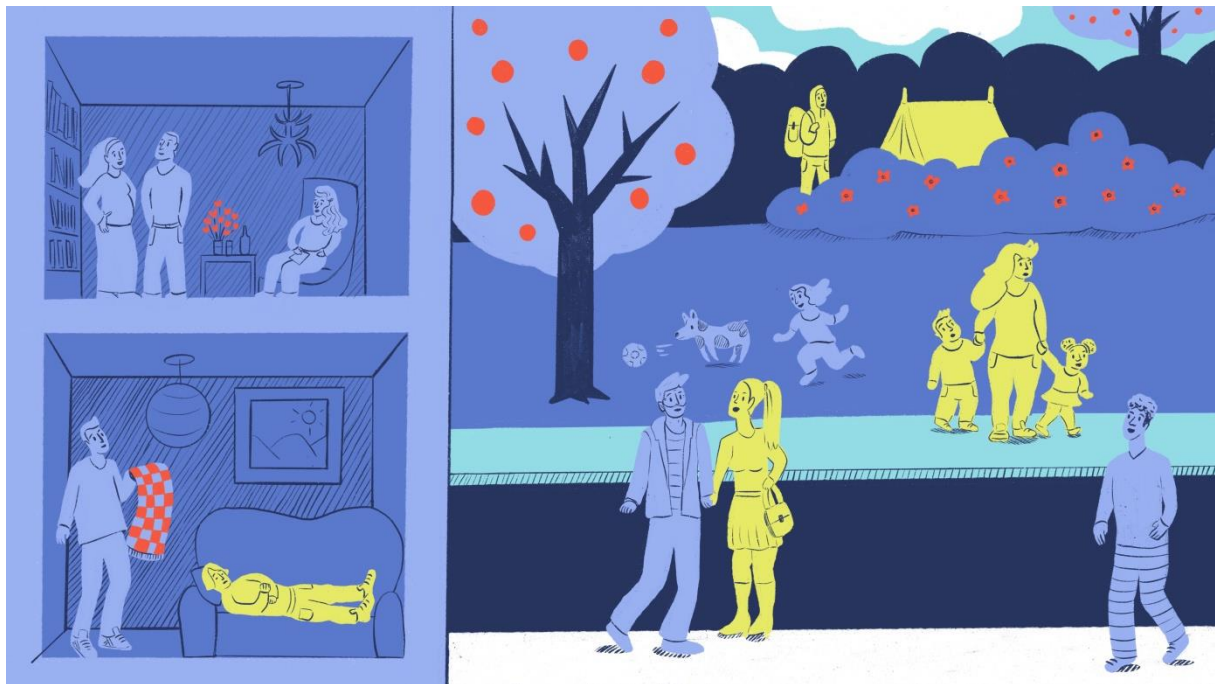
Homelessness is often episodic, meaning it happens throughout the life cycle and can be inter-generational. Any strategy at local or national level that aims to end homelessness requires a focus on young people. Ensuring that we prevent youth homelessness and that the supports to exit homelessness are sustainable, thereby ensuring that people do not re-enter homelessness later in life, requires a youth-oriented solution.

Since the publication of the [European Framework for defining youth homelessness](#), the Covid19 lockdowns have brought Europe to a standstill and intensified the challenges experienced by homeless services and their beneficiaries.

With the impossibility of self-isolation, homeless people are disproportionately affected by poor health and respiratory problems. As lockdowns began, shelters saw a drop in senior volunteers (who often make up a large part of the volunteer workforce) and were either forced to close due to stringent hygiene measures or reduce capacity to ensure proper social distancing. Social service providers could not maintain in-person counselling work and had to adopt new strategies such as telephone support. Although responses have varied across countries, initial measures included letting night shelters remain open round-the-clock and extending winter programmes into spring. Many countries have put in place a moratorium on evictions to avoid further homelessness, although in the UK some experts insist that this is not much more than an extension of the notice period.

