

The abandonment of the homeless during the Covid-19 crisis in France

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Abstract

On 17th March, during the establishment of the ban on movement in order to halt the Covid-19 crisis, the homeless were totally left out of the measures announced by the French government. With the slowdown of the voluntary services as well as the lack of governmental decisions, it has proved impossible for the homeless to properly protect themselves against the virus, which worsened their precarious situation.



The Covid-19 pandemic that has impacted the whole world these last few months has been particularly unbearable for a part of the population : the homeless. According to INSEE, there are about 4 millions inadequately housed people in France (living in overcrowded, dilapidated houses, or in designated emergency shelters) and about 150 000 homeless people, even though organisations such as the Fondation Abbé-Pierre would rather count about 250 000 homeless. During the lockdown announcement on 17th March, nothing was stated about this population who could not stay at home like the remaining part of the French. Once again, the voluntary services were the ones who had to take over to help the left-out of the sanitary crisis.

The lockdown and the lack of measures regarding the homeless

Within a really short time, the daily lives of French changed completely because of the lockdown. An attestation was required to leave the house, face masks became mandatory, social distancing... However, for the homeless, respecting these health measures has proved impossible. *“When you do not have any home, you cannot stay inside !”* states Alain Christnacht, the chairman of Samu Social in Paris. And how to get face masks or hydroalcoholic gel when you do not have the means to pay for it ? How to be updated about the evolution of the crisis without any mobile phone or wifi access ?

It must be noted that the State was unable to answer these questions. It is particularly deplorable that no essential hygiene products have been distributed by the public services to the homeless. Admittedly, the government opened four centres for the homeless in Île-de-France to take care of the homeless sick of Covid-19 or homeless with symptoms whose state of health did not require hospitalisation. However, no similar measure has been taken outside of Île-de-France. A few gymnasiums were requisitioned but only little of them were able to open because of the lack of staff to manage them. As for the hotel rooms which were supposed to be available as announced by the Ministry of Housing, they only represented a drop in the ocean : 200 in Paris and 600 in the rest of France. These few gymnasiums and hotel rooms have not been able to give enough places to protect all the homeless.

Organisations thus insisted for the State to extend the winter truce until 31st May, a period during which extra care places are open in shelters to protect homeless against the cold. If this actually allowed shelters to be opened for two more months, they were still overcrowded and inefficient because it is really hard to be locked down inside collective dwellings.

Organisations take over

When the government fails to implement the measures needed, numerous organisations rise to the challenge to remedy this.

Parisian organisation La Mie de Pain thus regularly organised screening campaigns using serological and virological testing (PCR), identifying 11 positive cases among the homeless. For its part, the organisation Dans Ma Rue organised distributions of reusable bottles for the homeless to be able to drink public drinkable water.

Unfortunately, from the very first days of the lockdown, we witnessed a massive closing movement of the biggest organisations. Despite a decree of the Ministry of the Interior authorizing the maintenance of

food distributions and the declaration of the action of the charitable associations, a lot of organisations had to stop their actions because of the lack of available staff or secure area. As the CEO of Emmaüs Solidarité Bruno Morel said : *“Right now, we do not really need volunteer doctors. Access to hygiene for the homeless, to deal with skin diseases due to heat for example, is more limited.”*

Some branches of Restos du Coeur stopped their distributions and numerous day care centres are no longer able to welcome people in need. Without any food distribution and without access to showers, the homeless thus were quickly prone to bigger hygiene and malnutrition problems than usual. Yet, as Florent Gueguen, who is the CEO of Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité (FAS) which gathers more than 800 associations fighting exclusion, reminds us : *“We know the homeless are a particularly vulnerable audience when it comes to the virus, because they are often aging people with a failing immune system. Moreover, most of those who will develop symptoms will not have the reflex to call 911”.*

The consequences for the homeless

Even more shocking, some homeless were scolded for non-respect of the lockdown, as Samu Social regrets with Agence France-Presse (AFP) especially referring to the cities of Paris, Lyon and Bayonne. There is every reason to believe that everything was made to further complicate their daily lives and not to consider their particular situation.

In order to observe the impacts of the Covid-19 on the homeless, UHC Saint-Pierre in Brussels carried out a study from 3rd March to 26th May 2020 comparing the hospitalisation of the homeless patients who are sick due to coronavirus with the ordinary patients. 14 homeless were identified among 238 patients who were admitted for pneumonia due to COVID-19, which represents 5,88% of total cases. Only three of them were living in shelters. For the period concerned , and related to 100 000 inhabitants, it represents 650 homeless who were hospitalized for Covid-19 against 194 non-homeless people. In Belgium, the hospitalisation rate thus is three times higher for the homeless than for the overall population.

No similar study has been carried out in France and it is hard to conduct national research given the lack of available statistics on the number of homeless and the diversity of situations. However, we think it is safe to say that the number of homeless sick with Covid-19 is way higher than the one of the overall population, hence the need to protect them.

This health crisis thus has been particularly deadly and painful for the homeless as well as for the organisations that have helped them. Far from being behind us, the difficulties are even more reinforced by the summer heat waves which are already a usual major cause of mortality. For example, it is hard to lower the temperature inside day care centres because the fans cannot be turned on in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

While Europe and France are worried in the run-up to a rebound of the pandemic at the end of the summer break, it is therefore crucial that the State does not make the same mistakes, and this time gets ready to address the issue and ensure the protection of the most at-risk.

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