

The Cruelty of Containment

The Mental Health Toll of the EU's 'Hotspot' Approach on the Greek Islands | December 2020
Executive Summary

Almost five years on from the establishment of five EU-funded Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) or 'hotspots'¹ on the Greek islands, nearly 15,000 people² remain stranded in these camps.

Having survived harrowing journeys to Europe, they find themselves trapped in dangerous, overcrowded and inhumane living conditions for months, and many for as long as two years. People who came in search of safety are instead further traumatised by their present and anxious about their future.

In September 2018, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) published 'Unprotected, Unsupported, Uncertain'.³ This report detailed the shortcomings at the heart of the EU's asylum and migration policies and their detrimental impact on the mental health of asylum-seekers living in Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. Two years later, this new IRC report finds that the situation has worsened significantly. It draws on fresh data spanning two and a half years to October 2020. The data was collected from 904 people supported by the IRC's mental health programmes on the islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, and is backed up by testimonies and interviews. This report sets out proposals for immediate action to improve the dire conditions they endure.

The IRC's research reveals consistent accounts of severe mental health conditions, including depression, post-

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In Afghanistan we were afraid of suicide bombers and I thought leaving there would be my salvation. But it is worse here... I even tried to hang myself but my son saw me and called my husband. I think about death a lot here: that it would be a good thing for the whole family.”

Fariba, 32-year old woman from Afghanistan, mother of two young children.
Vathy camp, Samos, Greece. September 2020

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and self-harm among people of all ages and backgrounds. As many as three out of four of the people the IRC has assisted through its mental health programme on the three islands reported experiencing symptoms such as sleeping problems, depression and anxiety. At least two out of five people reported symptoms of PTSD and nearly one in ten had psychotic symptoms and were self-harming. One in three people reported suicidal thoughts, while one in five reported having made attempts to take their lives.

The report demonstrates how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the suffering of already vulnerable asylum-seekers and exposed the many flaws



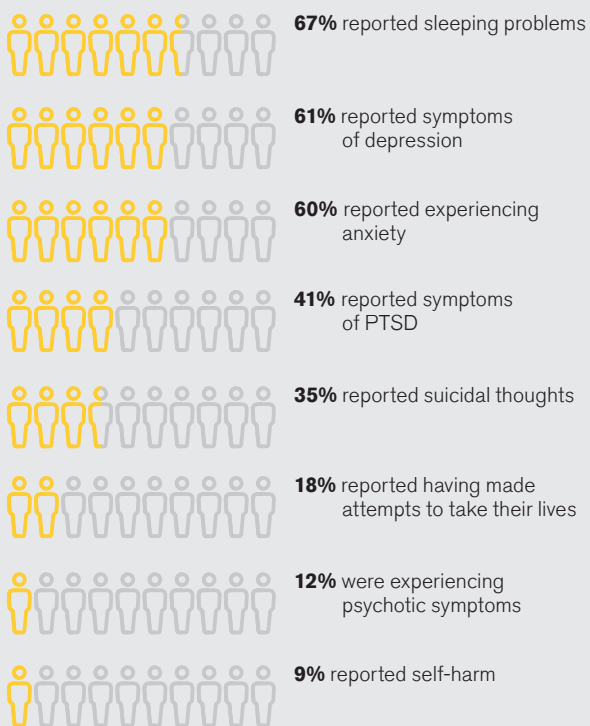
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I've never lived this type of life because imagine, you sleep outside in tents, with rats. It was very difficult.”

Baimba, 24-year old man from Sierra Leone.
VIAL camp, Chios island, Greece. October 2020.

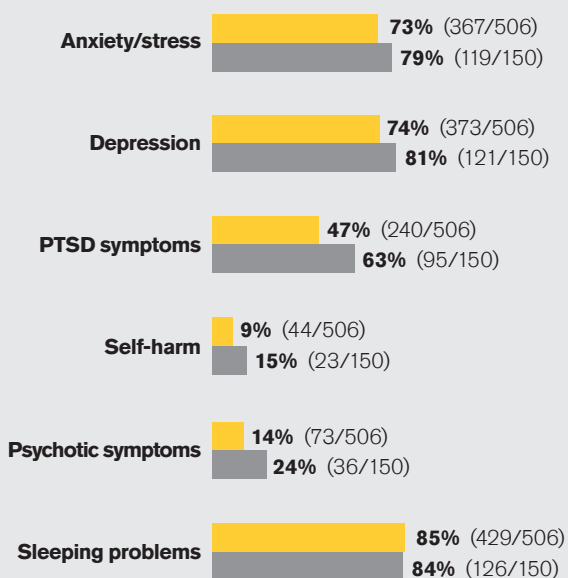
Mental health symptoms

Of the 904 people IRC provided counselling to on Lesbos, Chios and Samos...