Once emergency measures took effect, many homeless people faced a difficult dilemma on top of an already extremely difficult living situation: on the one hand, they were not allowed to remain in public space, and there have been cases of homeless people being fined for failing to comply with the call to stay home. On the other hand, open-air spaces were perceived by some as safer than shelters given the high risk of transmission in the latter. It is imperative to isolate positive cases in

order to mitigate this risk. Based on an informal survey carried out by [FEANTSA](#), testing in shelters is insufficient or unavailable in most European countries. In two shelters in Italy and Estonia where testing was made available for everyone following one confirmed case, more than half the shelter tested positive (55% and 56% respectively). Shelters house highly vulnerable people in conditions where social distancing and self-isolation is difficult, if not impossible.

The urgent need to house homeless people coincided with a halt to travel and cancelling of large conferences, opening up the possibility for use of these spaces as self-isolation units, and leading cities to strike deals with hotels, convention centres, and the short-term rental sector. However, many of these spaces are inadequate for social distancing, and it remains to be seen what kind of exit strategies governments will put forward as they lift their lockdowns. Governments and local authorities should view this as an opportunity to make changes made during the emergency a more permanent fixture of their social protection systems. Epidemiologists have made clear that this is unlikely to be the last time we face a global outbreak of this scale. It didn't take long to realise that housing had become the frontline defence of this crisis. It should be a key priority area to ensure we are prepared for future shocks.

Beyond arguments for crisis preparedness, housing must be reaffirmed as a human right. Legal provisions for housing already exist under international law (such as Article 11 ICESCR, Article 31 RESC). [The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights](#) reminds us that states are bound by the principle of progressive realisation: they must take appropriate measures towards the full realisation of economic, social and cultural rights to the maximum of their available resources. Another important concept is that of non-retrogression: regressive steps regarding economic and social rights are in contradiction to the progressive realisation principle and constitute a violation of these rights. This is important to keep in mind now that so many people previously unhoused have been provided emergency housing. When the lockdown is lifted, where will they go?

In particular the position of young people experiencing homelessness during Covid19 is incredibly difficult for services across Europe to manage.

Homeless young people often have poor contact with their family, which is compounded during lockdown, where day centres and drop ins are closed, contact with social workers has been moved online and social distancing rules exclude the fallback of sofa-surfing to keep a roof over your head.

Across Europe services note that Covid19 has led to an increase in engagement of their service, not just of new people entering homelessness, but people who had been sofa surfing or experiencing homelessness but had not accessed social supports previously.

> "*The young homeless people are the ones who stayed far from the shelters, and found alternative solutions, like moving in abandoned houses, staying in the forest, or in tents. They try to beg for money, but fewer people are on the streets, so they have less income. In Budapest a lot of homeless youngsters sell street papers, which is a legitimized income, but nowadays they are not too successful either*".
>
> Judit Popovics, Psychologist, Shelter Foundation, Hungary

Similarly in Slovenia services have seen youth homelessness become more visible:

> "*These young people are often not included in other programs that provide assistance to the homeless, as they do not identify with the older homeless population and as a result are deprived of appropriate forms of assistance. They often lack information about the options and rights they have in the field of social and health care and some fall out of the aid system (e.g. homeless juvenile excluded from a school system are unable to obtain financial social assistance).*"
>
> Simona Sabic, Drogart, Slovenia

Navigating social welfare systems during the period has also become difficult with young people discriminated by policy. For example in France most young people are not on the correct type of contracts to remain in work while on government support and so have been fired by their employers and those under 25 are unable to access social welfare leaving them without assistance and further pushing young people into a situation of homelessness.

While in Ireland there are some positive developments with young people returning to family and improved family relationships, but on the whole [Focus Ireland](#) has noted increased anxiety, loneliness and poorer mental health with the young people they work with. They've also noted young people are living through food poverty and are preparing food packages for young people as they struggle to manage budgets during Covid19.

This is a trend developing across Europe. [The Rock Trust](#) in Scotland have reported that a majority of their young people are no longer in education, training or work and those who retain work are on zero-hour contracts, creating uncertainty about their future and interrupting their daily routine.

> "*All of the young people we support are facing a significant risk of increased poverty over the coming months, difficulty accessing benefits and financial support as they struggle to manoeuvre a rapidly changing and confusing system, and increased anxiety and strain on their mental health and well-being as more of them are self-isolating and struggling with the lockdown restrictions. We are already supporting young people who were made redundant from their jobs as soon as the lockdown started, and some of the young people accessing our Health and Well-being service have reported feeling like they have nothing to get up for except for those sessions with our therapist*".
>
> Madeline Cross, Rock Trust, Scotland

Unsurprisingly the stress and anxiety of all these factors has seen an increase in drugs and alcohol use as a coping mechanism for this new situation. Young people are now connecting with people who have used drugs for a long time. This is risky because young people have a different "drug culture" than people who have used it for decades. They may not have the skills to cope with it which exposes youth to exploitation and sexual abuse.

