Homeless Migrants in the European Union: Case studies
Immigrants make up a significant proportion of the homeless people in the European Union. People mainly migrate to and within the EU for economic or humanitarian reasons and for reasons of family reunification. For most of them the migration path is a successful journey but it is not uncommon that many of them live in severely overcrowded housing or with no access to basic facilities; they might find accommodation in shelters but might be obliged to sleep rough because of limited capacity in night shelters or because of limitations linked to their residence status.

According to the UK Department for Community and Local Government, in Autumn 2014, 54% of London’s rough sleepers were migrants. In 2012, according to the census on homelessness, 59.4% of people using homeless services in Italy were immigrants. In 2013, in France, the Insee counted more than one third of homeless people (38.6%) were immigrants and that does not include asylum seekers housed in reception centres, i.e. 22,500 people. In 2010, approximately 63% of all those registered with homeless services in Spain were migrants and the latest street count in Copenhagen revealed that all rough sleepers except a few were migrants.

A recurring theme that arises in the stories of those migrants who have experienced homelessness is the lack of regular and secure employment, often caused by discrimination in access to the labour market and to fair and equal working conditions. A lack of employment, precarious working conditions and undeclared work are all obstacles to accessing social benefits and, in some Member States, even to accessing emergency social support such as night shelters. Besides work-related reasons, homelessness can be due to a series of variables that can go from insufficient availability of accommodation in reception centres for asylum seekers to dependency on sustaining a relationship with a violent partner (particularly for women) or to the length of administrative procedures.

This collection of case studies wants to provide an overview of the possible reasons leading migrants to destitution and homelessness. There are factors that concern all homeless, regardless of their nationality, and there are others that only concern migrants. Some of the reasons are peculiar in a few Member States but, generally, the dynamics of the stories collected are similar in the countries taken into account. Instability is overall the main cause of social exclusion and family disruption, domestic violence, lack of a stable job, no administrative status, discrimination, lack of language knowledge, health, mental health issues can all be destabilising factors that, if not recognized and solved in due time, might be very tough to tackle.
Meet E. from Belgium
47 years-old

“I want to do something but do not know what. I can’t understand anything about personal number, where to go to look for a job, where I can sleep or eat something – So I prefer to sleep on the streets; here at least I know what I’m entitled to”

E is a 47 year-old man from Belgium who has lived in Denmark for about seven years. E lost both his parents when he was a teenager and from 13 he lived with his only sister, with the plan to stay until he got a university degree in philosophy. Shortly afterwards, however, he was thrown out of his sister’s house and he travelled to Switzerland where he found a job and worked in a kitchen for two years. Later, he travelled to Italy, France and Germany alternating periods in which he worked and lived in an apartment and others in which he was homeless. E travelled around for the past twenty years and almost seven years ago came to Denmark. E firstly met an outreach worker from Fonden projekt Udenfor five years ago while he was living on the streets and making a living by collecting bottles. E is polite and a little shy and only after several meetings with the outreach worker did he explain that he would very much like to find a job but that he is struggling to find his way around the Danish system. The outreach worker helped E to find work in a cleaning company and a room. Three months later, the outreach worker met E who told them that he no longer has a job. He says that he was fired because the boss was displeased with him. The outreach worker called the former employer who said that E had not been fired but that one day E just left and has not returned since. E seems very depressed and convinced that everyone is against him. He began to drink a lot, which he normally does not do. After a few months, E was thrown out of his room since he had not paid rent and he ended up on the street again. In the following month, the outreach worker could not get into contact with E, but suddenly one day he called and asks for help to get a new passport and new documents since he had lost all his possessions.

The outreach worker helped E. to get new documents and E. also asked for help to find a new job. The outreach worker succeeded in finding a job for E through a recruitment company for persons with special needs. E also got an apartment. After six months, E said that he was not happy at his new workplace because the others were
against him thus he wanted to stop. The outreach worker advised him to continue, but E decided not to go to work anymore and was therefore fired. Fonden projekt UDENFOR helped E to apply for cash benefits, to which he is entitled since he had a job. E is given cash benefits, but after a year the municipality assessed that E no longer has the right to cash benefits since he did not have the right to stay anymore and had to leave Denmark.

