# Department for Destitute Migrants – Annual Report 2020

The newspapers have been fraught with headlines about the spread of the Coronavirus, the vaccine race and public dissatisfaction with government relief packages. Another story with slightly less exposure has demanded our attention this year. Our society is becoming more unequal. The poor have gotten poorer and the ones with the least to begin are the ones who have suffered the most during this pandemic. Solidarity as a societal phenomenon has been put to the test as our basic need to protect ourselves and those closest to us has taken precedence. Years of hard-fought progress in terms of society’s understanding, tolerance and respect in reception of destitute migrants has regressed. All over Europe, xenophobia and hate crime is on the rise.

In spite, and because, of this context, our work has continued. Our department is responsible for many services which provide for basic human needs. We have felt both responsibility and security in the knowledge that our work is critical for society.

The staff has been able and consistent in their endeavours. Some have taken on new functions and others have spent far too many days working from home.

More than half of the staff are from countries other than Norway. It has proved particularly challenging to be a frontline worker against the pandemic in this country, while worrying about conditions and family in our countries of origin. We have missed our families as there have been limited opportunities to visit parents, children and other relatives. This became particularly taxing when the borders closed and importsmitte (import-contagion) became public enemy number one. Many of us felt that foreigners were treated cruelly and unfairly, and ultimately scapegoated for the proliferation of the disease.

Together we have achieved much of what was planned for 2020. We have offered necessary services and stood firmly in support of our target group throughout many months of a pandemic.

Later in the annual report we will describe the services offered. But work is done by people and this year, we have had a great group: Adina, Bettina, Bianca Irina, Bogdan-Alexandru, Chadia, Christer, Daniel, Daniel Tesfa, Gabriella, Györgyi, Hannah Eline, Jeanne, Jessica, Joanna, Johanna, Laura, Lillian Priscila, Maren, Mari, Morten, Nikita, Pernille, Raluca and Sigmund B. THANK YOU!

A goal of ours in 2020 has been to strengthen our contribution in the battle against discrimination and exploitation in the labour market. These concepts will be discussed at length in the introduction of this report. The remainder of the report will focus on summarizing progress in each of the individual projects.

## Exploitation in the Labour Market

Guests to the City Mission Centre have for many years raised concerns over disconcerting structures in the labour market and asked for support in their claims to demand wages, report employers and inform of unsecure, dangerous and improper workplaces. Exploitation of vulnerable work-seekers appears to be taking place at such an alarming rate that it can seem as though nearly every single guest in the community has at least one negative experience in the black labour market. A lack of wages and (meaningful) contracts, and/or the prevalence of threats, extortion, violence, unreported workplace accidents, extremely poor living and working conditions, long workdays, and job insecurity leads to widespread disillusionment. Our guests becoming vulnerable employees in the Norwegian labour market can be attributed to a complex set of factors. The vast majority arrive with knowledge and skills, and some with formal experience, from other countries. However, they are often excluded from crucial services/institutions such as the welfare state, tax offices and banks. Exacerbating this is the fact that access to these institutions and registering as a resident requires a digital literacy that many do not possess. The particularly challenging road to acquiring a bank account and registered address (they are mutually contingent and not a universal right), combined with the language barrier and a possible lack of knowledge of rights, exposes these workers to the black market. The most vulnerable workers also lack a basic understanding and knowledge of the Norwegian labour movement with a trust-based and democratic work-enabling philosophy, unions, agreements and communal wage negotiations. Furthermore, an intersectionality of cultural power-structures based on gender, ethnicity, nationality and age contribute to exclusion. Compounding the pre-existing pressures that existential poverty and the responsibility to provide for dependents, which pushes workers to take bigger risks with regard to their safety and health, our guests, then, are extremely vulnerable as jobseekers. There are people in Norway that are exploiting this vulnerability with impunity.

There are several organizations and individuals working in this field and persevering in their efforts to eradicate such exploitation, but the work is fragmented and is plagued by a lack of resources and political will for structural change. For this reason, the department has initiated a systematic and methodical approach to engage in comprehensive follow-up of specific cases with the goal of supporting individuals and increasing our understanding of the structural and phenomenological challenges in this field.

