

Combatting homelessness in towns and cities is a priority for the Congress

On 27 March the Congress held a debate to take stock of the increasing problem of homelessness and explore means of remedying Europe's housing crisis. Contributions by experts and by Congress members and youth delegates, who shared both their assessments of the situation and the proposals for solutions at the disposal of local and regional authorities to combat the scourge of homelessness, gave rise to a rich and constructive debate in the name of human rights and dignity and the social and economic well-being of European cities.

Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, confirmed the urgency of the problem of homelessness and said that the persons concerned could be divided into six categories: people living rough, people in emergency accommodation, people living in accommodation for the homeless, people living in institutions, people living in temporary dwellings and mobile homes and people living with family and friends. He highlighted a series of aggravating factors such as increasing wealth and income inequalities and a lack of sufficient indexation of wages and social benefits, in the face of rising rents and a trend towards the individualisation of households.

Citing the report of the European Committee of Social Rights on the cost-of-living crisis and the UN report on housing for which he was a co-rapporteur, he condemned the criminalisation of homelessness and of practices deriving from this such as begging, vagrancy and waste collection. The stigmatisation of people in situations of extreme poverty and, worse still, the criminalisation of some of their survival strategies by the legislation in a number of European countries amount to, in his view, a violation of human rights. During the ensuing debate, his ideas were confirmed by a number of statements, including that of a Serbian youth delegate, Emilija Novakovic, who told the story of a homeless man who was the only person held in custody for a month after demonstrations in Belgrade because he had no permanent address. Urging local and regional authorities to adopt the *Housing First strategy*, which consists of providing people with decent housing before providing them with support for other problems such as employment, drug addiction and alcoholism, Olivier De Schutter also called for increased investment in the construction of social housing.

Johannes M. Böhmer, Vice-Governor for the Social Development Strategy of the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB), emphasised that the cost of the consequences of homelessness in terms of health and even crime is much greater than the investment required to ensure decent housing for all. Since 1966, the CEB has been investing in social housing construction projects and working with a range of international and national organisations to apply the European Social Charter and prevent homelessness. Referring to the EU Lisbon Declaration of 2021, whose aim is to eradicate homelessness by 2030, he assured the Congress members that the CEB would be reaching out to the Congress to work hand in hand on achieving this goal. Calling on the United Kingdom and Austria – which have not yet joined the CEB's partial agreement – to do so, the Vice-Governor reiterated the importance of multi-level solutions, which should form part of strongly politically motivated national strategies to combat homelessness, such as Sweden's.

This debate attracted a very large turnout of Congress members, reflecting their concern at the rise in homeless figures, which have doubled over the last ten years in a number of European countries. The members drew particular attention to the problem of increasing housing costs, which they regard as the main obstacle facing municipalities trying to invest in social housing, particularly those in the major European conurbations.

The youth delegates were particularly active during the debate, bringing together more than 20 participants and drawing attention to the particular vulnerability of young people, migrants and members of the LGBTQIA+ community when it comes to housing issues. Youth delegate Oliver McCarthy from the UK said that most people of his generation had to make a choice between “traditional accommodation” and “basic financial security” because even if they had a job, “rent costs 60% of our income”. Similar points were made by youth delegates Christos Parmakkis from Cyprus and Eimer Conlon from Ireland who described how, at her university in Dublin, some students routinely found places on university grounds to sleep rough at night. Oliver McCarthy concluded by calling on the Congress to act promptly because the young people making these choices today were the workforce of tomorrow, which was applauded by the assembly.