While E waited to be deported, he had a mental breakdown. Fonden projekt UDENFOR consequently helped E to get in contact with a psychiatrist with whom he had a shorter treatment period. E received an answer to his case and was told that he must leave Denmark and was sent home. E was sent home in December 2011 but a few days later, he was back in Denmark again. He did not want to live in Belgium, he was determined to remain in Denmark, which he considers his home. However, he no longer had his apartment and had to therefore live on the street. E was helped to buy a bicycle so he could collect bottles and find a permanent place for overnight accommodation close to Nørreport Station. When the outreach worker met E one month later, E said that he was pleased with his new residence. However, he was upset that he has again lost all his possessions, including his passport. The outreach worker helped E to get new documents and Fonden projekt UDENFOR paid so he can lock his possessions in a luggage box at the main station.

Sending people back to their country of origin is useless. Indeed, after a long period of living abroad the main centre of interest for an individual might have changed. Providing the right support before the person gets into a downward spiral is paramount. In the short term basic needs have to be taken into account. Besides food, accommodation, hygiene and health, also services such as the access to a luggage box are vital for those who have to survive day-by-day. In the long term rebuilding trust and find stability are the main challenges: these can be tackled by accompanying the individual concerned all along the integration path.

Depression and alcohol abuse can further exacerbate the consequences of social and economic precariousness pushing the individual in a negative spiral from which is very hard to get out. Furthermore, the lack of a stable job might entail the lost of residence rights and, with it, the entitlement to social benefits and support.

Precariousness can be caused by very different factors - among which family disruption – and is likely to prevent people from finding their stability and accessing the right support. This can happen particularly to people who moved to another country and as migrants they face additional challenges due to the lack of integration to an unknown system.

Belgium is not my country, I traveled for a very long time and now I have been living in Copenhagen for years. How could they expect I fancy going back to Belgium? They send me away and I'll be back as soon as I can.
Meet A. from Mauritius and K. from Poland  
26 years old and 55 years old

Dublin

Provided by Focus Ireland

“It’s so easy to start using when you live like I live and then if you don’t get help you’re just lost. I know where I’ll sleep tonight but don’t know whether I’ll ever find some stability.

In 2007 A came to Ireland. He applied for a student visa on arrival as he intended to study at a College in Dublin, however when he applied he realised he had not brought enough money with him for the visa. He stayed with friends for the first three months after which he got a full-time job working as a kitchen porter in an Italian restaurant in Dublin. He paid tax and has a PPS number (social insurance number). He did not apply for his visa during this time as he states the time limit for the application had passed. After two years working in Ireland he developed an addiction to heroin. He lost his job due to his addiction and he lost his girlfriend at this time too. He then became homeless in 2012. He has no income and is not in receipt of social welfare. He approached Gardiner Street social welfare office and was refused help. He is currently on a methadone programme and is awaiting a detox.

A said he is trying to keep his hopes up but is struggling to find a solution to his situation. He does not wish to return to Mauritius. He is currently homeless and struggles to get a bed, feels the Freephone service does not wish to accommodate him and stated...
he is usually told to ring the Freephone at 10.30 at night and does not get a bed regularly. A stated he wishes to work but feels without a visa he will not be employed.

K came to Ireland in 2004. He says he came here to get away from a difficult situation in Poland and to get employment and a fresh start here. In 2005 he was self-employed as a painter; he set up this business with a friend and was privately renting accommodation. In 2007 the business relationship broke down. From 2007 to 2014 K has worked a variety of casual jobs including as a street artist. While this has brought him enough income to support himself, he says that he still uses day services for food etc. He has applied for social welfare however he was refused as he does not have enough tax contributions.

K states that he worries about how he will pay his rent every month as he struggles to make enough money from his casual jobs. He would like to register himself as self-employed in future and try and pay some tax every month with the hope that this will assist him with an application for social welfare. K states that he still needs homeless day services for food etc.

Contrary to what public opinion often believes, irregularly residing migrants are mainly overstayers, i.e. people who entered the EU regularly and then stayed longer than the time they were entitled to. The lack of administrative status prevents migrants from integrating into society and the precariousness in which they live can lead to serious problems, such as drug abuse.