In effect this means that a social worker has begun working 100% on individual support, investigation and evidence collecting, bridge-building and networking, knowledge gathering and sharing, reporting and documenting. In addition, every corner of the department, from V4, the social team and the laundry, contribute to gather knowledge, support individuals and work preventatively in our community. This systematic and methodological work has proven to be very useful. It is time-intensive to follow up such cases and it requires both continuity and competence. Our experience is that when some guests have received support in such cases, requests for further support increase. It is a clear strength that this work is done horizontally and in collaboration with other activities. For example, V4 has provided shelter for, and contributed heavily to, several of the cases and staff who provide guidance and counselling have developed their own competence in the field, enabling them to better prevent, register and refer such cases on.

## Discrimination

We know and see that our guests are discriminated against. We felt a need for an increased awareness of how this discrimination is experienced, in which ways it affects them and the terms they themselves use to describe it. With this in mind, we invited 19 of our Romanian guests to a baseline study of how discrimination affects them. This study is an important foundation in the development of our services to guests and our rights-based and advocacy work in the field. This study was conducted by the City Mission Centre and Møtestedet, in collaboration with “seksjon for fag og tiltaksutvilking”. Following is an excerpt from the final report produced based on four focus group discussions with 19 guests:

“Starting from this exact point, we opened the discussion around discrimination in the narrow population group we are working with: poor Romanian travelers / immigrants in Oslo. We organized 4 recruiting sessions in places popular for the group. They resulted in 4 separate focus-group discussions, where we were primarily focused in observing the level of interest people give to the subject and which terms people are choosing to use when referring to it. The discussions followed an interview guide and each group had the possibility to reflect over what discrimination is, how it’s affecting their ever day life and to come up with their own insights on how to prevent and fight it.

Even if, in some ways, and for distinctive reasons, each group had a slightly different perspective and approach to the phenomena, we can identify some opinions that were common to all the groups we spoke with.

Most of them agree that they feel discriminated against very often, in many cases even every day, mostly for being Romanians (and the stereotypes about this nation) and for being poor (with all the consequences that come from it: being homeless, carrying luggage all the time, begging, collecting bottles etc.) For many of them, on top of this comes the stigma of being a gipsy and all the prejudice that comes with it.

They speak about it mostly between each other, but many times they just ignore it as if it was something normal or insignificant enough not to waste your time with it. Insignificant because they say that nothing gets fixed if they are only sharing these stories with each other. They would share them with others too (authorities, Norwegian people they know), but there is a language barrier that makes them hopeless. Besides, many resign and lack the trust that anyone would care or anything can change.

The answers showed also that the perception is that the public seems to value more the negative stereotypes about the Romanian nation, so prevalent in the media and in all public space, rather than explaining the mechanisms and benefits of tolerance and trying to get to know better this new population that showed up in the society no more than 10 years ago. Each group agreed that, in front of these kinds of challenges, the “host-state” and its people should, first of all try to understand the cultural environment from which the migrants come and to be more open to understand the backgrounds of the situation they are facing so they can explain the newcomers the system in which they try to integrate. Even so, each group stood out from a somewhat different perspective, which reflects their particular needs in accordance with their stated purpose for migration. “

## Foundations / Services

The department’s foundation is our commitment to services which cover guests’ basic need for shelter, food, storage and laundry. This is where contact is established, and trust and relationships are developed.

## Emergency Shelter

The Emergency Shelter was open as usual until March 12th. Guests were beginning to return after Christmas holidays and there were few available rooms for couples. In the days immediately following March 12, many travelled home by bus or plane.

There was a great concern amongst staff and guests that we would have to close the shelter. Strict rules to prevent an outbreak were put into place so as to minimize that risk. This led to us closing the kitchen where guests could make food to share with family and friends. We also chose to decline access to willing volunteers so as to reduce the number of people entering and leaving the building to an absolute minimum. Up until March 13th, volunteers had taken 213 shifts which equates to a contribution of 350 hours of service.

