

Impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the realisation of non-discrimination

The impacts of the coronavirus pandemic must also be examined from the perspective of non-discrimination: how the pandemic, the measures taken to combat it, and the aftercare measures affect the lives and realisation of rights of people with different backgrounds.

Particular attention must be paid to the situation of vulnerable population groups, such as older people and people with disabilities, children and young people, and different minorities.



Vulnerable groups must be taken into account in impact assessments

The coronavirus pandemic and the measures taken to deal with it have had a particular impact on the lives people already in a vulnerable position before the outbreak. This Policy Brief examines the effects of the pandemic based on the responses of a Ministry of Justice stakeholder survey. The results of the survey targeted at non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and advisory councils highlighted aspects such as the importance of accessible official communications and the impact of restrictions imposed during the pandemic on health, wellbeing and access to services.

In March 2020, the Government decided on the first recommendations to curb the spread of coronavirus. On 16 March, the Government concluded, together with the President of the Republic, that Finland is under emergency conditions due to the outbreak. In connection with the emergency conditions, the Government issued several recommendations and imposed restrictive measures concerning issues such as teaching, meetings, public services, visits to housing service units of risk groups, and transport. The powers laid down in the Emergency

Powers Act were implemented based on an assessment that this was necessary for protecting the population and safeguarding the implementation of fundamental and human rights. While the first period of emergency conditions ended in June 2020, various restrictive measures have also been taken later. After Finland's epidemic situation deteriorated again in early 2021, the Government decided on reintroducing the emergency conditions.

Measures, recommendations and restrictions issued during the coronavirus pandemic have had a wide range of impacts on people's daily lives and the realisation of rights. Vulnerable groups, such as older people, persons with disabilities, children and young people, people belonging to minorities and the indigenous Sámi people, have experienced new challenges, or previous problems have become increasingly pronounced during the pandemic. Quarantines, isolations and bans on visits during the pandemic have also had a particularly strong impact on those living in institutions and housing units, such as prisons, hospitals, detention units, nursing homes and reception centres.

While the restrictive measures imposed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic have succeeded in slowing down the spread of the virus in Finland, they have at the same time had significant negative economic, social and health impacts. When considering the lifting of restrictive measures, it is necessary to assess the effectiveness of the measures in a versatile manner and to start lifting restrictions from those that have the smallest impact on the spread of the virus, but can be assumed to have the greatest negative effects in the short and long term. (Scientific Panel 2020)

According to a report published by the Government in January 2021, creating a more comprehensive assessment became a special development target in decision-making related to the

During the pandemic, particular attention must be paid to extensive and systematic monitoring and assessment of fundamental and human rights impacts.

coronavirus pandemic. The decisions made in spring 2020 were clearly focused on the health perspective, while less attention was paid to the viewpoints of fundamental rights, the economy and social aspects. In addition, better consideration of regional perspectives emerged as a clear development target. The impact of the pandemic on equality was not examined separately in the report. (Government 2021)

Under the Constitution, everyone is equal before the law, and no one shall, without an acceptable reason, be treated differently from other persons on the grounds of sex, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, health, disability or other reason that concerns his or her person. Therefore, reasons that concern the individual may not affect people's opportunities for accessing education, finding work and using different services. The purpose of the Non-discrimination Act is to promote equality and prevent discrimination and to enhance the legal protection of those who have been discriminated against. Similarly, the purpose of the Equality Act is to prevent discrimination based on gender, to promote equality between women and men, and thus to improve the status of women, particularly in working life. The objective of the Act is also to prevent discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression.

Agents such as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has stressed the need to pay particular attention to the broad and systematic monitoring and evaluation of the impacts on fundamental and human rights resulting from the coronavirus situation. Measures during the coronavirus pandemic must also be examined and assessed from the perspective of non-discrimination: what effects have they had on the realisation of the rights of different population groups and how should this be taken into account in planning new measures and the aftercare of the pandemic? The Human Rights Centre's Human Rights Delegation also highlighted the importance of impact assessments in its publication on the impact of the pandemic on the implementation of fundamental and human rights. The Human Rights Delegation issued a recommendation to the Government (Human Rights Centre 2020)

Equality in the legislation

According to the Constitution of Finland, everyone is equal before the law, and no one may without an acceptable reason be treated differently from other persons, on the grounds of gender, age, origin, language, religion, belief, opinion, health, disability or other personal characteristics. Factors related to the person, therefore, shall not affect people's chances of getting access to education, employment and various services. Purpose of the non-discrimination Act is to promote equality and prevent discrimination and strengthen legal protection of the victim. Correspondingly, the purpose of the Equality Act is to prevent gender-based discrimination and to promote equality between women and men, and to improve the position of women, particularly in working life. The Act also aims to prevent discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression.

In its own review, the Council of Europe drew attention to direct discrimination, indirect discrimination as well as multiple or intersectional discrimination that may have been caused by the measures taken during the coronavirus pandemic. Direct discrimination may result from restrictive measures targeting certain people or a group of people in the name of health and safety. Meanwhile, indirect discrimination may occur when measures are extensively targeted at the population, but their impacts affect a certain part of the population more strongly than others. In the context of multiple discrimination, the status of groups such as women

belonging to minorities has emerged as particularly vulnerable: they may be subject to disproportionately negative effects due to their gender and minority background, for instance, in the labour market and in relation child-care, as schools transition to remote education. (Council of Europe 2020)

The Council of Europe has stressed the importance of disaggregated data, i.e. data divided into different population groups as the basis for measures taken during the pandemic. There is need for separate data on the situation of minorities and other vulnerable group to plan and target measures to best meet everyone's needs and rights. (Council of Europe 2020) The models created to assess the human rights impacts of the measures taken to combat the pandemic emphasise the consideration of vulnerable groups, especially from the perspective of equality and discrimination (see e.g. Scheini & Molbæk-Steensig 2021).

Exceptional measures may only be adopted if they are strictly limited to what is shown to be absolutely necessary and proportionate and if they are limited in time and scope and do not infringe on other fundamental rights.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights has monitored the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, especially from the perspective of social rights in EU Member States. The pandemic has affected health care particularly dramatically, as an increase in the number of coronavirus patients has resulted in a need to restrict the access to care of other groups. At the same time, the situation has affected the wellbeing and safety at work of health care staff. The pandemic has also had a significant impact on education, as the transition to remote learning has caused problems in the implementation of equality in education provision. Not all students have the same opportunities to study via remote access, as there is variation in the tools available and support obtained from family. The coronavirus pandemic has affected working life in many ways, and the restrictive measures have had a negative impact on many industries, re-

sulting in unemployment. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights has noted that the pandemic has caused particular problems to homeless people, who are often at a higher risk of contracting coronavirus while struggling to access healthcare. (FRA 2020)