Employment is the main reason that pushes individuals to migrate but inadequate working conditions and job insecurity make migrants defenseless as soon as something unexpected happens.

Administrative support and job advice would certainly help migrants to find the stability they need in order to be able to face unforeseen negative events.

“I’d like to find a stable job but it’s practically impossible – odd jobs do not allow me not to worry about where I’ll sleep, what I’ll eat. I don’t own anything”
“I didn’t have any other choice but leaving and see if I could find something better in Spain. I thought it’d have been different, that I could actually start a new life for me and my family”

M, 48 years old, came to Casa Ioana’s shelter with his wife and two sons. They had been living on the street for almost one week because he lost his job and, soon after, they remained without financial resources to pay the rent. They never had their own house. M has 2 sons: one is 12 years old and goes to school, and the elder is 26 years old and has mental health issues. Due to the mental illness of the older son, his wife has to be his personal assistant in order to take care of him. The only income that they had, at the moment they came to our shelter, was the allowances of the boys and the minimum salary that the wife had, as an assistant for the boy (135 euros). Before coming to Casa Ioana, M was working in construction without a work contract. He never went to school, so he did not know how to write or read. For him, this was a major problem in finding a job.

M remained unemployed for almost 2 months. In his search for a job, he faced many difficulties: he is Roma with no educational background and no proved experience on the labor market. He was the only one in the family that could get a job, so all the responsibility was laid on his shoulders.

He decided to travel to Spain, in order to work in construction as a friend, who was already there, promised him a job. He thought that it
wouldn’t be necessary to speak the language and the Spanish employers would give him quickly a job, because he would be paid less than the other workers. He was enthusiastic in gathering money and he thought that soon he would have able to also take his family to Spain. Despite being warned about the challenges he might have had, he left the shelter and his family.

Arrived in Spain, his friend managed to find him a job in construction, though without a work contract. M shared the accommodation with his friend and kept sending money for his family, who stayed in the shelter.

In September, he had some heart problems but was able to receive only emergency treatment. The doctors told him not to work anymore and to follow a strict treatment. Otherwise the problem would get worse. The treatment was expensive, especially since he wasn’t able to work anymore. He wasn’t medically covered there, as he had expected. When he left Romania, M thought that the situation in Spain would be better than the one at home, with a better access to services and benefits. He tried to find another job (as a watchman, as a cleaner) but the fact that he couldn’t speak Spanish was an obstacle. His friend wasn’t able to keep him in the accommodation because he wasn’t paying for the rent and the food). He became homeless in Spain, as he was in Romania. The only difference was the fact that in Spain he had lots of obstacles in accessing social benefits, and small chances of finding a job with a contract, not knowing the language and without educational background. M’s wife asked him to come back to Romania. He was offered the possibility to return living in the shelter.

At his arrival, he was looking pretty weak. He was sent to a clinic in order to be treated. Later, he started to look for a job. Casa Ioana managed to find him a job in a restaurant. He was earning the minimum salary, but had a job with a legal working contract. A couple of months later, he and his family left the shelter to live in a rented apartment. M still has his job at the restaurant.

Roma face discrimination all around the EU both when they are nationals of a Member State and when they exercise the right to free movement. The lack of preparation prior to the migratory journey can have devastating effects, particularly when there are no safeguards in case of unexpected problems.

Health issues jeopardise the process of social integration, which is already easily compromised by discrimination, social welfare restrictions, and lack of access to adequate services.

If the individual decides to get back to her/his country of origin, it is crucial s/he has access to the right support and have the necessary time to find stability in order to begin a new path towards social inclusion.
Meet K from Algeria:
42 years old

"My husband was violent and would deprive me of all liberties and then he disappeared and took my children. I wanted them back so badly, I was getting crazy"

K is married and has 3 children. She lives in Barcelona where her husband obtained a residence permit in 2004 and then family reunification in 2007. K has lived a marriage of violence. Her husband forbade her from leaving the house, or having any kind of relations with family and friends. He controlled money and she suffered constant physical and psychological abuse. K had no access to social support networks. After a final assault in late 2011, K’s husband disappeared with their children, leaving her in a state of utter abandonment, without financial resources and with the imminent threat of being evicted.

