

Support for medically and socially vulnerable populations in the EU/EEA and the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic – with a focus on people who use drugs

John Kinsman (Expert, Social and Behaviour Change)
Stockholm, 22 October 2020

Vulnerable populations

- Everyone has faced difficulties as a result of the COVID preventive measures, but it has been harder for some than for others:
 - *Medically vulnerable* = at elevated risk of severe disease and death
 - *Socially vulnerable* = vulnerable to the consequences of the public health measures that have been imposed in order to control the spread of the virus, which have exacerbated their already challenging social and economic life situations
- Some individuals may be **both medically and socially vulnerable**
- Many have also faced a particularly extensive set of challenges due to their belonging to **two or more recognised categories of social vulnerability**

Aims of the guidance document

1. To identify some of the **major cross-cutting challenges, successes and lessons learned** by **civil society** and **non-governmental organisations** as well as for **national and regional authorities** in the EU/EEA and the UK who have been providing support for people with medical and social vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Based on this, **to provide guidance** for these organisations in the event of a future upsurge in cases and a re-imposition of the preventive measures.

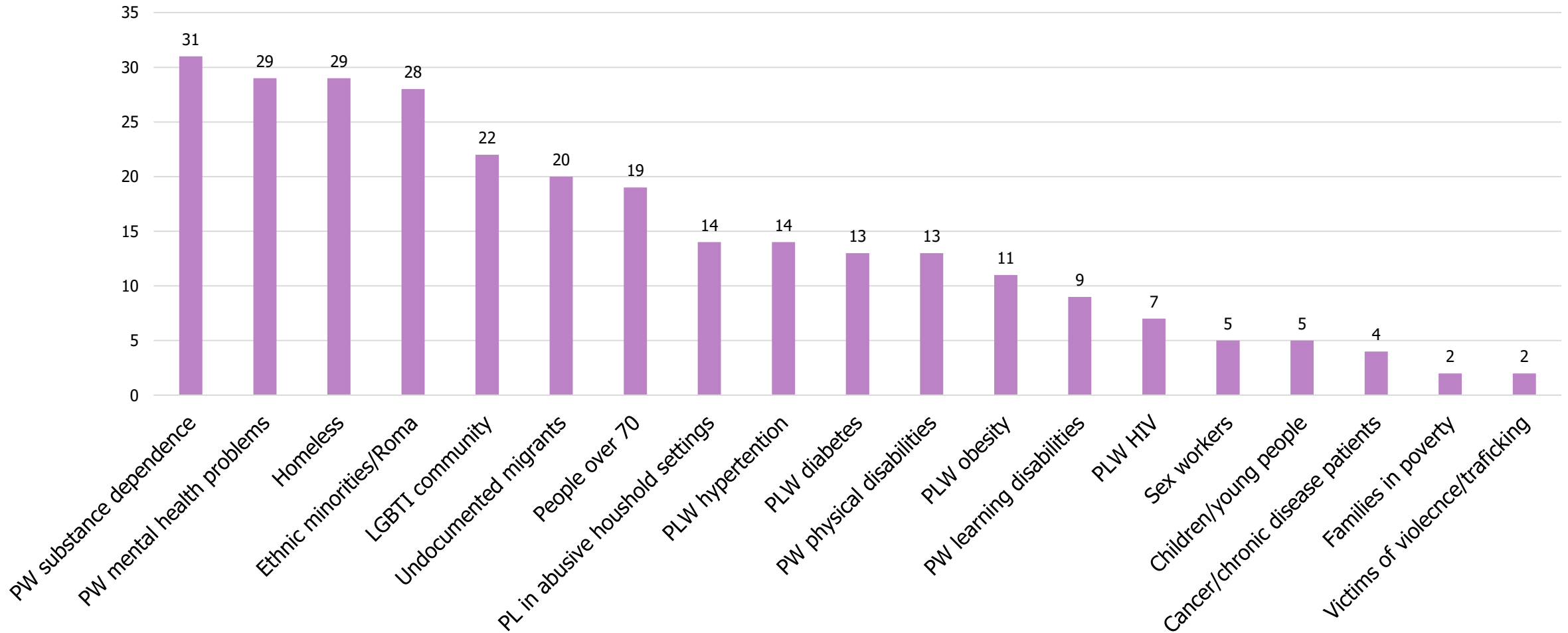
(Recent) history repeating itself?

- The findings are relevant today as many European countries return to high infection rates and restrictive measures that *disproportionately impact vulnerable populations*

Data collection

- Rapid literature review conducted for each of the included vulnerable populations
- Survey, including 10 multiple choice and open-ended (qualitative) questions
- Conducted in May 2020 (towards the end of the first phase of lockdown measures)

Number of responding organisations associated with different categories of vulnerable people (n=81)



Challenges faced by organisations supporting people who use drugs

- Heavy workload during the pandemic
- Potential exposure to the virus (staff and clients)
- Unclear and confusing communication strategies of the authorities
- Adapting limited physical space to ensure safe physical distancing
- **Remote drug treatment is not easy or always possible**

Successes

- Continuation of service provision, in spite of the challenges
- Flexibility, motivation and adaptability of the workforce (will this still be the case in the second wave?)
- Opportunity to revise and improve practices:
 - Counselling not always one-to-one but through video conferencing (some clients actually prefer this approach)
 - Needle exchange services generally maintained but adapted to the situation
 - OST is often prescribed for a longer period than usual (1 month instead of max. 2 weeks) and this can also be provided via electronic prescriptions
 - Paper prescriptions are delivered to the door and upon appointment

Lessons learned



- Key factors to optimising service provision for PWUD during a time of crisis:
 - **Preparedness** = having existing protocols and service continuity plans
 - **Integration** = ensure an integrated approach to the services provided to PWUD (social, psychological, medical)
 - **Innovation** = maintaining contact with PWUD during strict lockdown implied the adoption of innovative/flexible solutions (e.g. mobile services, take-home OST)
 - **Cooperation** and **coordination** with civil society and official organisations
 - Recognition that PWUD are a very heterogeneous population – their varying needs must be taken into account. There is **no one-size-fits-all approach** to service provision.

Contributors



- **ECDC experts** (in alphabetical order): Lisa Ferland, Tjede Funk, John Kinsman, Teymur Noori, Kate Olsson, Anastasia Pharris, Senia Rosales-Klintz
- **External experts** (in alphabetical order): Tamas Molnar, Cianán Russell, Annabel Seebohm, Thomas Seyler, Alyna Smith, Luca Stevenson, Milan Šveřepa, Bernadett Varga, Julia Wadoux
- We also acknowledge comments on a draft version of the report from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL)

Thank you for listening! Any questions?

- Please find the guidance document at:
<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Medically-and-socially-vulnerable-populations-COVID-19.pdf>
- Circulate it among colleagues and to civil society groups in your country!