This has worked well and we have managed to keep the shelter open throughout 2020 without contagion. We began receiving calls from Romania two weeks after many had travelled home to enquire about when they could come back. We quickly understood that the conditions they went home to were worse than the ones they had left behind. This sentiment was also tangible among the guests who were left behind with us. They were concerned about their family and friends in Romania and what things would be like here in Oslo.

This was a particularly difficult Christmas for our guests because most of the services generally available to them were discontinued this year. As a result of this, we chose to extend opening hours- opening earlier in the afternoon and closing later in the morning. This was practiced from December 24th to December 27th. Staff prepared and served a homemade Romanian Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve. This was one of the most wonderful moments in the shelter’s history.

We were meant to have left our current location in St Halvardsgate 28 in September 2020, but our work to acquire a new building is not finished. SKBO has therefore applied to the City Council to extend our stay until August 2021.

Statistics:

* Occupancies: 10 360
* Unique guests: 235
* Number of rejections: 64

## Corona Soup-Cycle: «Dugnad» of the ages!

On March 13th Sporet, the Café and the Church had to close their doors. This was a dramatic experience for the staff and we can only imagine how it must have felt for our target group: those who no longer could come by for food, conversation, rest, security, counselling and support in (times of) acute and chronic crises.

It was natural for us to be where our guests were, so since we could not invite them to us, we went into the streets to find them there.

Our goal was to distribute food, but just as importantly, we wanted access to our regular guests. A quick plan was put in place and a team was set up across the different departments. We were able to borrow a bicycle from «På hjul» with a basket and trailer. The kitchen began what became an impressive production of the best soup in town and we distributed it on a well-trodden track through downtown.

This was a period of widespread insecurity and many new challenges. How much food do we need? How long does the soup keep warm? How many people will we see? Are we able to be outside all week, every day? How long? How can we protect ourselves and guests from the virus out on the streets?

Permanent teams with team-leaders were established to reduce the risk of contagion. When we opened up for volunteers (from all departments), they played a crucial role in ensuring that we were able to deliver during the summer schedule.

Staff were given new rolls and new working hours. Most did not have weekend duties in their normal contracts, and now everyone was forced to work weekends. Everybody agreed to this, no complaints: What a gang!

In hail and rain from all sides, in baking sunshine, in whistling wind, on holidays of all kinds. Lots of seriousness, lots of need and lots of joy. 7 days a week, the same route, the same time. People could, and did, depend on it. We had many regular guests who waited for us at our different stops downtown in the period March 19th to August 31st, and all weekends in September. All in all, 174 days. Statistics were kept and they look like this:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Gender | Drug Users | Lonely/Mental health issues | Others | Destitute Migrnats | Soups w/bread | Other food (portions) | Coffee | Water |
| Men | Women |
| Totalt |  13767  |  2830  |  3927  |  5478  |  3040  |  4030  |  18988  |  2467  |  7876  |  11154  |

These stats are far from accurate. We did not start registering the numbers in the beginning, and several of the denotations were based on estimations and assumptions. Consider this a tool to assess the need in the city. In addition to this quantitative data, more extensive qualitative records (day logs) were kept. Sporet has also compiled a longer report on this activity based on the logs, statistics and reflections and experiences from employees in different sections of the department.

## Outreach

Mapping, trust-building and communication activities have, again, been central to our methodical social work. Tuesday morning has been earmarked for outreach. A social counsellor from the guidance and counselling team coordinates and participates consistently and brings along one other member of staff from the City Mission Centre. Outreach work has been primarily focused on downtown areas, but has stretched out to the suburbs where some in the target group have their permanent locations.

An important part of the outreach work is the possibility to reach people in the target group who do not make use of the City Mission Centre’s services. Through outreach, we also come into contact with some of the most vulnerable people in the target group. This is especially important when we consider, for example, that victims of exploitation and human trafficking are often prevented from visiting areas where they can come into contact with state or civil society actors.

