

Beyond Temporary Shelters: Protecting homeless populations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the Municipality of Lima

To: Government of the Municipality of Lima, Republic of Peru

From: Lucciana Alvarez Ruiz, Daniela Britto Falcón, Jossie Fahsbender, Pankhuri Jha, Eki Ramadhan, Rohan Sandhu, and Montserrat Trujillo San Vicente; graduate students from the Master's in Public Administration and International Development at Harvard Kennedy School¹.

Date: July 31st, 2020.

Executive Summary

The pandemic and its accompanying policy responses, such as physical distancing, has increased the vulnerability of the homeless population in Lima. Despite the complexity of this phenomenon and the challenge to characterize it, this is an opportunity for the government to redefine their policy. Which are the possible strategies the government can take to keep aiding this vulnerable population? What type of assistance can be provided? What are the critical information gaps to create such strategy?

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Municipality of Lima deployed a quick response to provide shelter, food and basic healthcare to the homeless at "La Casa de Todos" by transforming a bull ring into an integrated facility designed to serve people living on the streets. The Municipality has been mulling over the plan to continue this temporary initiative over the long term through "La Casa de Todos del Futuro". Such endeavor requires adroit planning to ensure its effectiveness in addressing the pressing homelessness issue and its sustainability after the pandemic slows down.

We propose three strategies for addressing these problems:

- **Stakeholder-mapping followed by coordination between institutions is likely to aid vulnerable population living in the streets effectively and efficiently.** Given that institutions that provide care for homeless have been recently facing budgetary and capacity constraints rooted in lack of technology use and overly bureaucratic processes, coordination between the Municipal Government and the civil society organizations could allow all parties to 1) understand the challenges of the already existing institutions, 2) create

¹ We are thankful with Rema Hanna for her outstanding guidance and advice throughout the process to make this project possible. The Social Protection Study Group received valuable insights from Carlos Contreras as part of the Municipality of Peru. We further thank Claudia Caceres for her advice and generous time.

synergies between actors, 3) share information, 4) explore the possibility to direct public funds to relief budgetary constraints to provide assistance.

- **Collecting data on homelessness to ensure specific groups are not getting systematically missed could benefit the vulnerable populations the Government is trying to help.** Lack of information on the typology of homeless people, as well factors affecting their wellbeing and livelihoods, have led to ineffective, long-run policies. Evidence worldwide suggests that policies that address symptoms rather than root causes of homelessness have failed. Therefore, collecting systematic data on root causes is imperative to develop multi-targeted sustainable strategies.
- **Increasing resources to provide sanitary living conditions and hand washing facilities will improve the health conditions of the homeless and of the community.** While current evidence indicates that frequent and proper hand hygiene can serve as the best line of defense against the community spread of COVID-19, people experiencing unsheltered homelessness may not have access to sanitation services and a hand washing facility with water and soap to be able to protect themselves and others around them from the risk of infection. Therefore, an emergency response during the pandemic must involve immediately increasing public investments on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) by ensuring sanitary living conditions and access to handwashing facilities, accompanied by extensive information campaigns.

Context

La Casa de Todos

To address the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations in Lima, the municipal government, in collaboration with the Beneficence, has transformed the premier bullring in Lima into a temporary shelter for people experiencing homelessness called "La Casa de Todos"² (henceforth, La Casa). The shelter, which is divided into four isolated zones, currently houses about 90 people who were previously living on the streets of Lima's city center (Cercado de Lima and Rimac). While many residents are elderly or people with disabilities, other people in vulnerable conditions are not barred from accessing La Casa,

Around 60 workers, both professionals and volunteers, provide services to residents, such as food, protection, recreational activities, and health services (including COVID-19 tests and psychiatric examinations). The shelter also facilitates residents in accessing basic social services, such as a government cash transfer program in response to the pandemic and the Free Integrated Health System (SIS), for those who are not yet registered to those.

Demographics of residents³

Total residents	90 people
Women residents	83%
Age range	3 months – 90 years old
Average age	61
Median age	65
Residents above 60 years old	62%
Residents with disabilities	10%
Residents with no coverage of social services⁴	41%
Adult residents with less than secondary education	44%
Immigrant residents	10% (from Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Spain, and Venezuela)
Sources of income	peddling (37%), crafts making (16%), waste collection (13%)

² Spanish for "Everyone's House".

³ Data from the Municipality of Lima, analyzed by memo authors. Note that the current residents may not be representative of the whole homeless population in Lima.

⁴ Including SIS and ESSALUD.