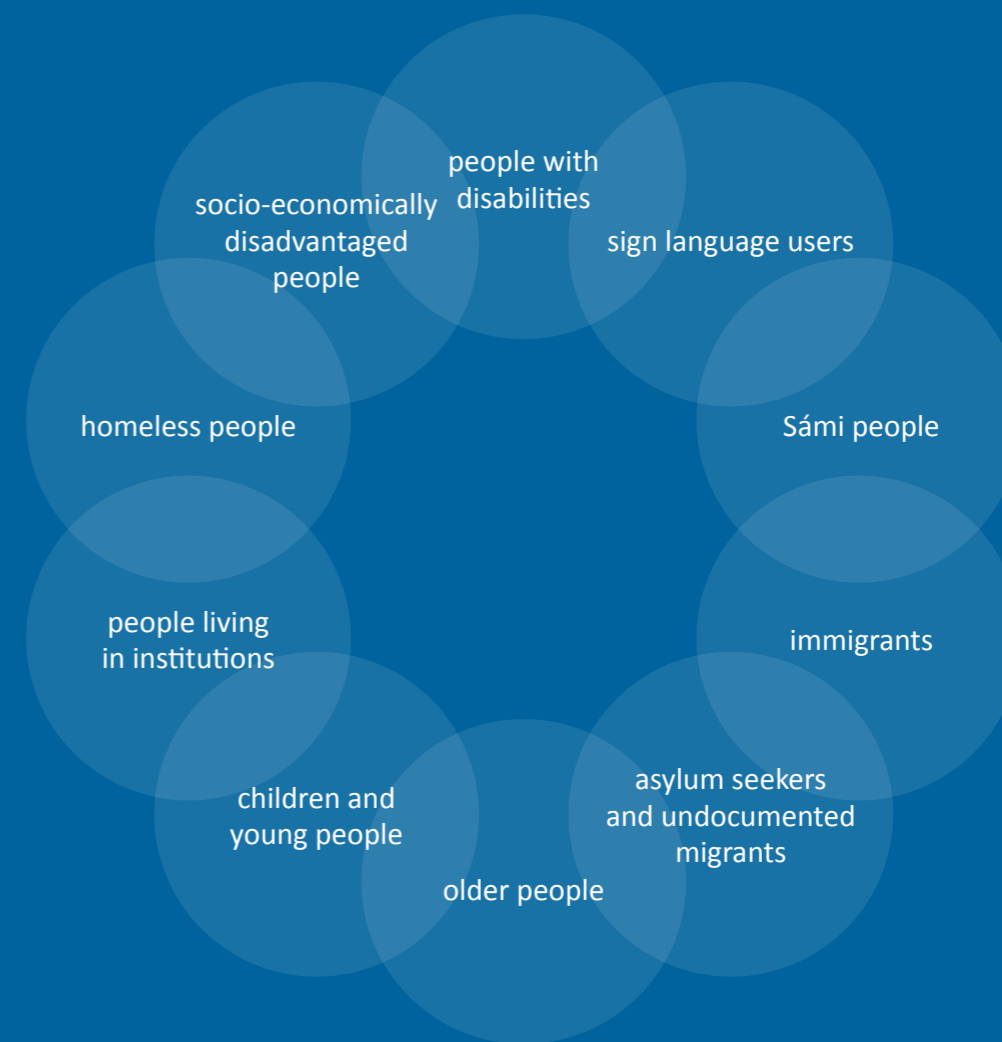
According to the Council of Europe, the lesson that the corona pandemic has taught us is that the more badly a country succeeds in taking the diversity of its population into account, the more difficult it will be for that country to respond to challenges such as the pandemic. The less cohesive and more unequal a society is, the worse it will fare when faced with a crisis. Anti-discrimination measures, equality and inclusiveness are therefore key strategic priorities in crisis management. (Council of Europe 2020)

According to the recommendations made by the Council of Europe, countries should avoid measures restricting the rights of certain groups unless there is a strong evidence basis of the benefits of the measures for people's health and safety. The Government should actively engage in dialogue with minorities and NGOs during the crisis. Particular attention should be paid to access to information and consultation of different groups, especially in the case of vulnerable groups and those at risk of discrimination. It is also crucial to find ways to promote these in an exceptional situation. Attention must also be paid to the accessibility of social welfare and health care services, especially at local level. Similarly, the process of teaching children and young people through remote connections must be examined from the perspective of vulnerable children and young people. (Council of Europe 2020)

Equinet, the European Network of Equality Bodies, has pointed out that equal treatment and non-discrimination are requirements that must be complied with whatever the circumstances, including in times of crisis. Exceptional measures may only be adopted if they are closely limited to what is shown to be strictly necessary and proportionate and if they are limited in time and scope and do not infringe on other fundamental rights. All authorities and politicians must clearly communicate that the crisis may never be used as a reason for denying people of their rights to equality and non-discrimination. Crisis response measures must ensure, without delay, the protection of the most vulnerable groups and equal access to, and accessibility of, the most important public services. (Equinet 2020)

Equality and non-discrimination must also be ensured in times of crisis.

When planning and taking measures to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities must pay special attention to vulnerable people, such as



Most contacts to the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman related to health and social services and education

Of the more than 1,500 contacts received by the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman in 2020, approximately 9 per cent were related to the coronavirus pandemic in some way. While the contacts came from all walks of life, most of them concerned health and social services and education. The contacts received by the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman concerning health and social services covered issues such as bans on visits and meeting restrictions in hospitals and housing service units, coronavirus testing and the availability of social and healthcare services during lockdown. Overall, the contacts were about restricting fundamental and human rights, such as freedom of movement, protection of private and family

life, income, health and education, or restricting the use of services due to the pandemic.

The ombudsman was also contacted in relation to various anti-pandemic measures, such as the enforcement and recommendations on masks, closure and restrictions concerning premises, and restrictions on movement and travel. The ombudsman was also contacted in relation to the financial support granted as a result of the epidemic. Some of the contacts received during the year also concerned prejudices that people belonging to minorities or of a certain age had faced related to the pandemic. (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman 2021a)

The Ministry of Justice investigated observations among stakeholders

In April 2020, the Ministry of Justice conducted a survey among its stakeholders on the effects of the coronavirus on equality. The survey was emailed to the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs (RONK), the Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations (ETNO), the Advisory Board for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (VANE) and several NGOs working with different minorities. The survey asked the respondents to provide information on the equality challenges that had emerged in connection to their work and to highlight issues relevant to the aftercare of the coronavirus crisis from the perspective of different minorities. Some of the organisations also gathered experiences more extensively from among their members.

Many of the respondents noted that it was still difficult to assess the true impacts of the coronavirus on equality at that time. The responses also pointed out that the challenges emerging during the pandemic are very similar to those faced by other population groups, but their impacts are more pronounced for vulnerable groups.

The survey was repeated in early autumn 2020, and the responses received at that time emphasised the fact that the problems and challenges that already emerged in the first few months of the pandemic had remained largely the same as the pandemic situation continued. This view is also supported by various subsequent reports on the situation, such as surveys carried out by disability organisations on the effects of the pandemic. It should also be noted that many of the problems emerging during the coronavirus pandemic have already existed before the crisis, but became more pronounced during the crisis.

The problems raised in the responses to the stakeholder surveys conducted by the Ministry of Justice dealt in particular with equality issues related to information provision and communication, the impacts of the restrictive measures related to the pandemic on vulnerable groups, the availability of official services in the exceptional situation, the toughening of attitudes towards minorities and views on developing the activities of the authorities in a crisis.

Need for accessible communication is emphasised during a crisis

During the coronavirus pandemic, it has been particularly important that the information provided by the authorities on the situation has been as accessible, clear, open and timely as possible to all people, regardless of their language, age, disability or other background. All population groups need various kinds of up-to-date information: on preparedness for coronavirus, general operating practices and restrictions in the exceptional situation, instructions for those contracting the illness and operating instructions related to issues such as arrangements made on children's schooling.

In its report published in June 2020, the Government's Scientific Panel also emphasised the need to pay particular attention to communications to vulnerable or minority groups in emergency conditions.

In the stakeholder surveys conducted by the Ministry of Justice, the respondents were generally satisfied with the availability of information. Challenges in communication have emerged in connection with older people and persons with disabilities as well as different minority language groups. A lot of the information on the coronavirus pandemic has been provided digitally, which means that it may not have reached everyone. Not all people have access to the internet, and navigating on different websites and evaluating information require certain communication skills. Older people or persons with disabilities may particularly face many kinds of obstacles regarding access to digital information. For example, inadequate digital skills, a lack of necessary devices or the provision of information in an inaccessible format make access to information difficult or even impossible.

The disability organisations emphasised the importance of accessible communications available through multiple channels in their responses to the surveys by the Ministry of Justice. There must be several other options alongside electronic communications, and the material must be available in sign language, plain language, Swedish and Sámi as well as in the most common foreign languages spoken in Finland. For persons with visual impairments, the information must be available in Braille and as a voice recording.

