



Preventive Measures against Homelessness and Housing Exclusion: A Discussion Paper

European Platform on Combatting Homelessness

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Introduction

A common message from people who have experienced homelessness is that early opportunities to intervene, provide support, and ultimately prevent the harms of homelessness, are too often missed. Whilst there have been promising developments in the prevention of homelessness, Baptista and Marlier (2019: 94) recently concluded that 'homelessness services in Europe are not sufficiently preventative in focus'. In their excellent synthesis report on national strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion, they made the following observations about the limited scale of homelessness prevention services across Europe: 'five countries (BA, BG, ME, MK, TR, XK) report a lack of any type of prevention services, whereas in 15 countries (AL, CY, EL, ES, FR, HR, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, SK) only very limited provision is available. Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland and Slovakia report certain preventative measures which cannot be considered as extensive mechanisms, whereas in nine countries (AT, BE, DE, DK, FI, NL, SE, SI, UK) national experts describe more elaborate and comprehensive systems for preventing homelessness'¹. The crucial issue of homelessness prevention will be the focus of this discussion paper.

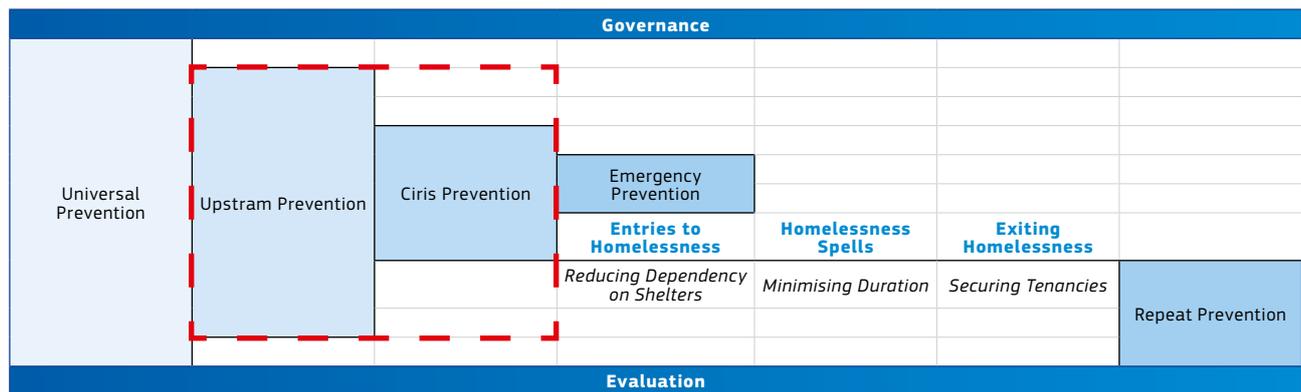
It is important to first define what is meant by homelessness prevention. In the first mutual learning event on 'Key Elements in Homelessness Strategies to End Homelessness by 2030', Professor O'Sullivan's discussion paper introduced a homelessness prevention typology (Figure 1) that can be used to situate the focus of the current paper on preventative measures against homelessness and housing exclusion. Unlike many other typologies it prioritises the timing of preventative actions and provides a useful heuristic tool for member states to reflect on the extent to which their strategies are effectively moving preventative action upstream.

The first stage of the typology is *universal prevention*, referring to interventions that prevent or minimise homelessness risks across the population at large, including access to secure and affordable housing in places where people wish to live, and effective social welfare protections. Universal prevention is the foundation of efforts to prevent homelessness. This discussion paper focuses more specifically on *upstream* and *crisis* prevention stages of the typology.

Upstream prevention acts early to identify and support at risk-groups, particularly those leaving state institutions such as prisons, in-patient treatment, and out-of-home care. Crisis prevention efforts focus on households at risk of homelessness in the foreseeable, relatively near future. Commonly, this includes people who face eviction from their properties, and can be supported to either retain their current accommodation or make a planned move to an alternative. Importantly, this paper does not address emergency prevention, where interventions typically focus on securing urgent access to temporary accommodation. Subsequent mutual learning sessions will focus on later stages of the typology.

¹ See Appendix A for list of country abbreviations.