Homelessness shelters beyond La Casa de Todos

The Municipality currently seeks to ensure the sustainability of La Casa by transforming the temporary shelter into a permanent "La Casa de Todos del Futuro"⁵ in collaboration with the Beneficence. This center will consist of a permanent shelter in the center of Lima for 120 people previously living on the streets, including those currently hosted in La Casa. The proposed center would also provide resources necessary to allow homeless people to reintegrate to their communities. **To implement this initiative, the Municipality would need to secure financial resources and support that could be maintained over time.** Beyond the 120 individuals who will be served by this program, there are still numerous homeless people living on the streets of Lima. They fall into four main groups, each with their own circumstances and challenges:

- People facing substance abuse problems, such as drug addiction and alcoholism;
- People with mental health disorders;
- Waste collectors; and
- Elderly and people with disabilities who have neither social support nor family support.

People of the first group tend to not access the temporary shelter out of choice because they refuse or are unable to comply with certain rules of coexistence. Meanwhile, people of the second group are directed to access facilities which can provide appropriate attention and services. The last two groups, especially the last ones, represent most of La Casa residents.

The challenge is even bigger in reaching to the people outside of Central Lima, primarily because there are no data available which could inform stakeholders on the number of homeless people, as well as their demographic characteristics, profiles, and locations.

Box 1: Addressing the vulnerabilities of the homeless: pitfalls in other contexts

Most countries have designed strong temporary measures to address the challenge – in ways similar to Lima, but the systemic issue of homelessness continues. The US is implementing a targeted intervention to **increase emergency housing facilities and testing for the homeless**, including taking over hotel rooms. However, there have been reports of outbreaks in existing emergency shelters across the US due to poor living conditions. Similarly, France created homeless isolation centers in major cities, but these

⁵ Spanish for "Everyone's House of the Future".

have not been adequate to address the challenge given shortcomings on adequate equipment and staff training.

Most developing countries are already overwhelmed with the crisis, and challenges related to homelessness have fallen by the wayside. Some city governments are taking a step to provide temporary solutions for the crisis, but these are mostly reactive in nature.

To strengthen the government's response to the sanitary emergency is crucial to guarantee minimum living conditions inside emerging shelters. Specific actions to consider include the following:

- Have supplies for staff, volunteers, and residents (soap, hand sanitizers, cloth face coverings and personal protective equipment).
- Provide training and educational materials on COVID-19 for staff and volunteers.
- Minimize the number of staff members who have face-to-face interactions with residents with any respiratory symptoms.
- Use physical barriers to protect staff who will have interactions with residents whose infection status is unknown.
- In meal service areas, create at least 6 feet of space between seats, or allow for residents to take food away.
- Make sure residents' faces are at least 6 feet apart in general sleeping areas.

Other vulnerable groups

A large proportion of **domestic migrants** live on the outskirts of the city or in satellite towns in extremely precarious conditions, without access to basic services. Having lost their sources of income, thousands of people from these households are unable to pay rent. Many must choose between living on the streets or returning to their hometown on foot. As part of the response to the pandemic, the Municipality has opened a center for migrant families in San Juan de Miraflores, which is expected to become a Community Center with temporary rooms for migrant families after the lockdown ends.

The second group comprises of **women and children victims of violence** who in many situations become homeless after escaping or being abandoned without any source of income. During the lockdown, a center for women was opened and it is also expected to become a permanent shelter. Other initiatives for them from the Ministry of Women and

Vulnerable Population include a hotline and emergency centers which provide support for women.

Meanwhile, domestic political pressure limits the ability of the Municipal government to direct resources to **migrants from Venezuela** at the expense of other vulnerable Peruvians. Instead, these migrants rely on support from the international community.

Key Challenges and Problem Analysis

Challenge #1: *Lack of coordination and overly bureaucratic process have furthered capacity constraints faced by each stakeholder working to serve homeless populations and prevented them from working together in collaboration instead of in silos.*

The municipal government has already built a relationship with institutions that provide aid to the homeless population. However, there is still room for deepening the communication channels and advocating for coordinated actions. Interactions between the government and the rest of the stakeholders don't happen through standardized interactions, leading to a fragmented system of aid. This aspect might become crucial as the impending recession is expected to increase financial burden over households, leading to an increase on the people that cannot afford a place to live. Relying on a stronger network to address this challenge will allow for a more structured response.

Box 2: Three main institutions involved in responding to the needs of Lima's homeless populations

- **The Municipal Government** has a Unit dedicated to serving people in homeless situation through food provision and social program registration. The unit sporadically organizes meetings with other institutions involved in supporting homeless people at the national and local level, such as non-profit organizations, ministries, police, among others.
- **The Beneficence of Lima**, a private non-profit organization, has been leading actions and projects in favor of the neediest in the city for the past 185 years. They run eleven social programs that serve more than two thousand people a day, including elderly, women and children in need.
- **The Lima Foundation** plays a role in collecting and distributing donations to temporary and permanent shelters during the pandemic.