The responses also highlighted the fact that some had found the communications by the authorities as somewhat arbitrary: one Arabic respondent had received mobile information in their own language, while other Arabic

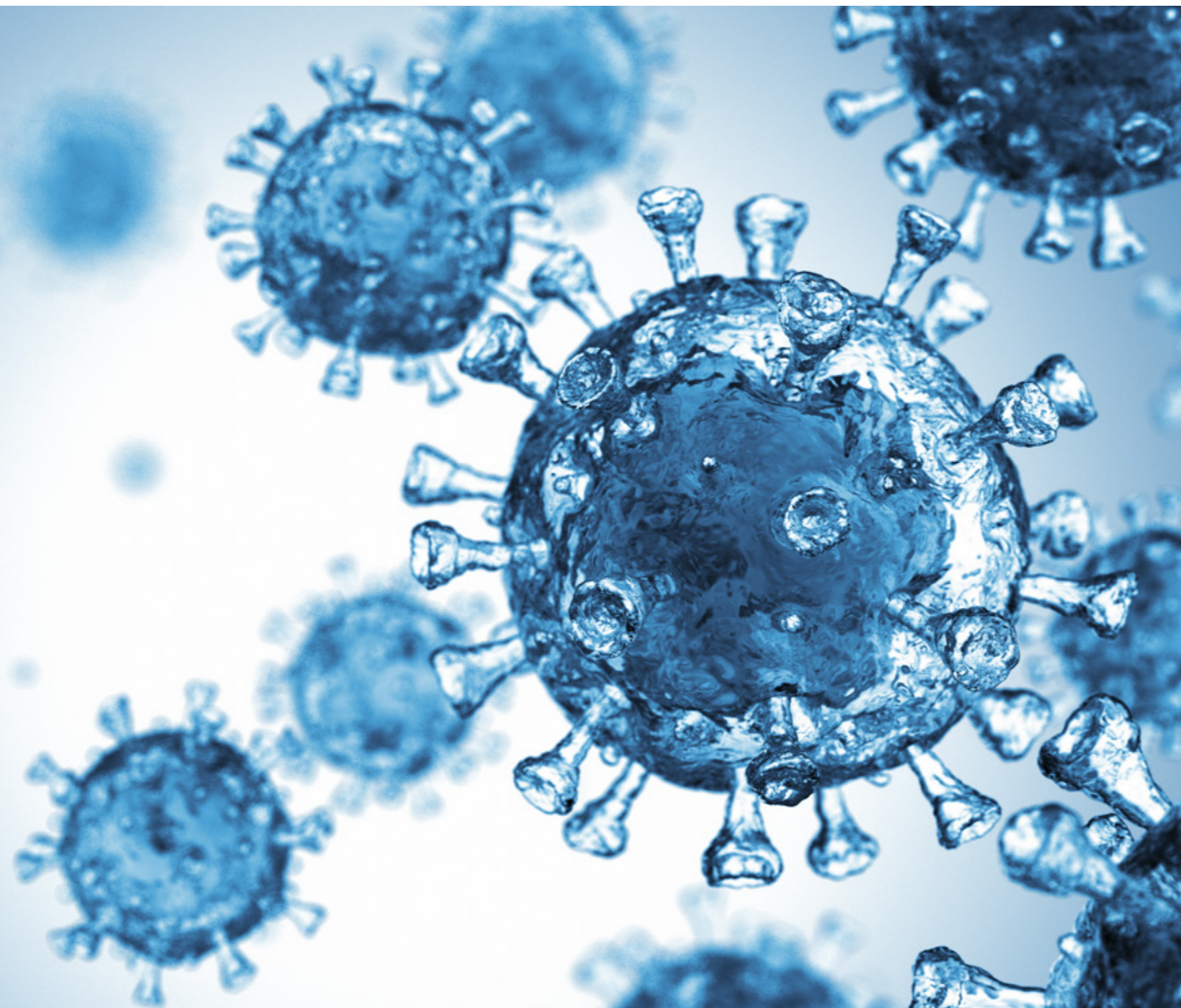
speakers in the person's close circles had not. This had raised questions about what the information provision was based on. People also received information in their native language with a delay, which resulted in various rumours spreading within the communities. There were also failures in providing information about the adoption of the Emergency Powers Act in Finnish and Swedish at the same time. The majority of operators only sent the message on the Uusimaa border closure in Finnish, as there were shortcomings in the implementation of mass text messaging.

According to the Ministry of Justice survey results, there were also positive examples of communications, such as the sign language interpretation provided at Government press conferences. Another positive example of the alternative use of information and communication channels is the rounds of calls carried out in many municipalities, which were used to investigate the coping of older people living at home under the emergency conditions.

Another example highlighted in the survey was a letter to the citizens by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired produced a Braille version and a voice recording of the text.

The responses to the surveys stressed that the flow of information from the authorities to individual people must be carefully examined to ensure that this chain works as well as possible. Effective cooperation structures and trust between the authorities and civil society have contributed to the flow of information. The organisations pointed out that cooperation must be built over a long period of time to ensure that the work also runs smoothly in times of crisis.

Organisations and religious communities have played a key role in communicating information from the authorities and also in translating information. This has partly resulted from the fact that service units and providers, which are also important places of information for persons with immigrant background, have been closed due to the coronavirus outbreak. The organisations welcomed the fact that operators such as the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA) opened an instant call for applications for funding provided for organisations to develop counselling services in the languages used by their customers. The capacity of organisations to transfer their own services online and to



support their communities during restrictions varies greatly.

In March 2020, Tampere University launched a study on the access to information and experiences of language minorities during the coronavirus epidemic. The purpose was to quickly produce information on the channels through which Russian, Somali and Arabic speaking minorities living in Finland receive information on the coronavirus and the official instructions related to the epidemic. During the study, the project prepared weekly press releases for the authorities to use.

Even though a lot of information has been available during the coronavirus pandemic, the study by the Tampere University revealed that this had not reached all target groups very well. There were shortcomings in areas such as what people should do if they contract the virus. The Arabic and Somali speakers interviewed for the study reported that their main information sources were television and social media as well as their children and acquaintances. For Russian speakers, key information channels included news agency websites. Some of the interviewees also reported that they received information from their workplace and place of study. According to the report, information provision on coronavirus in Somali, Arabic and Russian was increased during the period under review (between 23 March and 20 April 2020). For example, the Finnish Broadcasting Company extended its provision of news about coronavirus to multiple languages, including Arabic, Somali, Kurdish and Persian. (Tampere University 2020)

Society must show that it hears and listens to everyone in its communications.

The Impact of coronavirus epidemic on wellbeing among foreign born population (MigCOVID) study by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) assessed issues such as the availability of information concerning coronavirus for immigrants aged between 20 and 66. A clear majority of immigrants (94%) reported having received sufficient information on coronavirus and the measures taken to prevent the spread of the infection. The immigrants with excellent Finnish or Swedish language proficiency reported that they received sufficient information significantly more frequently (97%) than those whose language proficiency was intermediate (92%) or at most at the beginner level (91%). According to the study, the situation regarding the ade-

quacy of the perceived access to information and compliance with prevention measures was quite good. The conclusions emphasise that the link between the adequacy of information and the level of language proficiency in Finnish or Swedish highlights a need to use plain language in communication materials. Multi-lingual and multi-channel communication is particularly necessary when recommendations are updated or specified during the coronavirus epidemic. (THL 2021b)

According to a study examining the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives of people with an immigrant background speaking from Arabic, Somali and Russian living in Finland, Arabic and Somali speakers particularly struggled to find information from the authorities at the early stages of the crisis and found it consequently difficult to get help in the situation as the necessary information did not reach them. Poor skills in Finnish or Swedish led many to rely mainly on informal information shared on social media. As a result, some might have been exposed to unreliable information. In fact, the conclusions of the study underline the importance of sharing reliable information and providing assistance to immigrants in their own languages, especially in times of crisis. (Finell et al. 2020)

The Finnish language proficiency, reading and writing skills and the skills in using different communication tools have a significant impact on where a foreign-language-speaking older person looks for and obtains information. In a report by the JADE Activity Centre on the situation of foreign-language older people during the coronavirus pandemic (2020), some respondents reported that they were only able to follow the information when conveyed orally in their own language. Concise official information translated into other languages does not reach older people as well as it should. Instead, to ensure that the information is understood, issues must be explained and people must be provided with an opportunity to ask for clarifications so they can apply the information in a form that they can understand. Therefore, accessibility and cognitive accessibility must be promoted alongside the language range. To ensure that older people with a foreign background living in Finland receive correct and up-to-date information in a crisis situation, the differences between different language and cultural groups must be taken into account more extensively in the communications.