K was informed that her children were in different European countries: that her eldest son wanted no kind of relationship or communication with her; that the second child was in Norway and her youngest son might have been with his father in Belgium or in France. K began a journey of several months, following false trails in search of her youngest son, moving to France where she stayed temporarily at a friend’s house. She then returned to Barcelona where she stayed for several months in a shelter, or sleeping in the street, until she contacted the Foundation Bayt al-Thaqafa in May.
2012. At the Foundation she spent a period of time learning Spanish. She was looked after by the Care Team and remained in a Women’s Shelter from May 2012 to February 2013 and then went to live in the Foundation’s temporary accommodations.

After establishing and agreeing to the Individual Procedee, the team gave priority to improving K’s emotional state as she went from a more protective environment to a less protective one. K. showed low self-esteem, insecurity, and a depressive state that highlights sadness, apathy, difficulty to sleep and tiredness. She was often crying and thought her problems would have never been solved. Psychiatric and psychological assistance was provided by the Immigrant Social service San Juan de Dios.

The initial work plan focused on learning Spanish. K attended Spanish classes in the morning and afternoon at the Foundation, thus while she was improving her language skills, she was developing her social network. However, two months later, K was diagnosed with a rare disease called Behçet’s syndrome, which requires both clinical and pharmacological monitoring. Workers from the Foundation accompanied her during the entire healthcare process.

In February 2014 K found her first job: a contract of a month and an half as a kitchen helper in a prestigious pastry restaurant in Barcelona, and subsequently received good references. Furthermore, the Foundation attorney helped K. in obtaining a residence permit as a victim of domestic violence. K. has also filed a complaint against her husband and her youngest son was located in Belgium, although not living with his father but, rather, with a family. Another complaint was therefore filled in the attempt to bring the child back to his mother but no solution has been found so far.

K. despite her family and health problems is advancing very satisfactorily in acquiring language and other skills and is now ready to live autonomously.

Domestic violence is the immediate cause of homelessness for many women. Survivors of domestic violence are often isolated from support networks and financial resources by their abusers, which puts them at risk of becoming homeless. As a result, they may lack steady income and suffer from anxiety, panic disorder, major depression, and substance abuse. For migrants it might be even worse because residence permits can be dependant on sustaining a relationship with a violent partner, which is the sponsor of the family reunification. If the victim decides to leave her/his partner within the first 5 years s/he looses residence rights and, in several Member States, the access to services including basic ones such as shelter.

To be able to make a new start it is vital for victims of domestic violence to get support with practical issues such as finding housing, accessing benefits and employment and getting their administrative situation in order. Equally, language help and training can be an important element for integration. Victims of violence also need to deal with severe traumas. Trauma and mental health support services need to be readily available and geared towards the needs of individuals concerned.

I miss my kids, I miss my family but at least I have some friends, when in need I know to whom I can talk and I have a job. I’m slowly getting back on track.
Meet A. from Romania
38 years old

A. is a strong man and had a good life before the crisis came in 2008. He worked as taxi driver for a long time and was also delivering goods for two companies at the same time. Then came the crisis and all three companies he was working for went bankrupt. In 2009, A. moved to Norway as one of his friends promised some job there but after a while he was engaged in criminal activities. He immediately left Norway to move to Sweden to look for a job. A. soon realised that there was no chance to find a job in the short term thus so he started to collect bottles in Gothenburg.

A. learned to turn off his feelings and to work like a machine. A. says that no matter what job he does, he always tries to be the best. The same applies when it comes to collect bottles. He works about 12-14 hours a day, walking fast and long over 10 km in one night. A. bought a car though he cannot drive. He bought it cheap to have somewhere to sleep. The winter is hard in Sweden and sometimes he cannot sleep because of the coldness. He usually stays in Gothenburg for three months, then he goes back home for a
month to visit his daughter and wife. When he gets back to Sweden, it always takes a few days before he can start to collect bottles again.

He says that Swedish people are often polite but quite reserved. He thinks the Romanians have a bad reputation in Sweden since some of them misbehave during these last years and subsequently many nice persons are affected by this. Sometimes he tells people that he is from Czech Republic and thinks he is better treated by Swedes.