Further, while the Municipality has a budget dedicated to protecting the vulnerable populations, including homeless people, their resources are limited and could be supplemented with funds from civil society organizations. Related to this, to ensure that the budget is used in an efficient manner, it would be necessary to make a prioritization of people in need and ensure that those resources reach widely instead of being concentrated in several locations or communities.

Coordination between social workers working for the Municipal Government and the civil society organizations would be necessary to map beneficiaries and prevent duplications of efforts. Existing "vulnerability stoplight" used by the Municipal Government to identify households based on vulnerability and urgency of need would also benefit other organizations strategize their actions.

Addressing this coordination challenge is of utmost importance as it would allow stakeholders to 1) understand the challenges of the already existing institutions, 2) create synergies between actors, 3) share information, 4) explore the possibility to direct public funds to relief budgetary constraints to aid.

Challenge #2: *The Household Targeting System (SISFOH), does not necessarily have comprehensive or updated data on homeless people, since it requires beneficiaries to proactively register themselves to be registered in the system and access social programs.*

Lack of information on the typology of homeless people and associated factors lead to policies that are not effective in the long run. Evidence worldwide suggests that policies that address symptoms rather than root causes of homelessness have failed. Therefore, collecting data on homeless people is imperative in order to develop multi-targeted sustainable strategies. Currently, data are collected and stored sporadically. Inadequate communication between central and local governments prevents effective data sharing for policy purposes.

Information on this regard is useful to have enough information to design policy, but also to implement such policy and eventually get services in the hands of those who need it the most, considering that otherwise they were not counted for other governmental programs.

Box 3: Literature on identifying the homeless

The most common way of measuring homelessness is through 'point-in-time' estimates of people who are sleeping in shelters or on the streets. This approach intendeds to reflect the number of people who are homeless on any given night. This is the method used by the EE.UU. and it is closer to the rough numbers Lima has available from current shelters. Yet, data collection in Lima isn't centralized and is unfrequently updated. Further, it is generated by each shelter or institution for its own use. What does international experience can tell us about how Lima can go about changing its current approach to identify the homeless?

In Tanzania, primary data come from in-person surveys to people in homeless situation in various public areas, interviews with key informants (i.e. municipal authorities, community members, etc.) and focus groups discussions stratified into adult men, adult women and youth.⁶ However, there are disadvantages with self-reported data that include memory problems, socially desirable answering and distrust towards outsiders.

In Brussels, Belgium, a combination of self-reported and observational data are used to analyze homeless' income in Brussels.⁷ Given the lack of formal registry, they start the study by listing 255 possible begging locations using volunteer reports, police reports and a list of subway stations and marketplaces. Then, visited each location three times at different moments of the day and in the week and interviews were conducted face-to-face to facilitate respondents with low or no literacy.

In sum, literature offers a wider spectrum of possibilities to generate information on homelessness. Surveys on targeted locations with high-density of homeless population can strengthen the reliability of the data and can allow for the government to understand whether current shelter's location and capacity, is convenient or could be restructured.

Challenge #3: *Given the living conditions of the vulnerable population, making sanitation services available to the homeless requires creative solutions. They are currently more susceptible to poor health and their wellbeing may affect rest of the population's health conditions.*

⁶ Namwata, B. M., Mgabo, M. R., & Dimoso, P. (2012). Categories of street beggars and factors influencing street begging in central Tanzania.

⁷ Adriaenssens, S., & Hendrickx, J. (2011). Street-level informal economic activities: estimating the yield of begging in Brussels. *Urban Studies*, 48(1), 23-40.

While current evidence⁸ indicates that frequent and proper hand hygiene can serve as the best line of defense against the community spread of COVID-19 (CDC, 2020), people experiencing unsheltered homelessness may not have access to sanitation services and a hand washing facility with water and soap to be able to protect themselves and others around them from the risk of infection. Therefore, an emergency response during the pandemic must involve immediately increasing public investments on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) by ensuring sanitary living conditions and access to handwashing facilities.

The benefits of these public health investments on water, sanitation, and hygiene would extend beyond COVID-19 as they could also interrupt transmission of other infectious diseases, such as respiratory tract infections and diarrhea, thus reducing the general burden on the healthcare system.

Summary of Recommendations

We have three recommendations that are ordered based on:

Immediate policy recommendation: *Enhance coordination between institutions to aid vulnerable population living in the streets effectively and efficiently by holding regular meetings between the government and the non-profit organizations.*

This policy response requires urgent attention and action as it would facilitate the implementation of longer-term policy responses. From administrative feasibility perspective, it also promises to be the most cost-effective and requires less organizational tweaks.

Budget: The mapping and coordination effort is not expected to require an additional budget, as it will be undertaken by current municipal workers in the Social Development Division and they will use free online tools.

Supporting mechanism: This effort to structure collaboration between stakeholders could be built on the existing group inside the Municipality. The workers in this group could organize existing information from previous meetings with involved institutions and create a platform to share information in a dynamic way (i.e. Google drive, Dropbox, Facebook groups, etc.). This platform could also be advertised in social media for new interested institutions to join.