According to the Government's Scientific Panel, the effectiveness of communications during the coronavirus pandemic must be monitored from the perspective of how well

information succeeds in reaching different population groups. Society must also show that it hears and listens to everyone in its communications. In its report, the Scientific Panel emphasises that the key question of the citizens at risk of exclusion and marginalised people is 'Does anyone want to listen to us?'. In this context, NGOs and local organisations, news articles written on the hearings and the hearings themselves must pay particular attention to the participation of different minorities and Sámi people. Strengthening and developing the digital process of consulting citizens is also important. Digital consulting could be implemented in collaboration with local press and administration to ensure that the local level is reached as comprehensively as possible. (Scientific Panel 2020)

The political decision-makers and civil servants interviewed in the report on government authorities' activities during the coronavirus pandemic felt that the communications

Restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic have affected vulnerable groups in particular

The main objective of the various restrictions and recommendations issued during the coronavirus pandemic is to slow down and prevent the spread of coronavirus, safeguard healthcare capacity and particularly protect people in risk groups. However, restrictions on movement, education and working life affect the lives of different people in various ways and have also had negative effects, especially on vulnerable people. Protecting health may have caused problems in the realisation of other rights. Meanwhile, the strong focus on protecting health due to the epidemic may have undermined the consideration of other areas of health, resulting in increased backlog in services and treatment.

The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman has stressed that although the measures to limit the pandemic have been necessary from the perspective of preventing infections, the restrictions have had serious consequences for many groups already in a vulnerable position prior to the crisis and with a high risk of violence and other violations of right. For example, according to the ombudsman's statement, the Government proposal on the temporary restriction of freedom of movement and close

to the general public had been successful: the authorities were able to communicate the seriousness of the situation, which enabled them to influence the progress of the epidemic. On the other hand, improving cooperation and the flow of information both within the Government and between the Government and external agents was considered an important development target in the report. (Prime Minister's Office 2021)

In early 2021, a new strategic communications team was set up in the Government Communications Department of the Prime Minister's Office in charge of the Finland Forward communications campaign launched during the emergency conditions of spring 2020. The purpose of the campaign is to support national and regional communications cooperation during the crisis and to create a channel for assistance and support. (Prime Minister's Office 2021)

contacts (HE 39/2021 VP) did not include an assessment of the impacts of the proposal on equality, even though the Non-Discrimination Act obliges all authorities to carry out an assessment.

The ombudsman estimates that, in practice, the restrictive measures included in the proposal would have the greatest impact on vulnerable individuals, such as undocumented, migrant population, victims of trafficking, homeless or otherwise marginalised people as well as socio-economically disadvantaged people, who have less choice in their everyday lives to make alternative living arrangements. In addition, discretion must be exercised in imposing sanctions as part of the enforcement of restrictions. It is also important to note that those in a particularly vulnerable position do not have actual opportunities to act differently or even have access to information on the restrictions on movement. Moreover, they are also often more hurt than others by the sanctions imposed for violating the restriction, such as fines. (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman 2021)



Exceptional situation puts a strain on mental health and wellbeing

During the coronavirus pandemic, the most significant concern related to health and wellbeing has naturally been the COVID-19 and the health problems it causes. However, the restrictive measures imposed during the pandemic and other measures taken to prevent the disease have also contributed to different health concerns. Among other things, many of the responses to the stakeholder surveys by the Ministry of Justice make reference to mental health problems and their escalation during social isolation.

Crisis helplines and similar mental health services have been inundated during the coronavirus pandemic. For example, according to Mieli Mental Health Finland, contacts to the Sekaisin chat service for young people had already received 48 per cent more contacts in October 2020 than during the previous year. During the period, contacts to the crisis helpline had increased by 34 per cent compared to 2019. (Mieli 2020a) According to the Mental Health Barometer by the Finnish Central Association for Mental Health (2020), nearly four out of five Finns believe that the coronavirus pandemic will increase the amount of mental health problems in the future, and 62 per cent of the respondents estimated that coronavirus will particularly impair the situation of mental health rehabilitees.

The most important contacts of many people with immigrant backgrounds are found in places such as integration centres, and as the places close down, people are left alone. According to a report by Mieli Mental Health Finland concerning people with a foreign background, one third of the respondents felt that their mental health had deteriorated due to the coronavirus epidemic. In addition to mental wellbeing, the negative effects of the coronavirus epidemic are likely to extend to other areas of health and wellbeing of persons with a foreign background. (Mieli 2020b)

In March 2020, the Government issued a decree under the Emergency Powers Act, which gave municipalities the right to deviate from the time limits for non-urgent healthcare and for initiating the assessment of the need for social welfare services. These decrees were repealed in June. (Ministry of Social Affairs

and Health 2020a) health and social welfare appointments have also been cancelled during the pandemic, as health and social services have been reorganised on one hand, and clients have been afraid of contracting the virus during the appointment on the other. Due to the risk of infection, various low-threshold services, rehabilitation services and social and health care services organised for groups have been temporarily shut down. Slowing down the epidemic has taken precedence over the prevention of many other diseases and non-urgent treatment. The emergency conditions underline the fundamental right to adequate healthcare services for those who belong to a risk group or are otherwise vulnerable.

Older people are at a particularly vulnerable position during the coronavirus crisis. According to the responses to the Ministry of Justice surveys, concerns have risen particularly among older people who have contracted the disease and how they receive the help and support they need. In addition to concrete issues, the concerns have been related to mental coping and taking care of mental health. There are also particularly vulnerable groups among older people, such as older people living alone and those belonging to sexual and gender minorities. According to the responses, the concerns related to older people belonging to sexual and gender minorities are concerned with that as these groups are already more likely to suffer from loneliness than other groups, the emergency conditions can further impair their mental health and wellbeing. While the restrictive measures can safeguard the right of older people to health, they can have a negative impact on the right of older people to participate in social activities laid down in the reformed European Social Charter, for instance. (EAPN 2020)

The categorical bans on visits to service housing and other residential units by social welfare services during the pandemic have led to strong restrictions on the right to family life and personal freedom of older people, persons with disabilities and their family members living in the units for the purpose of ensuring safety. The Parliamentary Ombudsman has pointed out that when imposing restrictions on

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visits, the necessity and proportionality of the restrictions must be assessed on an individual basis and alternative means of preventing the spread of the virus must be sought. During the pandemic, decisions on special measures related to coronavirus, especially in housing units, have often been mass decisions made without the required individual consideration and consultation the parties concerned. (EOA 2020b)

In spring 2020, the Government obligated people over 70 years of age to avoid contact with other people as far as possible. This restriction concerning one group was considered discriminatory, and both the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman and the Parliamentary Ombudsman issued their opinion on it. According to the opinions, this was an operating instruction issued by the Government and not a binding regulation, and the recommendation could therefore not be considered to be discriminatory against people over the age of 70. However, as a government press release on the matter included the word “obligation”, individual persons over 70 years of age may have justifiably perceived the instructions to be legally binding. The Ombudsman stressed that to avoid discriminatory treatment based on age, it is necessary to continuously assess the recommended measures as well as issues such as whether the age limit should be changed or whether it is necessary to set an age limit in the first place. (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman 2020c, EOA 2020a)

Similarly as the older people in the majority population, older people with a foreign background suffer from being isolated and belonging to a risk group. According to a report by the JADE Action Centre, older people with a foreign background also had special additional concerns arising from their own situation, such as language, cross-border relationships, migration background, minority status and invisibility in services for the elderly, which all have an impact during the exceptional time. In their day-to-day lives, older people with a foreign background are mostly assisted by their close relatives, relatives and organisations. Accord-

ing to the JADE Action Centre, this results in a particular concern arising in relation to older people who do not have relatives in Finland. Not all older people with a foreign background have the capacity or resources to find or make use of the services available to older people in society or the help provided by the authorities during the pandemic. (JADE 2020)

The coping of informal carers has also been put to the test during the epidemic. For example, the statutory leaves for informal carers have not been realised satisfactorily in all regions. If inadequate support persists, it may pose a significant threat to the health of informal carers. It is important to investigate the wellbeing and coping of informal carers in municipalities and ensure arrangements for their statutory leaves. (THL 2021a)

Reception centres, shelters and other facilities where people reside close to one another are particularly vulnerable to coronavirus transmissions. Asylum seekers, and the residents and staff of shelters have raised concerns about maintaining hygiene and ensuring social isolation under these circumstances. People living in various closed institutions, such as prisons, advanced-level psychiatric wards or detention units operating under the Finnish Immigration Service, form a particularly vulnerable group. The Criminal Sanctions Agency has prepared guidelines that significantly restrict the everyday lives of prisoners during the coronavirus pandemic. (Scientific Panel 2020)

The rehabilitation of people with disabilities was interrupted in spring 2020 due to emergency conditions. According to NGOs, this posed a risk to the functional capacity of persons with disabilities and may have also led to permanent decline in functioning. Indeed, in their responses to the Ministry of Justice surveys, the disability organisations reported that, alongside rehabilitation, the functionality and continuity of the maintenance, fitting and repairs of assistive devices must be ensured, even under emergency conditions. In spring 2020, many municipalities suspended their assistive device maintenance, repair and fitting

service. Interruptions in the maintenance, repairs and fittings of assistive devices affect the functional capacity of people with disabilities and cause problems related to activities such as working and studying. Unsuitable assistive devices, such as an unsuitable wheelchair, may also cause health problems or complications. Suspending maintenance, repair and fitting of assistive devices is during the coronavirus pandemic is likely to cause backlog in the services later.

