



Family Digest 35

October 21st 2020

Homelessness during COVID-19

“You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall.” Isaiah 25:4

The homeless, those who have no secure place to live and with no fixed address, predominately live and work on the street, living in rudimentary shelters which have limited space. There is a lack of consensus on the total number of homeless people living on the street, but the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) estimate a nationwide number of between 100 000 and 200 000.¹ Those living on the street are homeless for various reasons, which may include unemployment; substance abuse; mental and physical health issues; little or no income; ineligibility for a social grant; and lack of familial support. Women living on the street may be victims of domestic violence. The homeless are in greater danger of violence than the general population, and they are also more vulnerable to infectious diseases such as TB. Many collect recyclable waste or guard cars to earn a small income, while others beg and scavenge for food; their diet is almost always inadequate. The homeless are those we prefer not to see, and whom we regard as a nuisance. We judge them as being responsible for their own misfortune and dismissively avert our gaze. The homeless are the most marginal of social groups.

The homeless have been hit especially hard by the advent of COVID-19 and the lockdown. In addition, many people who were already living with financial pressures are at serious risk of being pushed over the brink into homelessness as a result of the pandemic. At the start of Lockdown Level 1 there was a policy that everyone needed to be confined at home. This policy extended to the homeless and alternative plans needed to be made to accommodate them indoors. Existing shelters were unable to accommodate all those living on the street, so municipalities were required to make alternative plans. This was done with differing outcomes. Many homeless people were removed from their environments and moved to distant locations where waste-picking and other forms of economic subsistence were not possible. Those dependant on addictive substances had no access to these substances and no treatment plan to address the difficulties associated with sudden withdrawal.

Different municipalities responded to the issue very differently and with varying degrees of success. According to one report, “Dozens of homeless people in Durban have been reunited with their families. It was part of the eThekweni Municipality’s program to assist people who moved into their shelters at the start of lockdown. The City says it spent R66 million on homeless people during the

¹ [“More than just a roof: unpacking homelessness”](https://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/research-reports/2015/06/more-than-just-a-roof-unpacking-homelessness). www.hsrc.ac.za. Human Rights Research Centre. 2015. Retrieved 2020-06-02.

first three months of lockdown.”² Conversely, the City of Cape Town responded by moving the homeless to a large temporary shelter in the Strandfontein area. Sanitation was inadequate and social distancing difficult, and there were also allegations of sexual abuse. The facility was closed down and many of the homeless returned to their old haunts.

The impoverishment of so many due to COVID-19 is likely to increase homelessness. Shelters are a remedial and temporary solution. As we embark on the ‘new normal’, measures must be put in place to improve the living conditions of the homeless and to ensure their access to sanitising products and masks, thus reducing the probability of COVID-19 infection. There is a need for proactive social policy, supportive structures, and family involvement. The links below discuss these issues in greater detail.

https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/homeless-persons-benefit-from-rehabilitation-oppor?utm_source=Politicsweb+Daily+Headlines&utm_campaign

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/24/treasury-announces-85m-for-rough-sleeper-accomm>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2020-07-03-south-africa-where-shame-is-a-rare-commodity/?tl>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-07-08-amid-escalating-gang-violence-the-city-of-cape-town-wa>

<https://www.msf.org.za/stories-news/press-releases/south-africa-msf-stands-findings-assessments-strandfont>

<https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/city-of-cape-town-facing-lawsuit-for-fining-homeless-people-31323683>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-10-13-finding-new-ways-to-help-cape-towns-homeless/?tl>

<https://www.groundup.org.za/article/homeless-reunited-their-families-after-lockdown/>

<https://mg.co.za/opinion/2020-05-27-the-strandfontein-shelter-touches-a-societal-and-political-nerve/>

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² <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/homeless-reunited-their-families-after-lockdown/>