



LEARNING BRIEF 1

The Impact of Covid-19

May / June 2020

SUMMARY

- The impact of Covid-19 is worsened by the existing vulnerabilities of homelessness and insecure shelter.
- For many people experiencing homelessness or living in dense informal settlements, social distancing and isolating is impractical and often impossible.
- Services addressing homelessness and insecure shelter have developed new ways to keep in touch with their clients, including on-line contacts and working through community groups.
- The crisis has led to innovations and, in some cases, the extension of services and protections for people experiencing homelessness that need to be retained following the crisis period.

1. INTRODUCTION

This is the first of a series of learning briefs from the Comic Relief funded Homelessness and Insecure Shelter programme. The learning brief draws from a webinar held on the 13 May 2020, with 43 participants from the United Kingdom, sub-Saharan Africa and India, on the impact of Covid-19 and how organisations working with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are responding to the crisis.

The learning brief is aimed at members of the Community of Practice and partner organisations working to address homelessness and insecure shelter. This

brief and other materials are available via the [Community of Practice website](#).

The rapid global spread of Covid-19 since December 2019 has affected countries in all regions. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation formally declared Covid-19 a pandemic, issuing guidance aimed at stemming the transmission of the virus.

2. LEARNING POINTS

The webinar provided an opportunity for the Community of Practice members to discuss key issues and share experiences of working

with their target groups during the Covid-19 crisis. Breakout groups focused on three topics: the challenges of Covid-19; how organisations are adapting; and advice for other groups.

Providing Safe Spaces

The international public health response to Covid-19 has focused on improved hygiene including regular handwashing, social distancing, restricting access to public spaces, isolation and treatment for people infected with the virus. Many governments have provided emergency shelter for people on the streets and enacted new legal protections for tenants and landlords to delay eviction notices.

From the outset, people experiencing homelessness and those living in informal and insecure accommodation have been at heightened risk, unable to observe guidelines due to the lack of basic amenities, pre-existing health (particularly respiratory) conditions, the density of settlements and the absence of safe and secure housing in which to isolate.

Home isolation may not be safe for people that are exposed to violence or coercive control. An inability to access friends or expert agencies or an unwillingness to report threats at a time of national crisis, can place some people at additional risk.

The rapid response to Covid-19 has clearly shown how spaces can be created or facilities re-purposed to provide shelter for people experiencing homelessness. It will be vital to take these experiences into post-Covid-19 public policy and service design.

Learning Point 1



Local government, community organisations and businesses have made hotel rooms, hostels and other community venues available for people experiencing homelessness in the UK; night hostels in Delhi; and large tents in sports stadia in Pretoria, as a way to enforce isolation and prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Reduced Access to Support

Covid-19 has disrupted the normal practices of organisations working with people experiencing homelessness and those in insecure shelter. It has necessitated the closure of offices, community venues and drop-in centres that have been trusted sources of information and support for people experiencing homelessness and those at risk.

Limited access to information and support increases isolation and anxiety for

vulnerable individuals. Organisations working with people experiencing homelessness and at-risk groups have quickly adapted their services to stay in touch with clients. But the crisis has put pressure on the finances of these organisations. This has required additional fundraising activity, the delay of projects and in some cases temporary laying-off of staff.

Learning Point 2



A key response has been to reorganise and continue group and individual activities that promote good mental health at a time of increased worry. These range from one-to-one counselling through to using telephone, social media and on-line resources to run social events and exercise clubs.

While organisations have responded creatively by changing their working arrangements, concerns remain about those without access to mobile phones or the internet. With the loss of face-to-face contact, some people may not be accessing the support and information that they need. Individual interaction is a vital part of support for people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable people.

Covid-19 has challenged organisations to reimagine how services are delivered and

has highlighted that safe spaces and personal contact remain essential.

Economic Implications

In addition to the health impacts, many people have lost income or livelihoods during the crisis. This is having a major impact both on the ability of individuals to cover their housing costs and, more widely, to afford basic necessities.



The closure of public spaces and social distancing has particularly affected the livelihoods of petty traders in African and Indian cities. The loss of income compounds poverty, placing huge pressure on families, including young children, to earn money during the lockdown.

The longer-term effects on poverty are a concern. With a slow recovery from Covid-19, employment and livelihood

opportunities may be limited and lead to an increase in levels of homelessness. Providing support to rebuild livelihoods after the crisis will be vital to prevent increased vulnerability.

Learning Point 3



Relationships with grassroots groups have been essential to identify people at risk, to distribute food and to share information and advice about coping with Covid-19. Local knowledge about vulnerable individuals, held by outreach workers and community organisations, is key to effective targeting of support.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The public health response has exposed deep inequalities in individual access to public services and the vulnerability of people with insecure housing and livelihoods. In some cities in South Africa and India, authorities have used violence to enforce curfew and lockdown arrangements.

Globally, there has also been a reported spike in gender-based and domestic violence, highlighting the risks of social isolation. Covid-19 has underlined the

fundamental importance of shelter for wellbeing.

For policy – the emergency response has created a new awareness of what is possible to address homelessness and insecure shelter. Key safeguards and provisions that have been effective in the short term, such as offering temporary accommodation in hotels or using community facilities as shelters, need to become long-term policies. These initiatives represent an opportunity to redirect the way governments and the public think about homelessness.

For practitioners – new approaches to using digital technology to engage with people, to deliver support, to manage staff teams and to collaborate with partners provide important lessons for how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery.

For partnership working - homelessness organisations have taken on additional roles during the crisis to work with partners, coordinate action to engage people experiencing homelessness, to distribute food and signpost individuals to sources of support. This experience has underlined the importance of co-production of services and utilising the skills and capacity of practitioner organisations, government and clients.

For all – after the crisis there is likely to be an avalanche of delayed evictions, closure of

shelters and a withdrawal of protections and support. Learning from Covid-19, the new normal needs to be better than the old normal, starting with preserving the changes

that have improved the lives and life chances of people experiencing homelessness and those in insecure shelter.

Learning Point 4



Homelessness organisations have focused their activity on ensuring that people are able to obtain welfare payments, where available, and gain access to food parcels and medicines. Access to public support is more difficult where people do not have identity documents. The lack of ID multiplies negative impacts on people experiencing homelessness and migrant groups.

Learning Point 5



Organisations working within communities have sought to hold governments to account, ensuring that the rights of people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable people are protected and that public support is made available to marginalised groups.



4. FURTHER INFORMATION

Additional information on the impact and responses to Covid-19 can be found on the [Community of Practice website](#).