A. earned a total of 13,000 SEK (around 1,400 €) in the last three months. He sent everything to his family. Sending money home is very expensive since he paid 1700 SEK (around 180 €) to Western Union. His wife works as a hairdresser and her salary is 1100 SEK per month (around 120 €), so A.’s family is dependent on his incomes.

A. dreams to save enough money to start his own business in Romania opening a second hand shop, while his wife would like to have her own hair dress salon. Meanwhile, A. continues to collect bottles and sleep in his car hoping for a better life.

Several cases are registered of people moving to another country because of a degrading economic situation and on fake promises of jobs that turn out to be linked to criminal activities. Once trapped in a dangerous environment, it is difficult for the individual concerned to access the right support. S/he is likely to be afraid of quitting the criminal activities s/he engaged in because of possible repercussions and for lack of alternative options.

The access to the labour market can be very challenging, especially in Member States where there are very strict criteria when it comes to hire foreigners. Individuals therefore need advice and support with regard to administrative processes and employment seeking before their situation become too difficult. Prolonged destitution can quickly lead to additional challenges related to physical and mental health.

Homelessness brings with it prejudices and stigma, often reinforced by ethnic origin and nationality. A socially excluded person easily can slip into a downward spiral if s/he is not economically active, does not have a place where to sleep, can not find any support and on top of that has to fight against discrimination.

Targeted services, that not only provide necessary basic help but also work with the individual to look for durable solutions, should be made available in the first stages of the migratory path. In the long term an integrated strategy that allow the individual to get out of homelessness and be economically active will be not only the right choice from a human point of view but also from an economic perspective both for the receiving and the sending country. Indeed many people see their journey abroad as temporary before coming back to their country and their family with enough resources to start a new economic activity.

“It must be possible for me to earn enough here in Sweden and in a few years I’ll be able to start my own business in my hometown and live with my family”
J has been a victim of domestic violence since her twenties, when she got married. She arrived in Athens illegally ten years ago, crossing on foot the Greek-Albanian borders, carrying her two baby daughters. She was forced to follow her husband, who had previously migrated to Greece. Shortly after her arrival she started working as a cleaner in order to feed her family. Her husband would abuse her almost on daily basis; while many times she had been transferred to hospital. Being deprived of any document, and due to fear of having her children arrested as irregular migrants, she wouldn’t report her husband’s violent behavior. This situation lasted for many years and she was feeling entirely helpless. During a violent episode at home, her older daughter was terrified and called the police asking for help. Upon the police's arrival the father escaped, while J and the two children, aged 10 and 13 years old, were arrested and were transferred to the aliens’ detention centre as irregular migrants, without being offered any protection as victims of domestic violence; no charges were announced against the father. Instead, a deportation decision was
issued against J and the children on the grounds of public order and security, due to illegal stay in the country. They remained detained to be deported, until a family friend was offered to pay for the expenses of a judicial process against their detention. After their release they were roofless, having nowhere to go. Due to the limited shelters’ capacity in conjunction with the bureaucratic process, it took some months until they were sheltered. In the meantime, the mother and the two children were offered occasional hospitality in the houses where Z used to work as a cleaner. Currently, a year after, Z with the support of a pro bono legal service and the shelter’s social service she has managed to issue a residence permit for her and her daughters on exceptional/humanitarian grounds and also to find a new rented home. She continues to work illegally as a cleaner, since she is unable to cover the required insurance fee. The latter fact apart from preventing her access to proper health, social and housing benefits, it also risks the forthcoming renewal of her residence permit. Despite these difficulties, she participates in a team, encouraging women to speak up against domestic violence.

Evidence shows that there is a lack of a coherent and legally binding protocol on the handling of the domestic violence cases and the protection of the most vulnerable victims, especially with regard to minors and undocumented migrants.

Precariousness of the administrative status further prevents women from asking support when they are victims of domestic abuse since the only alternative often is detention and repatriation. Unfortunately there is limited awareness and lack of competence of those professionals – such as health providers, police and judicial authorities – who are paramount in assessing individuals’ situations and proposing solutions.

Besides the need to provide advice and protect people who are victims of violence, it is important to set up adequate shelters where individuals can feel safe, overcome traumas and have enough time to be socially included. Moreover, free legal services should be available in order for individuals concerned to effectively get access to legal remedy.