Figure 1. Homelessness prevention typology (focus of the discussion paper highlighted)



Source: Adapted from Fitzpatrick *et al* (2021a) and Lee *et al* (2021)

This discussion paper aims to identify effective preventative measures and draw out cross-cutting lessons on enablers and barriers to implementation. The paper also includes a very brief and timely discussion on prevention during crises such as the emerging cost-of-living crisis.

Before launching into the discussion, it is important to include four caveats. First, many homelessness prevention interventions are poorly defined and there is an absence of rigorous evaluations, particularly in the European context. Therefore, we are often frustratingly reliant on a small number of North American studies. Second, this is a discussion paper based on a selected review of literature and the author’s knowledge of the field – this is not a systematic review of the evidence. Third, the paper does not attempt to provide a detailed overview of prevention practices across Europe. This is beyond the scope of the paper and to some extent has already been covered in the European Social Policy Network Transnational and National Reports on Fighting Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Europe (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Finally, any efforts to move homelessness prevention upstream must be taken forward collaboratively with people with lived experience of homelessness and housing exclusion. This paper has been developed without this expert input.

Upstream Prevention

There is a robust evidence base demonstrating that some groups are at elevated risk of homelessness, including those leaving state institutions, especially the criminal justice system and state care of children. These groups are the focus of upstream prevention efforts. Upstream prevention has been subject to insufficient policy and research focus due to the enduring focus on emergency responses. In their synthesis report on national strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion, Baptista and Marlier (2019) found that only eleven of 35 countries could provide data on people living in healthcare or penal institutions with no available housing solution at the exit point. Recognising this upstream challenge, the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (The Lisbon Declaration) aims to work towards a situation where no one is discharged from any institution (e.g. prison, hospital, care facility) without an offer of appropriate housing. This section of the paper summarises selected evidence on homelessness prevention across these institutional settings, before highlighting promising examples of interventions which identify at-risk groups through screening tools. The section ends with a brief word of caution that not all upstream interventions work.

A useful starting point is the Hanratty *et al* (2020) systematic review of discharge programmes for individuals at risk of experiencing homelessness. They describe the considerable variety of approaches employed. Programmes primarily seek to address housing needs, either through maintaining previous housing arrangements prior to entry into the institution or entries into new suitable accommodation. Commonly, interventions also attempt to coordinate between the discharging institution and relevant statutory and voluntary agencies such as social services, housing agencies, parole offices, and community health teams. A key variation between programmes is the timing and duration of transitional support, particularly the extent to which coordination begins prior to institutional exits. In the meta-analysis conducted by Hanratty *et al* (2020) they conclude that discharge programmes substantially improve housing stability for people leaving institutional settings, albeit there is some uncertainty around the magnitude of impact due to the quality of the evidence base.

Arguably the best evidenced discharge programme is Critical Time Interventions (CTI) (Hignite and Haff 2017, Herman *et al* 2007, Kaspro and Rosenheck 2007, Lutze *et al* 2014). CTIs typically last nine months and enable individuals to transition from support within an institutional setting to community-based support through three main phases: (1) Transition to the community, (2) Try-out, and (3) Transfer of care (Herman *et al* 2007). Two key facets of CTIs seem to emerge as particularly important in achieving positive impacts on the prevention of homelessness. First, the individual is supported by a case manager who first establishes a relationship within the institution (pre-CTI) and then provides continuity of care throughout the transition to community-based support (Hignite and Haff 2017). Second, CTIs attempt to support individuals to rebuild personal relationships and supportive social networks that are proven to help sustain exits from homelessness (Herman *et al* 2007). This has been particularly important in transitions from local authority care (Johnson and Mendes 2014; Schwan *et al* 2018) and prisons (Spencer and Jones-Walker 2004, Todis *et al* 2001). However, securing effective cooperation from prisons is often problematic, not necessarily due to a lack of will, instead it seems prisons often lack capacity to plan ahead, and focus mostly on point of discharge.

Denmark appears to have made particular progress on preventing institutional exits into homelessness. Between 2009 and 2017 there was a fall of approximately 20% and 13% in the number of people living in penal institutions and healthcare institutions respectively with no accommodation to return to (Kvist 2019). In both Denmark and Finland there is a clear strategic emphasis on meeting the needs of these populations. According to Baptista and Marlier (2019) this includes the development of new accommodation, access to supported housing, access to social housing, Housing First services and housing-focused support. The principle is that housing should be secured whenever the client is met in the service system (Pleace 2017).