In March, outreach was put on hold but then quickly became incorporated into the Soup Cycle work, an effective combination of food distribution and outreach work. Outreach was concentrated downtown and consisted of Grønland, Hausmannsgate, Jakobskirka, Storgata, Gunerius and Jernbanetorget.

Usually the outreach team primarily reaches out to street musicians, sellers and beggars. Because of the pandemic most within this target group chose to leave the country, and home to (primarily) Romania. Through the work with and around the bicycle, the team met people with a different background and living situation than we normally do. This was a profoundly educational and developmental endeavour for us.

When the autumn came, and we returned to a “business as usual” of sorts, we experienced a marked decrease in the number of people we met per outreach session: from 15-20 before the pandemic, to 3-8 after.

## Laundry and Storage

The laundry was closed for a period of approximately three weeks after March 12. After a while, we opened up two days a week, and by the end of 2020 were open 5 days a week with a capacity of 54 washes. The laundry also distributed the necessary warm clothes such as wool underwear and socks. In 2020 we washed 1296 machines of clothing (67% of our total capacity).

We rented out a total of 93 storage boxes in 2020, rented out for kr.25 per month, for a period of three months at a time. (During the pandemic we stopped taking payment and offered this service free of charge on a temporary basis. This project has been running since 2017. All guests who desire to rent a storage locker signed a rental contract and kept one of three keys. Whenever the Centre was open, the guests had access to their lockers.

## Byfrokost

Byfrokost closed in March, but reopened October 3rd, 2020.  There was a team of 5 permanent employees who rotated in teams of 2 together with 7-8 volunteers per shift.

A number of routines were changes in order to reduce the risk of contagion. Firstly, we limited the number of guests inside to a maximum of 35 at once. We also established rules to maintain distance between guests, employees and volunteers. There was a great deal of disinfecting and washing of surfaces. Guests could register themselves and were offered facemasks as they entered. To avoid people standing in line inside, we initiated a serving system whereby guests could order food to their tables.

In spite of these restrictions and the changes, we did our best to recreate a pleasant environment with a predictability for our guests to rely on.

We received 542 guests between October 2020 and January 2021, of which 89 were women.

## Communication Activities / Guidance and Counselling Cafe

In 2020, there was a continued need for support for those who first came into contact with Norwegian society. Since 2019, the department has had a guidance and counselling team consisting of four social counsellors. The team has been focused on facilitating guest knowledge of duties and opportunities, as well as realizing their rights, in the Norwegian context. Societal understanding, bridge-building and prevention are a few key words.

The department’s communication activities can be imagined as a scale. On one end of the scale, one finds basic information which is communicated in our own open arenas, the café, Byfrokost, the shelter, the laundry and during outreach: information about services offered, where one can find help and basic information which can make life in Oslo easier to navigate. On the other side of the scale are the few cases where we provide long term support (both socially and legally) for individuals in need of such assistance.

In 2020, an important part of this communication work has been the gathering of knowledge and documenting loopholes in the system. Knowledge such as this can be used in our advocacy work to change legislation and practice.

Guests who so desired could schedule an informal meeting with a social worker during opening hours in the café. The focus of this meeting was “here and now” and the agenda dependent on the needs of the guest.

In 2020, the team registered a total of 256 such appointments. Of these, 15% were women. These guests originated from 17 different countries, although the majority (50%) were from Romania. Approximately, 20% of the inquiries came from people from Eastern European countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Serbia. The remaining inquiries were split evenly between the Nordics, Western Europe and other parts of the world such as Bangladesh, Nigeria, Syria, Algeria, Ethiopia, Malaysia and Senegal. These statistics do not pertain to the period between March and June when the café was closed and the team worked together with the Soup Cycle. Some common themes in the counselling meetings were residence permits and other registrations, NAV questions and labour market exploitation.