According to a study by the Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities, the independent movement of people with disabilities outside their homes decreased and their sphere of life narrowed down during the pandemic. At the same time, they became increasingly dependent on persons close to them. As many as 74 per cent of the survey respondents reported that they spent less time outside their homes in 2020. Meanwhile, 22 per cent of the respondents reported that the outbreak had not affected the amount of time they spent outside their homes. Only four per cent of respondents had increased their physical activity. The coronavirus pandemic narrowed down the sphere of life of people of disabilities to a point that they mainly spent time outside their homes when leaving their home to buy groceries. Remote work and studies also reduced movement. Many of the responses also reflected a fear of spending time outside the home. For example, wheelchair users avoided visiting shopping centres where safe distances are not always ensured. By contrast, outdoor activities remained at the previous level or even increased. People with disabilities mostly engaged in outdoor activities in their own garden or near their home. They aimed to maintain their functional capacity by watching exercise programmes on TV. Many respondents had cut down their social relationships during the pandemic, and some reported that they had isolated themselves from the outside world. The independence and personal initiative of people with disabilities decreased, as an increasing share of people with disabilities were dependent on their family and friends in contexts such as getting a ride as taxi services or public transport were not seen as a sufficiently safe way to get around. (Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities 2021b)

COVID-19 vaccinations started at the beginning of 2021 raised concerns about how and in what order different population groups would be vaccinated. For example, disability organisations expressed concern about how to safeguard vaccines for persons with disabilities. According to the organisations, permanent and

severe disabilities must be taken into account in the priority list for vaccination, as sitting in a wheelchair or other serious physical impairment of functional capacity significantly reduces lung function. Vaccination arrangements should therefore pay particular attention to people with the most severe disabilities who rely on personal assistance, live in their own homes 24 hours a day or in sheltered housing units. In addition, personal assistants for persons with disabilities and staff of housing units with intellectual disabilities are in a particularly critical position in relation to vaccinations. The disability organisations have also called for more detailed and easy-to-read information on the schedule and arrangements for the vaccine rollout. (Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities 2021a)

The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman issued a statement to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health on the application of the principle of equality to possible regional targeting of coronavirus vaccines when planning the targeting of vaccinations to the country’s worst-affected areas. The Ombudsman noted that the principle of equality does not, as such, prevent the targeting of vaccinations or other health care measures when this equalises the risks to human health caused by the pandemic. These risks may be related to complications caused by a virus for people of different ages or with various diseases, to the risk of contracting the disease of people working in different tasks, or to the risk of disease caused by regional variation in the prevalence of the virus. However, different treatment based on issues such as a person’s place of residence must meet the requirements laid down in the Constitution of Finland and the Non-Discrimination Act. At the same time, it should be shown that this regional targeting is likely to prevent further spread of the infectious disease and therefore protect human health and the carrying capacity of the health system more effectively than more even vaccine rollout covering the entire population could ensure. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman stressed that if there is no evidence of this, the prohibition of discrimination prevents targeting vaccines to specific regions. (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman 2021c)

Concern about the coping of families with children increased

In the assessments of the respondents to the Social Barometer 2020 survey, most concern was raised related to young people and families with children with support needs. 49 per cent of all respondents expressed most concern about young people in need of support in their region and 48 per cent of respondents about the children and families with children in need of support. The situation of families with children in need of support increased by 15 percentage points compared to the previous year.

According to a working group appointed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, there is a risk that the coronavirus crisis will increase the inequality and exclusion of children and young people. The duration and quality of the restrictive measures must be carefully assessed, especially in relation to children and families with children. Although all children and young people are affected by the coronavirus epidemic, the duration and extent of the effects vary. The negative impacts will also accumulate for vulnerable young people. Such groups include children and young people whose family's livelihood has been affected by the crisis, children and young people with disabilities and long-term illnesses, children and young people placed outside the home, and children and young people whose families have mental health or substance abuse problems. The exceptional situation has also put a strain on parents, which increases the need for support for parenthood. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2020b)

In a survey conducted by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters for families with children (2020), 43 per cent of the respondents reported that the coronavirus outbreak had caused mental strain and related problems. The second most common challenges are related to combining remote work with child care and combining remote work with distance education. About a quarter of all respondents identified problems related to these tasks. For some families, reconciling children's needs and remote work has turned out to be nearly impossible. The lack of hobbies and meaningful activities for children and not being able to spend time with friends has further aggravated the burden. The situation has been particularly strenuous in families with several children of different ages. In families, under-school-age children need care and company, while schoolchildren need help in coping with their school exercises, as the practices of different schools in supporting children's learning seem to vary greatly accord-

ing to the survey. The results indicate that the support for children in need of special support from the school has been insufficient based on the parents' views.

Less than half of the respondents (40%) estimated that their personal coping would be worse in the future than currently. This was also the case with parents with no prior difficulties. The situation is the most worrying for that one third of the respondents who struggled to cope with the coronavirus crisis and whose future also appears distressing and problems are continuing. These families have accumulated problems and face challenges in their day-to-day lives, which the coronavirus situation has intensified. The greatest concerns are related to exhaustion, the escalation of inter-family relationships and having already spread oneself too thin already. (The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters 2020)

The replies to the Ministry of Justice surveys emphasised that children and young people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable during emergency conditions. For example, short-term care and children's personal assistance services have been either cancelled or reduced to a minimum, and parents in gainful employment have had to stay at home with their children, as some children with disabilities are at risk. Supporting remote education has been particularly demanding for the parents of children with disabilities. The exhaustion of parents may have long-term effects on the wellbeing of children with disabilities and their possibilities to live in their families.

Many of the support services needed by children with disabilities and their families have been cancelled or reduced to a minimum in the exceptional situation brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. The impact of the strain caused by the state of emergency on the situation of families with children with disabilities has already been visible in the early stages of the pandemic. The treatment of many children with disabilities has become considerably more binding and demanding, which may have long-term effects on both children with disabilities and their families.

Children placed in care are also vulnerable, and the coronavirus and the related restrictive measures are more clearly reflected on their wellbeing, mental health, realisation of rights and the availability of services compared to many other groups of people. Children placed in care often suffer from mental health problems and the coronavirus pandemic has made it difficult for them to



get help. Reducing child protection services and replacing in-person appointments with remote ones have further impaired the welfare of vulnerable children as a result of the poorer availability of services. At the same time, the need for assistance has increased, both in Finland and globally: restrictive measures and an increase in financial problems have put a strain on children, families with children and the child welfare service system. The crisis has caused feelings of fear, concern and uncertainty in children. It may not be as easy to talk about these feelings to a professional via a remote connection as in a face-to-face encounter. (Nelimarkka et al. 2021)

40 per cent of the municipalities that responded to a municipal survey commissioned by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and the Central Union for Child Welfare estimated that the number of child welfare clients had increased due to the coronavirus pandemic, and 47 per cent reported an increase in the number of child welfare notifications. The circumstances of families with a client relationship with child welfare services have become clearly more difficult in the majority of municipalities. Up to 63 per cent

municipalities estimated that children's mental health problems had increased compared to the time before the coronavirus epidemic. Similarly, 55 per cent of municipalities estimated that parents had more mental health problems than before. (THL 2021b)

In 2020, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman was contacted because of difficulties in family reunification related to the coronavirus pandemic. In Finland, it has been increasingly difficult for persons under international protection and their family members to even submit an application for a residence permit on the basis of family ties. In particular, travel restrictions, long distances to missions and the requirement of legal residence in the country where the mission is located have created almost insurmountable obstacles to the reunification of many families. The partial or complete lockdown of mission services has delayed and complicated the processing of the cases of many family members. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman has considered it essential to take any measures necessary to eliminate obstacles to family reunification.