In the specific context of children leaving local authority care there is policy momentum to ensure exits from care are less abrupt to support more positive housing, education, health, and wellbeing outcomes (Schwan *et al* 2018). This predominantly translates into young people having access to additional financial support and an 'after care worker'. A meta-analysis by Heerde *et al* (2018) appraised literature investigating the impacts of transitional programmes for young people leaving 'out-of-home care'. They reviewed nineteen studies, all from the United States, and the findings were incredibly mixed, ranging from very low levels of homelessness (Nolan 2006, Jones 2011) to contexts where, even with support, becoming homeless was normal i.e., greater than 50% (Heerde *et al* 2018). One particularly notable approach which is gaining considerable traction across Europe, guided by the FEANTSA Housing First Europe Hub, is Housing First for Youth. This is increasingly applied to prevent homelessness amongst young people ageing out of care. It adopts a rights-based approach to support young people into housing. The five core principles are: immediate access to housing with no-preconditions; youth choice and self-determination; individualised and client-driven supports; social and community integration;

and positive youth development orientation². There have been few impact evaluations but an evaluation of the initial pilot with 12 young people in Scotland found all except one young person maintained their tenancies successfully over the pilot period (Blood et al 2020). Finland provides an example where Housing First for Youth is delivered at scale through NAL – the Finnish Youth Housing Association.

Internationally, screening tools sometimes play a role in upstream efforts to identify individuals at heightened risk of homelessness. This paper identifies three examples. First, the Behavior Analysis Services Program (BASP) in Florida uses data analytics to identify runaway behaviours among young people in care and provide support to prevent further episodes. The evaluation showed positive significant changes in housing stability and fewer instances of young people running away (Clark *et al.* 2008). Second, The Geelong Project (TGP), also referred to as the Upstream Project outside of Australia, uses a screening survey conducted with all children in school settings to identify those at risk of homelessness, primarily due to emerging conflict at home. Children and their families are subsequently supported before they reach crisis point. A longitudinal time series evaluation of TGP reported 40% reductions in the number of students entering the local homelessness system (MacKenzie 2018). Upstream is also currently being piloted in Wales (Mackie *et al.* 2021). The third example is the Homelessness Screening Clinical Reminder. In the USA, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) implemented a universal, two-question screening questionnaire for current homelessness and imminent risk—the Homelessness Screening Clinical Reminder (HSCR). The HSCR asks veterans whether they have been living in stable housing and if they are worried or concerned that they may not have stable housing in the near future. Individuals are then referred to discuss their living situation and potentially receive support. Although the outcomes of the intervention have not yet been evaluated, Shinn and Cohen (2019) explain that the screening coincided with a significant reduction in the rate of unsheltered homelessness among veterans.

Whilst the evidence on ‘what works’ in upstream efforts to prevent homelessness is sparse, there are some interventions for which there is no clear evidence of effectiveness. Fitzpatrick et al (2021a) warn that misdirected efforts with intuitive appeal can waste what little resource is focused on upstream prevention. For example, generic homelessness education provided as part of school curricula is a popular intervention but there is little evidence to support its effectiveness (Watts *et al.* 2015).

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2 <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/housing-first/youth/>

Crisis Prevention

Across Europe and internationally, an array of homelessness prevention interventions centre on households at high risk of homelessness in the near future – we refer to this as crisis prevention. Crisis prevention focuses predominantly on evictions, which reflects the fact that evictions are a primary trigger of homelessness in many countries. It is why The Lisbon Declaration states evictions should be prevented whenever possible and no one should be evicted without assistance for an appropriate housing solution, when needed. The literature also discusses contexts where landlord evictions are not the primary trigger of homelessness, for instance in relation to people facing relationship breakdown or domestic abuse. In these contexts, several alternative forms of crisis prevention have emerged. The discussion in this section of the paper initially focuses on evictions, before reflecting on other forms of crisis prevention.

In their incredibly useful seventh overview of housing exclusion in Europe, FEANTSA and Foundation Abbé Pierre (2022) set out the state obligations within international law to take positive steps to guarantee the right to adequate housing even where eviction is justified. They explain that for an eviction to take place certain conditions must be met, including; access to effective judicial remedies, genuine consultation with those concerned, consideration of alternatives, guarantees that eviction will not result in the violation of other rights, special protection for vulnerable groups, and reasonable steps to provide alternative accommodation. There is limited evidence on the extent to which these conditions are met across Europe.