Mental health symptoms of people served by the IRC, pre- and post- lockdown

Pre-lockdown (506 people)
Post-lockdown (150 people)



in Europe's asylum and reception system. The data reveals a marked deterioration in the mental health of people in the camps following the initial COVID-19 lockdown measures and movement restrictions, which were stricter than those applied to the rest of the population in Greece. There was an alarming spike in the number of people who disclosed psychotic symptoms, jumping from one in seven (14%) to almost one in four (24%). There was also a sharp rise in people reporting symptoms of PTSD, which climbed from close to half (47%) of people beforehand to almost two in three people (63%) and in disclosures of self-harm, which jumped by 66%.

At the roots of this crisis are longstanding and unresolved political and policy failures at both the Greek and EU levels. EU member states' inability to agree on a fair system of shared responsibility has been compounded by the prioritisation of deterrence and border control above upholding the right to seek asylum and the human rights, dignity and wellbeing of those in search of protection. Policies of containment put in place to implement the EU-Turkey Statement, coupled with persistent gaps in the Greek state response to provide adequate reception and accommodation and effectively process asylum claims, are clearly harming asylum-seekers arriving at Greek shores.⁴ This approach is also taking a serious toll on local communities. Increasingly frustrated with the deteriorating situation on their islands, people once hailed for their warm welcome and support, have begun to target those seeking asylum and those who assist them, often actively encouraged by far-right activists.⁵

Urgent action is required. After several years of deadlock, the forthcoming negotiations following the publication of the EU's Pact on Asylum and Migration are Europe's last window of opportunity to put in place a fair and sustainable system that works in the interests of both new arrivals and local communities. Announcing the Pact, Commission President Von der Leyen pledged to achieve a balance between solidarity and responsibility and to ensure that Europe manages migration in a humane and effective way. There is some way to go to make this a reality.

The Pact includes some positive steps forward, but there are also elements that risk taking us in the opposite direction. New screening procedures before an asylum claim can be lodged could mean longer waiting times for people at processing centres, while increased grounds for detention could allow such centres to become closed camps. There continues to be a strong focus on preventing people from arriving in Europe through irregular channels, but very little on establishing safe and legal pathways. Critically, the absence of an automatic relocation mechanism means large numbers of people will continue to be trapped in Greece. The current construction of new compounds on the Greek islands in partnership with the EU, coupled with the

proposals above, all suggest a continuation of the current containment model. Indeed, mandatory border screening could mean more camps on Europe's borders – not less.

The inhumane facilities on the Greek islands should never have existed and must not be the blueprint for the EU's future approach to forced migration. The European Commission's vocal acknowledgement of the crisis at Europe's borders is welcome, but refugees and asylum-seekers trapped in dreadful conditions need more than words. They need protection that includes the enforcement of existing legal provisions by states that receive them. They need to be treated with dignity, whatever the outcome of their asylum claim. They also need safe and legal routes to reach Europe. Without this, women, men and children, of all ages and backgrounds, will continue to suffer needlessly, with their resilience diminished and their mental health harmed as a result of Europe's response to forced migration.

This year, 495 unaccompanied children from the Greek islands were successfully relocated to EU member states following the onset of the pandemic. Efforts were also made to transfer people following the fires that ripped through Moria camp.⁶ These measures are proof that political will and coordinated action can transform the lives of people held in the island camps. As negotiations on the Pact begin, the stories in this report that testify to the ongoing cruelty of containment should give pause for renewed reflection on the need for true solidarity and responsibility-sharing in Europe.



Cumulative stress, such as that which the people in the camps are forced to endure, has been associated with weakened immune systems and chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease. Simply put, life in the camps can destroy your health."

Dr. Georgia Karoutzou, IRC's Senior Mental Health Manager since April 2020

References

- 1 In this report, the terms RICs (Reception and Identification Centres) and hotspots are used interchangeably.
- 2 There were 14,608 people as of 4 December 2020. Source: <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/11344/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-03-12-2020/?lang=en>
- 3 International Rescue Committee (IRC), 2018, 'Unprotected, Unsupported, Uncertain', IRC report, Available at: <https://www.rescue-uk.org/report/unprotected-unsupported-uncertain>
- 4 International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) & Oxfam, 2017, 'The reality of the EU-Turkey statement: How Greece has become a testing ground for policies that erode protection for refugees', Joint Agency Report, Available at: <https://www.rescue.org/report/reality-eu-turkey-statement-how-greece-has-become-testing-ground-policies-erode-protection>
- 5 Refugee Support Aegean (RSA), 18 March 2020, 'Timeline of attacks against solidarity', RSA Publication, Available at: <https://rsaegean.org/en/timeline-of-attacks-against-solidarity/>
- 6 International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 30 November 2020, 'Voluntary scheme for the relocation from Greece to other European countries', IOM Factsheet, Available at: https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/201204_0.pdf