Distance learning undermines the equal implementation of education

In March 2020, hundreds of thousands of comprehensive school pupils, general upper secondary school pupils and vocational school pupils moved to distance education due to the restrictive measures taken to combat coronavirus. Since then, distance learning has been continuing in various ways at different levels of education and in different parts of Finland. In addition, some pupils, students and staff has been participating in distance education due to corona exposure for the time required by quarantining.

Distance learning for schoolchildren requires parents to have competence in using different software so that they can support their children as necessary and follow their school performance. This poses particular challenges to parents with an immigrant background, especially if they have poor Finnish skills. Families may also lack the devices required for distance learning, which means that children of families with an immigrant background do not have equal opportunities to participate in and manage distance learning. According to the replies to the Ministry of Justice survey, there is a lot of variation in how the distance education for schoolchildren with an immigrant background has been running, which indicates challenges in the equal provision of education. Inadequate digital and language skills and the lack of necessary devices also pose a challenge to the distance learning for adults who have immigrated to Finland.

In a survey by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), the responses of around one third of education providers, principals in basic education and teachers in basic education indicated that the impacts and challenges of the exceptional teaching arrangements on the realisation of equality and non-discrimination have been similar at different levels of education. The responses of education providers (13%), principals in basic education (24%) and teachers in basic education (14%) and general upper secondary education (16%) estimated that the lack of information technology devices or an internet connection had impaired the equal implementation of distance education for all learners. The open answers by education providers (16%), principals in basic education (9%), and teachers in basic education (21%) and general upper secondary education (35%) indicated that the lack of contact teaching had undermined the realisation of equality, especially among pupils and students in need of support and those belonging to language minorities. (FINEEC 2020)

The biggest challenges in vocational education and training were considered to emerge in

the context of working life learning and competence demonstrations, support for capacities related to distance learning and special support. In universities and universities of applied sciences, the transition to distance learning was mainly successful, but according to the survey, it is important to pay special attention to the wellbeing of students, and the development of self-direction capabilities and the pedagogical competence of teaching staff needed in distance learning. According to the evaluation results, most support and additional resources are needed in strengthening the support for learning and competence in basic education and vocational education and training, and for pupil and student welfare. Problems that had already been identified before the pandemic, such as the availability of pupil and student welfare, were intensified during distance learning. Moreover, the importance of learning support for those in need was emphasised during emergency conditions, but not enough support was available. In vocational education and training, there was not enough guidance available for the transition to working life or further studies. (FINEEC 2020)

The development of learners' self-direction capabilities must be supported at all levels of education. Participants in the evaluation emphasised that it is important to keep monitoring the impacts of the exceptional teaching arrangements in the future, as possible impacts that cannot yet be perceived may only emerge in the coming academic years. (FINEEC 2020)

During 2020, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman received several contacts related to the special arrangements made to education and training as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. For instance, the ombudsman was contacted as a municipality had made a decision on the basis of national guidelines to limit distance education to those pupils who belong in a risk group for coronavirus. This decision excluded those pupils with a loved one belonging in a risk group from distance education. In a statement sent to the municipality, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Board of Education, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman considered that the municipality's practice and the underlying national guidelines may be indirectly discriminatory in a manner prohibited under the Non-Discrimination Act. Based on the statement by the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, the National Board of Education amended its guidelines, as a result of which the provision of distance education was also recommended for pupils who were

rightly absent from contact teaching because their family members belonged to a risk group for coronavirus. (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman 2020b)

The Government proposal on the temporary amendment of the Basic Education Act contained special arrangements on the basis of the health of pupils and their loved ones. Based on the statement of the Ombudsman for Non-Discrimination, the Government proposal was amended for these parts. In her statement, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman also drew attention to safeguarding the rights of vulnerable children in any pandemic situation. The ombudsman considered the proposed policy on the stronger right of pupils in grades 1-3 and pupils in need of special support for contact teaching to be justified. At the same time, however, processes should be prepared to enable schools to move to distance education also for vulnerable children if the infectious disease situation so requires. The Ombudsman emphasised the importance of cooperation between educational institutions and families in connection with making special arrangements. (Non-Discrimination Ombudsman 2020a)

Non-discrimination ombudsman received several contacts related to the special arrangements made to education and training as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

Based on a contact by a customer, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman also took a stand on the mask recommendation for teachers. The wearing of masks by teachers may harm the ability of students with a hearing impairment to follow teaching. The National Board of Education supplemented its recommendation for masks based on the statement by the ombudsman: teachers would be advised to wear a visor or a mask with a clear window in classes with a pupil with a hearing impairment who should be given an opportunity to see the teacher's face. (National Board of Education 2021)

Arrangements for entrance examinations different from initial plans had to be made in summer 2020, and some of these involved changing the admissions quota. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman examined several student admissions procedures at universities and universities of applied sciences. The ombudsman did not find actual discrimination in these cases, even though she drew attention to the arrangements for some entrance examinations and made recommendations for their more equal implementation.



The time of the coronavirus pandemic has been particularly challenging for young people

The restrictions imposed during the coronavirus pandemic have had a particularly strong impact on young people. More than one third of the students lost their summer jobs in 2020 and many students' graduation was postponed due to the pandemic. In summer 2020, around one quarter of the employed under 25 years of age were unemployed. According to a study by the University of Jyväskylä, 40 per cent of people aged between 18 and 25 were concerned about the impact of the restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic on their mental wellbeing. Concerns related to livelihood and career were also highlighted in young people's responses: 45 per cent were concerned about their career. (Wilska et al. 2020)

In the #MPkorona online survey, 68 per cent of the 13–19-year-old respondents reported that coronavirus had brought worries or problems to their lives or exacerbated previous ones. The most common emotions and problems caused by the coronavirus epidemic included feeling anxious (72% of respondents), excessive use of the internet, social media or mobile phone (69%), boredom (68%) and loneliness (64%). More than half of the respondents experienced a lack of energy (58%), challenges related to school attendance (56%) and fatigue (56%). Other common emotions included problems concentrating (48%), mood swings (45%) and problems with sleeping (40%). It was particularly worrying that 13 per cent of young people with worries or problems reported having self-destructive thoughts. 2,200 young people across Finland responded to the online survey in April 2020. (Allianssi 2020)

However, according to the #MPkorona survey, the effects of coronavirus on young people have been highly polarised. Nearly half of the respondents also felt that good things had occurred in their lives as a result of the time of the coronavirus pandemic. In the respondents' open answers, positive experiences were most commonly related to a lighter workload caused by studies, an increase in meaningful leisure time, and a reduction of stress. On the other hand, the exact same things, i.e. distance learning and a break from recreational activities, were a significant source of stress and concern for some young people. (Allianssi 2020)

The effects of social isolation are also negative for transgender children and young people whose peer support has been interrupted when it has not been possible to organise group activities. Problems may have emerged for LGBTI youths as a result of having an already infected situation at home before the crisis. According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare's 2019 School Health Promotion study, a worrying number of LGBTI youths experience mental and physical violence from

their parents. According to the results of the School Health Promotion study, concerns related to mood are almost twice as common among LGBTI youths than other young people. Two out of three young people belonging to sexual minorities and around 60 per cent of those belonging to gender minorities had expressed concern about their mood during the year before the survey. In addition, anxiety and depression symptoms were almost three times more common among LGBTI youth than in other young people, and about one in five LGBTI youths felt that their health was average or poor. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020)