Kenna *et al* (2016) provide an excellent overview of the range and scale of evictions prevention interventions across the continent. These interventions can be grouped into three main categories; 1] legal requirements to notify authorities of an eviction, 2] short-term financial assistance, and 3] legal support, advice and representation, along with landlord-tenant mediation.

In several countries there are legal requirements on courts to notify authorities when evictions proceedings are initiated. Notable examples include a requirement for courts in Austria to inform local authorities of imminent evictions, albeit there is no obligation on authorities to then act to prevent the eviction. Also, Belgian legislation prescribes that the Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW) must be informed by a court when an eviction procedure is taking place. The key difference with the Austrian case is that the PCSW is then legally obliged to investigate how it can support the household (Kenna *et al* 2016). As yet, there has been no robust evaluation of the impacts of these policies.

Kenna *et al* (2016) also identify many European countries where short-term financial assistance is available to help prevent an eviction, including; Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Poland, and Spain. However, evidence on the effectiveness of this approach in Europe is again incredibly weak. In the U.S.A, where evictions are a major trigger of homelessness, there is a much stronger evidence base. According to Shinn and Cohen (2019: 6), 'some of the strongest evidence demonstrates the role of financial assistance in preventing homelessness'. The Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP) was the largest homelessness prevention programme in U.S. history (Berg 2013, Byrne *et al* 2016) and whilst it funded an array of interventions, short-term emergency funding to prevent evictions appears to have been the primary intervention to emerge and there is growing evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness (Piña and Pirog 2019, Shin and Cohen 2019). For example, in an evaluation of a cash assistance programme in Chicago, those who received a one-off benefit of \$1,000 were 76 per cent less likely to experience homelessness within six months than those who did not (Evans *et al* 2016). Despite this evidence of effectiveness, Baptista and Marlier (2019) point out that this support is often not compulsory nor wide ranging in Europe.

Schwan *et al* (2018) highlight the role of legal support, advice and representation, along with landlord-tenant mediation in preventing evictions. Shinn and Cohen (2019) observe that there are few studies of the effectiveness of these interventions, albeit they do identify a study by Seron *et al* (2001) which found legal advocacy for lower income tenants in New York City's Housing Court reduced eviction orders by 77 per cent compared to instances where no legal advocacy was available.

Beyond evictions, relationship breakdown and domestic abuse are key experiences that place individuals and families at high risk of homelessness. In the context of relationship breakdown, young people have been the focus of attention, and the most common intervention is family mediation (Dore 2011, Quilgars *et al* 2008, Tabner 2013, Watts *et al* 2015). Family mediation aims to resolve disputes with the help of a mediator to either help a young person remain at home or make a planned exit whilst retaining important relationships with family

members. Evidence on the effectiveness of mediation is lacking, despite its widespread use, particularly in the UK context (Watts *et al* 2015). Winland *et al* (2011) have documented some impacts of the Family Reconnect programme in Canada, whereby the housing situation of programme participants improved in 40% of cases, however service data in many UK programmes would suggest much higher success rates³.

Domestic abuse is one of the main causes of homelessness and housing instability for women and their children internationally (Spinney and Blandy 2011, Tutty *et al* 2013). Outside of legal responses such as injunctions, an increasingly used accommodation-based crisis prevention response is sanctuary schemes, which are intended to enable domestic abuse survivors to remain in their home (Jones *et al* 2010). In this approach the perpetrator is not in the home and multiple measures are put in place to increase the security of the property, including; reinforced external doors and windows, stronger and more robust locks on both windows and doors, personal and property alarms, and sometimes a panic room (Quilgars and Pleace 2010). Research into sanctuary schemes generally unearths positive perspectives (Abrahams 2010, Jones *et al* 2010) but the evidence base, as with many other prevention interventions, is limited.

To conclude the discussion of crisis prevention interventions, the paper returns to the critique by Baptista and Marlier (2019) that these interventions are often not compulsory nor wide ranging. Wales and England offer rare examples of countries where crisis prevention has been systematically integrated into the national homelessness response. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014, and subsequently the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in England, sought to encourage earlier preventative action and extend meaningful assistance to all households, irrespective of any perceived vulnerability. The keystone of the legislation is a duty on local authorities to take 'reasonable steps' to prevent homelessness for those at foreseeable risk. Statutory guidance sets out a wide range of interventions that local authorities ought to have in place, including the majority of those discussed above. Studies of implementation of the Welsh legislation have demonstrated positive impacts, with nearly 70 per cent of all prevention assistance recorded as successful (Ahmed *et al.* 2018, Mackie *et al.* 2017).