All facets of our work have been coloured by the pandemic this year. Throughout Spring and Summer, counselling and outreach was an integrated part of the work around the Soup Cycle. Building bridges between our target group and what was happening on a (inter)national basis took on a new level of importance. A minority of our guests speak Norwegian and have access to daily news sources. Throughout the pandemic year, an important part of our communication responsibility has been centred around informing guests of new rules around travel restrictions and other rules with regarding to minimizing contagion, as well as what to do if one suspects infection. Last but not least, our communication work has been focused on preventing the spread of fake news. An important part of the work has also been to gather knowledge about the effects of the pandemic on our target group’s situation and needs, so as to communicate this to the powers that be.

Because of the pandemic, the guidance and counselling team have, for the most part, concerned themselves with work-related questions about rights in the case of job loss and the question of access to funds from the welfare state. Many have come to us for the first time who otherwise probably would not have needed our help.

## Student Collaboration and POP UP SHOP

In recent years, the department has collaborated with Oslo Metropolitan University’s social work program. The students have been given the opportunity to conduct internships, project work and volunteer at the Centre. In 2020 we accepted two groups of 7 students each.

A pivotal part of the students’ contributions and efforts have centred around the POP UP SHOP project. The Church City Mission Centre has noticed a dire need for warm winter clothing and POP UP SHOP is a concept where we try to address some of these needs. In short, POP UP SHOP is a free store that pops up at the Church City Mission Centre a couple of times every winter. With support from staff in the department, students take ownership of the project by collecting donations of clothes and planning, coordinating and organizing the shop at the Centre. An important aspect of the project is that the customer is to have a dignified shopping experience. At POP UP SHOP, “shoppers” are met by friendly and helpful “shopworkers”, nicely folded clothes, changing rooms with mirrors, music and a little piece of chocolate at the register.

2020 was an unusual year and our spring POP UP SHOP scheduled for March was cancelled days before opening. The Autumn 2020 POP UP SHOP was arranged outdoors in the backyard of the Centre: with masks, rubbing alcohol and social distancing. The shop was visited by approximately 150 customers. Our experiences arranging POP UP have been primarily positive, both for guests and employees/volunteers/students. An important aspect of student learning is to consider social work from an international perspective.

## V4

Is a project subsidized with funds from the TV-action in 2018 and shelters exceptionally vulnerable people for medium-term stays in combination with social, health and legal support.

We have been up and running as usual during the pandemic, with a reduction in the number of EEA-citizens in town resulting in less tension on capacity. This has given us the opportunity to provide longer residencies than we had imagined in 2019.

The project has housed 32 individuals (22 men and 10 women) in 2020. 1207 nights split into 38 residencies, the shortest of which was a single night and the longest 115 nights. The average residency was 31 nights.

Guests came from 13 different countries: Romania, Poland, Iran, Ethiopia, Kurdistan, Estonia, Somalia, Iraq, Thailand, Eritrea, Bulgaria, Italy and Moldova. Ages ranged from 22 to 70, with an average of 44.

Most admissions were made on the basis of somatic pains such as: MRSA, poorly regulated Diabetes, heart and cardiovascular disease, scabies, concussion, vertigo and mental health issues/conditions. Some guests were admitted while we investigated their rights to support through the welfare apparatus, and in some cases we have managed to solicit such support from the state. We have also gained valuable experience with refugees, and have been in contact with several refuge centres around the country regarding positions there. Less pressure on admissions meant that we were able at times to prioritize more social dumping and labour market exploitation cases, which crave considerable resources.

## Knowledge Gathering and Advocacy Work

Project V4 has a directive to gather relevant knowledge and engage in political advocacy. This work takes place in close cooperation with the rest of the department.

Cases/fields investigated in 2020:

### Directive to expel on the basis of petty theft

Since 2013, a directive from the Justice Department has led to the deportation of more than 1300 EEA destitute migrants from Norway for committing petty theft. A disproportional percentage of the expelled are destitute migrants from Romania.

The department’s advocacy work in 2020 has to a large extent revolved around the attempt to end this practice, by advocating that the Justice Department withdraw the directive.

When a foreigner is punished for petty theft, the immigration authorities are to consider whether or not to open a deportation case. The directive lists a number of factors to consider in this decision, amongst which; whether the subject is lacking a place to live and other connections to Norway, if they have the means to support themselves and/or able to document their reason for visiting (e.g. work or tourism).

