

# Imagine You Were Me On How COVID-19 Affects Vulnerable Groups

**LUISA SCHNEIDER**

Imagine

the internet stops working  
 electricity is out  
 the many screens which connect you to the world  
 turn black  
 you no longer have access to your bank account  
 or functioning credit cards

the walls behind which you retreated fade away  
 and you find yourself under the open sky

now you are like me  
 nothing but a “dangerous body” on the street

what can you do now?  
 what must you do now?  
 out in the open where an invisible virus lurks?

you roam  
 roam the city for  
 food  
 information  
 and means to protect those you love

but everything is closed!  
 and without the zero you can’t have  
 you can’t even enter the supermarket  
 and all shopkeepers have closed  
 almost daily new regulations are passed  
 they don’t include your needs  
 so  
 you cannot possibly survive  
 and adhere to them

you can no longer be with loved ones  
 for without the walls of your house  
 you must decide  
 between your child and your partner  
 because  
 only two people  
 may stay together

and without papers  
 without walls  
 how can you prove  
 that you belong together?

Then they change the rules again  
 now  
 without housing  
 only one person  
 can move around

you wish this nightmare were over  
 wish for the world to go back to normal

be careful what you wish for  
 because  
 this, my friend  
 this is my normal.

for I have no housing  
 and I am telling you

while you wait it out at home  
 part of an expanding digital universe  
 connected to those you love  
 millions of us  
 have no door to close behind us  
 or doors behind which  
 violence waits  
 or loneliness  
 or emptiness  
 or fear

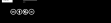
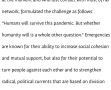
some people  
 voice their solidarity  
 share food and words  
 but their faces  
 their person  
 remains unknown

others  
 who do show their faces  
 come with sticks  
 to act on their face  
 as if our disappearance  
 could somehow  
 end their fear

but while people discriminate  
 viruses do not

this is the world we crossed  
 can you imagine?  
 do you even want to?

what will you do about it?  
 now  
 and once this is over



The COVID-19 pandemic poses global medical, economic, political and social challenges. Indeed, health crises can dramatically increase existing social and economic inequalities if social factors and specific needs are not considered in the development and execution of response mechanisms. While efforts to limit the impact on our economies consider different occupations and circumstances, current virus-containment measures are one-size-fits-all solutions. They are technical and relate to medical protective measures. “Experts say” has become the fail-safe way to preventively end any opposition and politicians built an unusually united front with little space for discussion or discourse. But the solutions don’t fit everyone. Indeed, protective measures such as social distancing, frequent hand washing and the request to stay at home cannot possibly be implemented by some vulnerable groups, such as people without housing or refugees. For others – including people who experience violence at home, who have special needs or who suffer from loneliness – they add to their hardship. Tailor-made measures are imperative.

That those who are most at risk during this pandemic are already struggling to make ends meet has become a global but meaningless slogan. What seems to be forgotten is that our inequality is not natural. It is a product of our guidelines. Health emergencies are always social crises too. We urgently need to think about the long path of neoliberal measures that led us to this pandemic. If we undermine solidarity and social justice, the devastating effects of this pandemic will go far beyond the medical and economic consequences. Current measures reduce the visibility of the suffering for those in need of the most support but not their suffering as such. One of the rough sleepers I conduct research with, Yelena Hill, who has limited access to food, water or money at the moment and who lost contact with most of her network, formulated the challenge as follows:

“Humans will survive this pandemic. But whether humanity will is a whole other question.”

Emergencies are known for their ability to increase social cohesion and mutual support, but also for their potential to turn people against each other and to strengthen radical, political currents that are based on division and hatred. How this pandemic will shape our societies depends on our ability to support each other and to document and combat increasing poverty and inequality.

I am an anthropologist at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale). I conduct collaborative, long-term ethnographic fieldwork with people who do not have housing in Leipzig, Germany. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, I have been working with rough sleepers, social workers, the city and politicians on measures to provide care for particularly vulnerable people, to give them the opportunity to isolate themselves and to seek medical help. The poem above is an assemblage of structures of feeling that emerge currently in different places across the world and are communicated via different media. Predominantly, however, it is based on what my unboxed research collaborators – who wish to remain anonymous – have told me since the pandemic mitigation measures entered into effect, and reflects on the urgent need to strengthen empathy and solidarity in our societies and to serve the common good in the collective sense.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luisa Schneider is a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale).

SHARE THIS