³ <https://www.cymorthcymru.org.uk/en/resources/case-studies/llamau-family-mediation-service>

Prevention During Crises

Crises such as the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic, and potentially the current cost-of-living crisis, create particular housing challenges. Interventions to prevent crises-induced homelessness primarily occur at the 'emergency' stage of the prevention typology, however the urgency attached to this issue warrants brief exploration in the current paper. Evidence suggests that preparedness and resilience of housing systems to crises is generally weak across Europe, particularly in relation to sudden and significant inflows of refugees.

Two main lessons emerged from national responses to homelessness during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, according to Preece *et al* (2021) countries using temporary supported accommodation that offers people their own rooms/apartments and homelessness strategies that are inclusive and lean towards housing-led responses appear to have been more resilient to the impacts of the pandemic, because those systems meant self-isolation and maintaining lockdowns was less of a challenge. Second, eviction bans implemented across almost all European countries proved crucial in preventing new entries into homelessness – this was particularly important at a time when the number of people in temporary accommodation was growing, and options to move on to settled accommodation were limited (Fitzpatrick *et al* 2021b). These lessons can inform systems that are more resilient to future shocks and help inform the most effective emergency actions.

In relation to the current cost-of-living crisis, in a recent opinion piece for Euractiv, Owen (2022)⁴ proposed a series of actions member states and the European Commission might take:

Member states

- Introduce temporary moratoria on evictions and repossessions from primary residences, as many countries did successfully during COVID-19 lockdowns.
- Before the winter starts, introduce emergency income support and other measures (tax breaks, price caps, social tariffs, rent controls) to enable households to cope. It is important to ensure that low-income and vulnerable households who are most at risk receive the support they need first. Taxing windfall profits in the energy sector could help finance support schemes. Public authorities need to plan now how to address gaps in the coverage and take-up of support measures.
- Protect households, social and health services as vulnerable energy consumers and prioritise their needs uppermost. Ensure the provision of adequate services to advise and support people affected by or at risk of cold, hunger and homelessness this winter.

The European Commission

- Publish a detailed proposal for emergency intervention and structural reform of the EU energy market to reduce prices. There is now a clear appetite from member states for this.
- Propose emergency legislation for an EU-wide ban on the disconnection of water, energy, and digital services to primary residences because of the inability to pay. Protecting access to these essential services will ensure that households can continue to meet their basic needs this winter and will reduce the scarring effects of an economic downturn.
- Propose a new SURE-like (Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency instrument) instrument to help member states finance short term assistance to households facing arrears on utilities, rent or mortgage payments for their primary residence.

Source: Owen (2022)

The sudden and significant inflow of people displaced by conflict presents major housing challenges for host countries. The vast range of challenges and lessons from past displacements are too considerable to discuss here, and would warrant a standalone paper, however given the scale of recent displacement from Ukraine to many European countries, the paper reflects briefly on recent housing responses and ongoing challenges. In September 2022 the Housing Solutions Platform organised an online debate⁵ to discuss the European Commission's Safe Homes Initiative – an initiative that aims to support the efforts of Member States, regional

4 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/opinion/eu-leaders-must-take-steps-to-limit-cold-hunger-homelessness-in-europe-this-winter/>

5 https://www.feantsa.org/download/housing-solution-platform-debate_safe-homes-ukraine_20092022_summary8777205936689263936.pdf

and local authorities and civil society in organising private housing initiatives for those in need of protection⁶. The Safe Home Guidance identifies a series of key principles that should be followed, including:

- Supporting hosting families through a single communication channel,
- Facilitating proper matching between hosts and those in need through trusted websites centralising offers and providing a real time view of the offers and of the individuals seeking accommodation,
- Ensuring suitable and safe accommodation through tailoring offers to the needs of hosted people, standardised criteria to check the safety of housing, adequate screening of specific needs from the outset, regular visits, background checks and proper vetting of hosts.