In April 2020, the Save the Children organisation collected information on young people's experiences during the coronavirus pandemic. The responses indicate that, compared to all young people, LGBTI youth felt clearly more often stressed (66%/all young people 54%), anxious (63%/49%) and depressed (49%/33%) due to the exceptional circumstances related to the coronavirus epidemic. (Lehtonen 2020)

68%

of 13-19-year-olds reported that coronavirus has made them worry or caused problems in their lives

56%

of 13-19-year-olds were experiencing challenges related to school attendance

40%

of 18-25-year-olds were concerned about the impact of the restrictions on their mental wellbeing

60%

of young people belonging to gender minorities were concerned about their mood

49%

of young LGBTI people were experiencing anxiety

Livelihoods deteriorated, particularly among those in the most vulnerable position

The impacts on the employment of the coronavirus crisis have been most severe in the service sectors dominated by women, and, of all age groups, in young people 15–24 years old. In the age group of young people, the employment situation of women also deteriorated more significantly than that of men. The number of lay-offs started to grow sharply as soon as the crisis broke out in March 2020: the number was three times higher than in February. The number of lay-offs was highest in April, after which the number of it decreased sharply and stabilised in August. (Statistics Finland 2020)

The coronavirus epidemic has had a particularly significant impact on the livelihoods and wellbeing of those who were already in different socio-economically difficult positions before the pandemic. These people include those in need of social assistance, mental health and substance abuse rehabilitees, homeless people and working-age people with a foreign background. (Kestilä et al. 2020) The coronavirus outbreak has treated household rather unequally, which is reflected in the highly different trends in wages and social benefits. The wages and salaries received by households decreased by 0.4 per cent in 2020 in nominal terms, while the unemployment benefits paid increased by 38 per cent. (Statistics Finland 2021)

Making a livelihood is particularly difficult for many people in a vulnerable group in the exceptional situation caused by coronavirus. Many people with minority backgrounds are in uncertain employment relationships and there is a fear that the coronavirus crisis will further damage their position. For foreigners, especially third-country nationals, the termination of employment will also have a direct impact on issues such as the continuation of the right of residence. The other economic impacts of the lay-offs and the coronavirus pandemic on different population groups should be investigated in more detail in the future.

For the first time during the coronavirus pandemic, the number of foreign and non-Finnish-speaking unemployed jobseekers (44%) grew significantly faster than the number of Finnish unemployed jobseekers (39%) when examining the statistics of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEE) in October 2020. According to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, the number of foreign and non-Finnish-speaking unemployed jobseekers has risen at almost the same rate as the number of all unemployed jobseekers in the

longer term. The growth of both foreign and foreign-language-speaking unemployed jobseekers has been highest in Uusimaa and Åland.

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the work activities for persons with intellectual disabilities were interrupted, and at the same time the payment of the related incentive pay was cancelled. While the remuneration paid for the work activities is very small, it is significant to a person with no other income. The termination of paying the incentive pay due to the coronavirus outbreak has not been compensated for in any way. (THL 2020, HRC 2020)

The time of the coronavirus pandemic has made it significantly more difficult for the families of children and young people with disabilities to make ends meet. When schools transitioned to distance education in spring 2020, many parents of children and young people with disabilities had to leave work to take care of their children. The parents could apply for a temporary allowance from the Social Insurance Institution of Finland to cover the loss of income caused by unpaid leave. The payment of the allowance related to the epidemic was stopped when the schools moved back to contact teaching in May. The financial situation of those parents who have not dared to take their children to school due to a risk of infection has remained difficult. (Inclusion Finland KVTL 2020a and 2020b)

The economic decline, the increase in unemployment and the collapse of household income increase the need for forms of support such as food aid. The coronavirus crisis saw many people resorting to food aid for the first time, and the number of customers in food aid has risen since the beginning of the pandemic. In the 2020 Social Barometer, three out of four social workers reported an increase in the need for food assistance. However, the restrictive measures have challenged the operating methods of food distribution and caused problems in the availability of surplus food. Food aid distribution has been interrupted at least temporarily due to restrictions on gatherings, or people have avoided lines to food banks out of a fear of a coronavirus infection. In addition, a significant number of both food aid distributors and customers are older people or members of other risk groups. As the state of emergency continued, there was an increasing concern for homeless people and substance abusers, who already needed regular food assistance before the coronavirus outbreak. Their situation dete-

The crisis has particularly affected families with children in need of special support.

riorated further, and many had not been able to wash themselves or eaten warm meals for up to several months. (Laihiala & Nick 2020)

According to the Central Union for Child Welfare (2020), the coronavirus crisis complicated the day-to-day lives and livelihoods of many families with children. The crisis particularly affected families with children in need of special support. According to the report, the number of families with children experiencing scarcity doubled as a result of the coronavirus crisis. An earlier study indicated that even before the coronavirus crisis, as many as 40 per cent of the recipients of food aid were families with children, and they resorted to food aid more

regularly than other customer groups. (Laihiala & Nick 2020)

In the households of low-income families, food expenditure has increased considerably, as the entire family's meals have been arranged at home instead of at school, day care centres or workplaces. The responses to the survey conducted by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters (2020) reveal how important the free lunch offered at schools and day-care centres and affordable workplace meals are for families. While some families were able to obtain food aid in their distressing situation, this is not a permanent solution.

Availability of services must also be ensured at times of crisis

The coronavirus epidemic changed both the production of social and health services and the use of the services among the population. The provision of services was reduced as previously agreed appointments were cancelled and fewer care appointments were booked. People also sought medical attention less frequently than previously. In specialised medical care, significantly less care has been provided in 2020 compared to the previous years on average. Some of the patients in need of care have been left without the planned treatment and have been forced to wait for the treatment longer than would be appropriate. Many risk groups were excluded from services in spring 2020 or left without services when personal services and group activities were restricted. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020)

The responses to the Ministry of Justice stakeholder surveys noted that equality should be taken into account in the preparedness plans of the state, regional administration and municipalities so that different population groups could be taken into account so that their fundamental and human rights would not be violated during a state of emergency.

During the first restrictive measures introduced in spring 2020, there was a decline in the use of domestic violence shelters and helplines.

This led to a backlog in service needs, which was reflected, among other things, in a significant increase in the use of helplines after the spring. Services intended for the victims of violence have provided indications that controlling violence has increased during the coronavirus pandemic. There was a clear increase in seeking help to violent situations from chat services. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2021)

Based on the responses from the Ministry of Justice survey, there is a cause of concern in the availability of official services. As education, rehabilitation, therapy and other services were largely moved online, the daily lives of many persons with disabilities or persons living with mental health disorders, for instance, have become significantly more difficult. Many of the services provided by the authorities have moved online, which makes it difficult for people with insufficient language skills and digital skills to access the services. Many official services require strong electronic identification, but not everyone has the codes required for this purpose. Many service providers have also begun offering their services through the telephone. Telephone services are often subject to a fee, which makes the use of the services more difficult for people in a dire financial situation.

Official processes have become prolonged

during the crisis. There is a lot of uncertainty associated with the continuation of processes, which causes stress and depression in the persons involved. For example, the survey responses highlighted the prolongation of criminal proceedings and asylum processes, and uncertainty related to the continuation of long-term health care processes, such as the that of treatments related to gender reassignment. The exceptional situation caused by the coronavirus outbreak has also affected the operations of transgender clinics: while many appointments have been moved online, but some have had to be cancelled completely. In addition, there have been difficulties in using interpreter services remotely, which has complicated the availability of services for those needing these.