> "*Young women in particular are in a vulnerable situation now. Sexual health services are closed, increasing a risk of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections are transmitted even faster. Drugs are used as a coping system to manage the stress of this new situation, their use is rising and because of that sex work is increasing. In Helsinki there are people who are offering free drugs to young women. Once women have become addicted to drugs, these abusers "pimp" them. This is no longer about sex work, it is about human trafficking.*"
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> Sari Rantaniemi, Project worker
> NEA project - Securing Housing for Women, The Deaconess Foundation
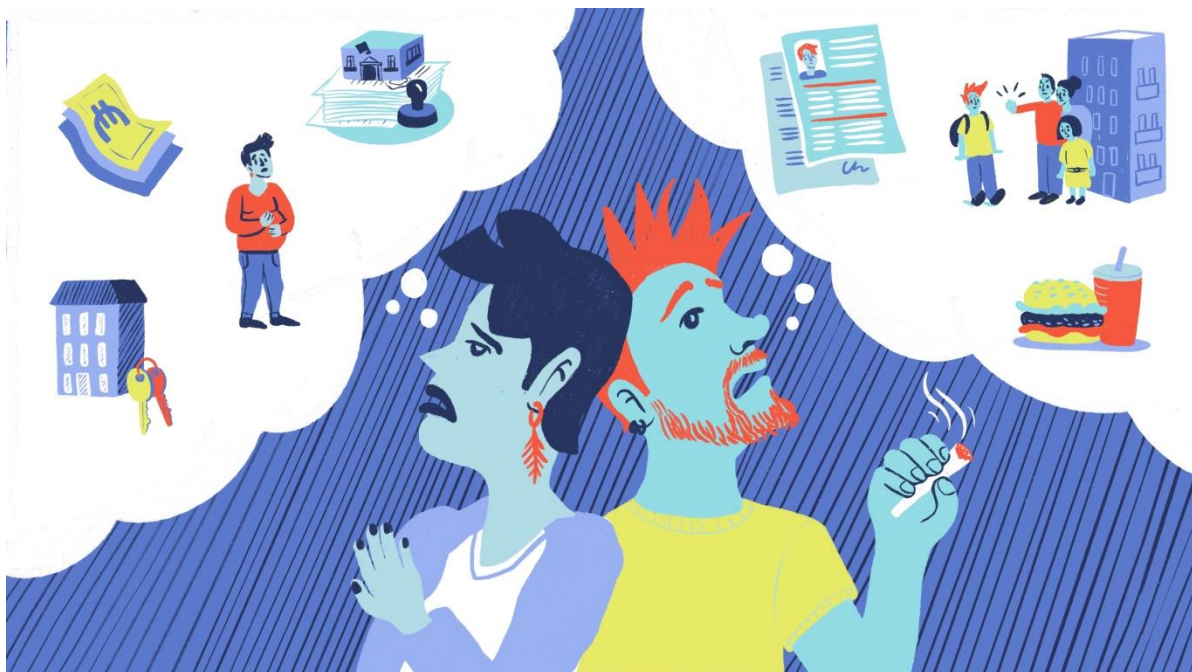
Across Europe services are concerned about what comes next. Covid19 has restricted fundraising activities and events with corporate partners while projects due to start in the spring have been delayed and income from private partners, public donations and governments is under threat. Services in the coming months will be hit with a double blow with increased youth presenting to services and lower income affecting their capacity to meet those needs.

Services across Europe forecast that over the coming months the number of young people at risk of homelessness will increase, as a result of job losses and increased debt and the strain on family relationships for young people still living at home.

Robbie Stakelum leads FEANTSA's work on youth homelessness. He coordinates a network of professionals across Europe committed to preventing and ending youth homelessness by putting human rights at the core of solutions for youth homelessness. As a course director with the Council of Europe's Youth Department Robbie has also led a series of trainings building the capacity of homeless services to develop human rights solutions for young people experiencing homelessness.

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