Crucially, the online debate concluded that OECD country responses have been reactive in their housing responses, with few pre-planned crises responses enacted. The debate also concluded that countries have relied on private households to accommodate refugees. The impacts of this approach are yet to be evaluated but there are certainly concerns relating to both hosts and refugees, including on the issues of safety, managing expectations, and affordability⁷.

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⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/FS_22_4325

⁷ https://www.feantsa.org/download/housing-solution-platform-debate_safe-homes-ukraine_20092022_summary8777205936689263936.pdf

Enablers and barriers to prevention

Looking across the evidence base on upstream and crisis prevention, **six key enablers and barriers to effective implementation** emerge, including; effective universal prevention, political will, systematic integration, collaboration and buy-in between public bodies, appropriate resourcing, and equal access. Where these are present, they generally act as an enabler, whereas their absence creates barriers. This is not an exhaustive list and the extent to which these are significant will vary by national and local context, however if efforts to prevent homelessness are to effectively move upstream, these enablers should be in place.

The most significant barrier to effective upstream and crisis prevention is **ineffective universal prevention**. Insufficient secure and affordable housing, accessible to people in places where they wish to live, and a lack of social welfare protections and decent employment will undermine most prevention efforts. As Baptista *et al* (2022: 14) state; ‘internationally, no level of coordination, evidence-led practice or comprehensiveness of response has been found that counteracts the effects of insufficient affordable, adequate homes’.

Sparkes and Downie (2020: 25) claim; ‘evidence of what works does not seem to lead to that evidence being adopted’. Whilst much more robust evidence is required on early prevention approaches, their point remains valid – evidence alone will not lead to change. Achieving a significant shift in responses to homelessness, often with high upfront investment and an upheaval of prevailing systems, requires considerable **political will** (Mackie *et al* 2019). Its absence at any level of government can be a key barrier to the delivery of interventions that work. In her address to the 2018 National Conference on Ending Homelessness in Canada, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, poignantly captured this challenge; ‘If we’re going to solve homelessness we need governments to show up. All levels of government.’

Across Europe there are many examples of preventative services, but a paucity of integrated and comprehensive prevention-focused systems limits their impact (Baptista and Marlier 2019). Homelessness strategies must **systematically integrate upstream and crisis prevention** into national homelessness responses.

The failure to effectively **engage a sufficiently wide range of public bodies** in homelessness prevention efforts is a key limitation on upstream interventions, given evidence that education, health, and criminal justice sectors often come in contact with high-risk groups at a much earlier point than housing and homelessness services (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 2013, 2021a).

Homelessness prevention must be **appropriately resourced**. There are many examples of homelessness prevention services that lack human resources or sufficient revenue (Baptista and Marlier 2019), resulting in either rationing and selectivity, or services so thinly spread that people’s needs cannot be met. Furthermore, funding is too often provided on a short-term basis, preventing long-term planning and mainstream integration of services.

Finally, if all other enablers are in place, efforts to prevent homelessness will still fail unless there is **equal access to support** (Baptista and Marlier 2019, Mackie 2015). The routine exclusion of migrants with no recourse to public funds, and the exclusion of other groups (e.g., people who are LGBTQ+, disabled) through poor service design, is problematic in many countries and a key barrier to effective homelessness prevention.

Conclusion

In a paper focused on upstream and crisis prevention, it is important to forefront that effective universal prevention must be the foundation of any strategy to end homelessness. However, there is also an urgent need to reorient homelessness responses towards upstream and crisis prevention, and away from emergency response. The message from people who have experienced homelessness is that early opportunities to intervene, provide support, and ultimately prevent the harms of homelessness, are too often missed. This discussion paper provides some insights into effective approaches and the enablers of prevention but its key contribution is to challenge member states to reflect critically on the extent to which their strategies are prevention-oriented and to swiftly make progress on this agenda.

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Appendix A. Country Abbreviations

Country	
AL	Albania
AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BA	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BG	Bulgaria
HR	Croatia
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czechia
DK	Denmark
EE	Estonia
FI	Finland
FR	France
DE	Germany
EL	Greece
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
XK	Kosovo
LV	Latvia
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
MT	Malta
ME	Montenegro
MK	North Macedonia
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
RS	Serbia
SK	Slovakia
SI	Slovenia
ES	Spain
SE	Sweden
NL	The Netherlands
TR	Turkey
UK	United Kingdom

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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