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Guidance for Healthcare Providers about Hand Hygiene and COVID-19," *CDC*, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/hand-hygiene.html>.

Medium-term recommendation: *Collect data on homelessness to ensure specific groups are not getting systematically missed.*

In the context of homeless people in Lima, data collection could start from information already available in touchpoints that assist homeless people, for which collaboration with civil society organizations would be a valuable first step. The necessary first step would be to construct a list of people that different organizations already serve and places where they tend to be. This could be followed by a period of systematic visits to these places to conduct in-person surveys. This survey will include questions that allow for "snowball sampling", which consist on asking the interviewed individuals about other people in a similar situation. In this way, the sample of people can be continuously increased until there is a clear idea of the number and characteristics of homeless people in the different areas.

Budget: There are three categories of workers necessary to run the data collection, namely: enumerators, data entry experts, and analysts. Depending on the level of experience, an enumerator can earn a wage between S/.1000 - 1500 (US\$ 283 – 425) per month if current undergraduate student taking a part-time job, and between S/.3000 - 3500 (US\$ 850 – 992) per month if they are an experienced social worker or a phycologist. The number of enumerators and the time of the contract will depend on the size of the scope that the Municipality would like to undertake. For data entry and digitization, the Municipality can tap into their internal expertise once the data has been collected. Thus, there shall be no additional costs for this part. To perform data analysis and report findings, the Municipality may consider building partnerships with universities that would like to use this data for a research project, given that these studies are scarce and highly needed. In short, we believe that data collection can be implemented under a low budget strategy.

Supporting mechanism: Data sharing mechanism between information between central and local governments would be helpful to systematically connect homeless people identified with existent government services and programs. For instance, collaboration to gather and update information of homeless people in the National Registry of Identification and Civil Status (RENIEC) using the national ID document (DNI), register people in SISFOH and provide with social services such as SIS.

Longer-term recommendation: *Increase resources to provide sanitary living conditions and hand washing facilities through creative means*

This policy response would be most resource intensive compared to others mentioned above, but it would be necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19 and lessen the burden on the Peruvian healthcare system.

Budget: In the context of the pandemic, there have been donations of hand washing units that have been in public parks, markets and plazas. These units use foot pedals in order to avoid the virus spread. There could be campaigns to promote this kind of donations for charity or in exchange for free advertising spots in these locations for private company donors. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI) there are 167 public restrooms in Lima. Public restrooms could be built in municipal garages or in other properties of the Beneficence that are currently not under use. In the case of garages that are owned by the municipality but operated by private companies, the contract could include conditions to regularly clean and maintain the public restrooms. A rough estimation of one complex of public restrooms is around S/.80,000 (U\$22,600), considering that it is in an area with water and drainage connections. This policy would require a higher budget than the rest and will most likely require support from other governmental authorities. Yet, we believe that it is worth pursuing.

Box 4: Innovative WASH ideas for the context of Lima

Increase the number of public restrooms that could be accessed by people experiencing unsheltered homelessness for free

These public restrooms must be cleaned and disinfected regularly to prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses, including the novel coronavirus. Technology, such as touchless flushing, faucets, and soap dispensers, could be introduced to create a more hygienic restroom experience for users and cleaners. Locations with high density of homeless population but lacking other alternative WASH facilities should be prioritized.

Run a weekly or monthly mobile service delivery for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness across the municipality

In addition to mobile showers and lavatories, such a program could also provide laundry and possibly barber services. Similar to the public restrooms' proposal, hygiene must be maintained through frequent cleaning and disinfecting, as well as possible deployment of technology.

Supporting mechanism: Complementary to the options above, information campaigns are essential in ensuring that people are aware of both the importance of sanitation and hygiene as well as the existence of the above services. Proven behavioral change techniques can help increase the frequency and improve the practice of critical hygiene behaviors. Resources such as the Global Handwashing Partnership can be tapped to mobilize various stakeholders to support the development of messaging and materials to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak in Lima.

Conclusion: Next Steps

The Municipality of Lima has shown its commitment to providing social services to its most vulnerable populations living on the streets. However, experiences of other countries illustrate how the issue of homelessness must not be simply reactionary. Instead, sustainable planning for long-term solutions that outlast the pandemic must be considered. Nevertheless, there are coordination, information, and resource constraints which must be overcome to ensure that policy responses are effective.

In an immediate term, the Municipality should start investing in increasing coordination with other institutions involved in providing aid to the homeless. Cooperation between parties will strengthen the network of aid provision and allow them to provide better assistance. Having this network in place will also contribute to addressing the information gap and allow the Municipality to pursue longer-term and more resource-intensive responses outlined in this memo.