Precarious economic sectors, such as domestic work, tend to rely on migrant workers who do not have any working contract, often because privates find it difficult to hire cleaners or care workers in a regular way. Member States need to develop new policies to facilitate the regularisation of precarious economic sectors and the administrative status of those who are working in it.

“When we got the residence permit, I couldn’t believe it. And I felt this strength that pushed me to do something for those women in my same situation. Though I don’t have a contract and no access to benefits, my life got better and I’m confident my children will get more opportunities than what I’ve got”
Meet L from Somalia
26 years old

I didn’t want to leave my daughter, I wanted to stay with my family, I was so young. It wasn’t easy: I made it through the whole journey but wasn’t happy anyway.

L. is a young 26 year-old woman who had to leave her country, Somalia, three years ago, due to the consequences of a conflict started in 1991. This conflict, despite some recent improvements at the political and institutional level, makes civilians, and women in particular, risk their life every day because of the crossfire between the regular army and the Islamist militias. Women fear to suffer violence and sexual abuse and cannot get access to basic needs, such as food and healthcare. For all these reasons L. decided to go to Europe. Her parents agreed to look after L’s daughter who would not be able to go safely through the long trip through Kenya, Sudan, Sahara Desert, Libya and Mediterranean Sea.

L. bravely faced the long road, conscious of its risks and, despite the sufferings caused by deprivation, abuse and imprisonment, she got to Italy, landing in Lampedusa. She was transferred in a CARA (Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo – Shelter for Asylum Seekers), where she sought asylum and got Refugee status. When she left the CARA, there was a place for her in the SPRAR (Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati – National Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees).
Thanks to SPRAR, she arrived in Torino, where she spent a few months in a dormitory held by a religious organization, before accessing the apartment of the “Progetto Tenda” cooperative. Supported by the shelter’s social workers, L. attended different schools to learn Italian; she got the primary school diploma and attended a professional training as a hotel cleaning worker. The effort of attending school and carrying out training while living with the stress of knowing her family in Somalia and the oncoming end of the shelter program, unsettled her and she started suffering from eating disorders. However, thanks to the operators and to a psychologist she was able to handle her problems and solve them. L. is unemployed; she cannot even afford a room in a shared house. She was terrified about sleeping rough since she knew how hard Turin’s winter can be if you don’t have anywhere to go during the day.

Luckily, right before she had to leave the shelter, a bed in another shelter became vacant and thanks to the commitment and the tenacity showed and the professional and linguistic skills she acquired, L. got employment as a domestic worker.

Unfortunately, this was a temporary employment, not sufficient to earn her living, so at the end of the second-shelter program she risked becoming a rough sleeper again. In Turin she did not have relatives and the majority of her compatriots and acquaintances were in even bigger difficulties than her and could not help her.

Public housing system is stuck since a long time, the waiting list is already long, and for a foreigner it is hard to have all the requirements for being a candidate. Again, L’s hard work was rewarded by an unexpected event: she received an offer to enter the “Housing First” Program, which, in Turin, is still a pilot project. Once in the apartment, she can finally find some stability.

The young woman, since she has a working contract and thanks to the support of the operators and the psychologist who kept following her through the years, can enter into the waiting list for the rental of flats at low cost, held by a religious organization. This makes her most important dream possible: she can start the practices for the family reunification in order to have her daughter in Turin as soon as possible.

**Challenges**

Getting the refugee status is not always the end of the troubled migration journey and, in the absence of an effective integration strategy, the lack of family or a friendship network can be destabilising and prevent the individual concerned from finding her/his way out of social exclusion.

Mainly because of discrimination and of lack of economic means, refugees struggle to find a place where to live. Moreover, in the absence of an address individuals might not get access to the social security system and remain stuck in a vicious circle of destitution and exclusion. Homeless shelters often become the only solution but most of the times a temporary alternative to sleeping rough.

The traumatic migration path, which often means abandoning the beloved ones, along with the lack of network support, housing, safe job and consequently any kind of stability, can have a strong impact on physical and mental health making the way out of homelessness even harder.

“All I’ve done I’ve done it for my daughter. When you think about it, we don’t get to choose where we are born and the only thing I want is to give a chance to my daughter, and maybe to myself”