Deportation is the most stringent punishment a foreign national can receive I Norway, and our department has communicated that this is an unreasonably strict practice which is in violation of Norway’s EEA commitments, that the directive is both discriminatory in its essence, and that it leads to a discriminatory practice against an already highly discriminated group: destitute migrants from Romania.

This practice has been ongoing for a long time without much reaction, in part due to the speed with which people have been deported. We have heard stories over the years, but began working and legally following cases as late as 2019. In 2020, we have worked with the Norwegian government and requested that the directive be withdrawn, by submitting a letter to, and meeting with, the Justice Department in the summer of 2020. In contact with the Justice Department, it became apparent that the government had no intention to withdraw the directive. We therefore commenced lobbying the opposition coalition to challenge the government, and in the fall of 2020, parliament representative Petter Eide (SV) asked questions of Minister of Justice Monica Mæland. The department contributed background information to the representative to inform his line of questioning. The department contributed to getting this case on the agenda, and was profiled in a long article in Dagsavisen which was discussed in NRK’s Nytt på Nytt.

The more we assessed the directive, the more secure we became that this directive is in violation of Norway’s EEA commitments, and in the end of 2020 the department filed an official complaint with ESA.

### Roma Network

In order to improve the living conditions for our target group, it will be necessary to collaborate with other actors who have knowledge of, and engage with, this group. In 2020, activity in the Roma Network was reinitiated. The network is coordinated by our department and the Norwegian Institute of Human Rights. This network consists of various organisations, public institutions ad research milieus engaged in questions that pertain to Roma rights, history and opportunities in Norway. Members of the network exchange knowledge, set up projects and engage in advocacy around common issues. Following the network’s discourse on anti-tsiganism, LDO is currently setting up a web-based portal for recording discrimination and hate speech against travelling Roma in Norway. In the spring of 2020, several members of the network brought forward issues to be included in the various political parties’ programs.

### Bank Account Action

The Norwegian Church City Mission projects around the country are in agreement that workers from EEA countries face considerable obstacles to attaining a bank account in Norway. This is the case even when they are legal residents, have begun working and meet the necessary documentation requirements. Not being able to open a bank account as a worker has serious consequences for society and the individual.

In the Autumn of 2020, the department initiated a Bank Account Action in which we invited the participation of other projects around the country. We have broached the issue with banks to discover what information is required for EEA citizens to open a bank account, and to gather knowledge of the consequences of not being able to open a bank account from people who have experienced this. We have also provided input to the government’s proposal to demand wage payment via bank transfer: we welcome this proposal but pointed out that this needs to come hand in hand with a strengthening of the right to a bank account in Norway. In 2021, the department will follow up on the case with Finanstilsynet and bank executives, and formulate clearer political demands as well as garner media attention for the issue.

### Wage Theft

In 2020, the government proposed the criminalization of wage theft. This is an issue that many of our guests face, and the department contributed input to the proposal in the Autumn of 2020. We urged the government to criminalize wage theft, facilitate access to legal support for its victims, and to strengthen and professionalize the collaboration between third sector support and police on this issue. In order to fight wage theft, we must provide far superior protection and support than we do today.

### SDGs

In 2020, the government began work on a national action plan for how Norway will meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The SDGs are universal and demanding of all nations, even wealthier ones. The goals are founded on the principle of “nobody left behind”, including migrants. The department contributed to the action plan by asking the state to improve the conditions for destitute migrants in Norway. We asked the government to fight homelessness, provide necessary universal healthcare, stop labour market exploitation, improve access to welfare provisions and fight discrimination of destitute migrants.

### Knowledge Development

In order to develop sound political demands, the department has initiated knowledge gathering on a variety of themes. In the autumn of 2020 we engaged in a mapping of how our guests from Romania experience discrimination in Norway. We have also set the wheels in motion for a census report on homeless travellers in Oslo. A study into what rights to healthcare EEA citizens have when in Norway is also in the works, and will be executed by the university of Tromsø in the spring of 2021.