56 per cent of the municipalities and joint municipal authorities that responded to the survey estimated that access to educational services and pupil welfare services had become more difficult at least to some extent during the coronavirus pandemic. Access to child and youth psychiatry services, on the other hand, was estimated to have become somewhat more difficult in at least 62 per cent of municipalities and joint municipal authorities. While some of the problems related to the services have already been detected before the pandemic, but the exceptional period has clearly exacerbated the situation. (THL 2021b)

So-called undocumented persons, i.e. those living in Finland without a right of residence, are in a particularly challenging situation in terms of their access to health services. The situation is particularly difficult for this group as the service structure has changed and the services have been partly moved online. Due to the coronavirus situation, the Finnish Immigration Service issued a recommendation that reception services should be continued for all asylum seekers from whom they were about to expire under the Act on the Reception of Persons Applying for International Protection and on the Identification of and Assistance to Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings. The recommendation expired at the end of August 2020, resulting in many no longer receiving the services. In August 2020, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health recommended that municipalities and joint municipal authorities do not charge a fee for the coronavirus testing or treatment of homeless people, such as undocumented individuals. (Kuntainfo 8/2020) The ministry's 2021 information sheet to municipalities instructed providing those temporarily residing in Finland with a coronavirus vaccine free of charge. (Kuntainfo 1/2021)

According to disability organisations, the maintenance, repair and fitting of assistive

devices for persons with disabilities has ceased in some places. For example, no arrangements were made for the fitting of a new wheelchair even though this is vital for a person with a disability. Transport services for persons with disabilities have also deteriorated in some countries. Some municipalities have recommended that people with disabilities over the age of 70 should not use transport services. On the other hand, some taxi entrepreneurs have stopped their operations, as the number of journeys has decreased significantly due to the pandemic. In spring 2020, municipalities closed some of their services for persons with disabilities or restricted their use. The implementation of individual services and services to replace them varied by municipality. The cancellation of day and work activities had significant impacts, as appropriate day-time activities offer interaction and meaningful activities for persons with disabilities. (Finnish Disability Forum 2020).

As the coronavirus pandemic spread, those over 70 years of age and other risk groups were urged to remain in quarantine-like conditions. At the same time, the work of informal carers became increasingly binding, as it was not necessarily possible to temporary care during informal carers' leaves. As a result, people had less contact with others and fewer opportunities for spending time outdoors. The assistance and support normally provided by loved ones was interrupted or reduced, and there was less support organised by the municipality available than normally. At the same time, the service needs of older people in particular grew as a result of increasing loneliness and insecurity and reduced functional capacity. Many had to rely on social assistance and/or use paid private services, such as the delivery services of shops or pharmacies. (Social Barometer 2020)

According to studies, the outlooks of children in substitute care of child welfare services are significantly poorer compared to other children when it comes to health, education and labour market status. During the coronavirus pandemic, there has been particular growth in the demand for inpatient treatment, which has caused shortages of substitute care facilities and skilled staff. With the emergency conditions continuing and in the post-pandemic efforts, it is important to pay attention to supporting the children placed in care and allocating sufficient resources to substitute care to prevent the already strained situation from culminating in a crisis. (Scientific Panel 2020)

Fear and uncertainty feed hate speech



There has also been an increase in hate speech during the state of emergency related to coronavirus. As communications and information provision have moved online in increasing amounts, hate speech has increased, especially on social media channels. The crisis situation has also been estimated to feed people's feelings of fear and uncertainty, which, in turn, has been erupted as hate speech and other attacks, especially against minorities. For instance, according to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), discrimination and hate speech against minorities such as the Roma have increased, especially online across Europe. (FRA 2020)

In particular, people with an Asian background have encountered racism around the world, which is because the coronavirus began to spread from China. The American Stop AAPI Hate -organisation reported that it had received more than 2,800 reports of violence or discrimination against individuals of Asian origin in the United States between March and August 2020. 70 per cent of the cases were targeted against women, and 38 per cent of

the cases had occurred in business premises, such as grocery shops. (Stop AAPI Hate 2020) In February 2020, the Helsingin Sanomat and the Finnish Broadcasting Company reported that the Chinese people living in Finland had encountered inappropriate behaviour related to the coronavirus outbreak. For example, people with Chinese background had been yelled at related to coronavirus and asked to stay further away. (HS 2020, Yle 2020)

Sexual and gender minorities had also been subject to more hate speech and other inappropriate treatment than before. According to the responses of the stakeholder survey of the Ministry of Justice, image manipulations have been distributed on social media in an effort to stir hatred towards sexual and gender minorities. According to the ILGA Europe 2021 report, the year of the coronavirus outbreak has resulted in an increasingly difficult situation of sexual and gender minorities across Europe due to issues such as increased hate speech.

In December 2020, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare reported that the share of coronavirus infections is considerably high

among foreign language speakers compared to the rest of the population, as 25 per cent of them had been infected, even though they only account for 8 per cent of the total population. (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020b) The media also reported of a particularly high rate of coronavirus infections and related deaths in the Somali community in Helsinki. The news stirred up fears of stigma and more negative attitudes among the Somali community. Many of the people with Somali background in Helsinki work in visible customer service professions, which makes them vulnerable to hate speech and discrimination.

The crisis may also create opportunities to improve and advance cooperation and trust both within immigrant communities and between them and the rest of society.

According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, the reason for the higher proportion of foreign language speakers in infections is, for example, that they usually live in larger cities where there are also more infections. Exposure to the virus is also affected by more cramped living arrangements and larger family sizes compared to the rest of the population. There were fears that the situation would stir negative attitudes towards foreign-language speakers. As a result, the authorities in cities such as Helsinki aimed to communicate that the issue should not be overly simplified as an immigrant issue. Instead, the problem should be tackled by means such as improving the information provision about coronavirus among foreign-language speakers. In fact, discussion events on the topic were held with immigrant organisations and communities, and advice on coronavirus was provided in residential areas with a particularly large number of people with immigrant backgrounds. (THL 2020b)

In its recommendations of July 2020, Equinet, the European Network of Equality Bodies, noted that there should be no discrimination and hate speech related to the crisis in public institutions and the media, nor any activity that could create discrimination and hate speech. These also include indirect discrimination, which involves taking seemingly neutral general measures that have disproportionate negative effects on certain population groups.

(Equinet 2020) The responses to the Ministry of Justice's stakeholder surveys also particularly called for the responsibility of decision-makers, political parties and other public agents to communicate in a manner that does not give rise to negative attitudes, especially towards vulnerable groups, in the potentially volatile crisis situation.

A study on the impact of the coronavirus epidemic on wellbeing among foreign born population (MigCOVID) by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare examined, among other things, the experiences of discrimination among immigrants during the coronavirus pandemic. 15 per cent of the respondents reported that they had been treated less respectfully than others, called names or verbally insulted, threatened or harassed. There was no significant difference between men and women (16% and 14%). During this period, experiences of discrimination were most common among people coming to Finland from Eastern Asia. Of them, 37 per cent gave an affirmative answer to the question. Experiences of discrimination were the second most common among immigrants from South-East Asia, of whom just over 23 per cent reported discrimination. Experiences of discrimination were nearly as common among those from the Middle East and North Africa. A significant share of those who had experienced different types of inappropriate treatment, threats or harassment reported an increase in these experiences during the coronavirus pandemic: 67 per cent of the respondents estimated that less respectful treatment had increased, 62 per cent felt that being called names had increased, and 50 per cent estimated that threats and harassment had become more common. (THL 2021c)

According to a study that examined the situation of people with immigrant backgrounds in Finland during the pandemic, the crisis can also create opportunities to improve and advance cooperation and trust both within immigrant communities and between them and the rest of society. However, this will require that the authorities create the necessary institutional conditions and reserve sufficient resources for the purpose. According to the study, effective cooperation with the authorities was considered particularly crucial for enabling different population groups to act in the best way to overcome the crisis. (Finell et al. 2020)

Recommendations for ensuring equality in the aftercare of the coronavirus pandemic

- The measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus and during post-crisis management must be examined particularly from the perspective of equality and especially from the perspective of vulnerable groups. Fundamental and human rights impacts must be assessed systematically.
- Consultation of different population groups, for example in connection with legislative projects, must also be ensured in the exceptional situation. The consultations must be organised in an equal and accessible manner.
- Official communications must be clear, timely and accessible to all. Particular attention must be paid to different language groups, persons with disabilities and older people in the planning of communications.
- Comprehensive information on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on equality concerning different population groups must be collected. This information must be used in the planning of the measures taken in response to the pandemic and its after-care to ensure that the situation of various population groups, especially vulnerable ones, can be taken into account as well as possible in advance.
- Organisations play an important role during a crisis, especially in helping and reaching out to different minority groups. The work and opportunities for taking action of organisations, associations and other citizen representatives must be supported during the exceptional situation. In addition, cooperation and trust between civil society and the administration must be developed on a long-term basis to enable acting together promptly when facing crises and exceptional situations.

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