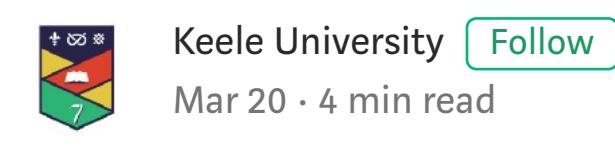


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Coronavirus and the homeless: Why increasing policing powers is not the answer

Felicity Adams, PhD Candidate, and Dr Fabienne Emmerich, Law Lecturer, explain the impact the [Emergency Coronavirus Bill](#) could have on the homeless.



Mar 20 · 4 min read



What would be a humane response to the needs of the most vulnerable in society during a humanitarian crisis? Lock them up — that's what the new [Emergency Coronavirus Bill](#) proposes. The Government introduced it on Thursday (March 19) to Parliament.

The legislation will increase police and immigration officer powers to detain and quarantine people if they are suspected of being infected. Should a person refuse to be tested, they are committing an offence and subject to £1,000 fine. The Government states that the measures contained in the Bill are “temporary, proportionate to the threat, [and] will only be used when strictly necessary and will be in place for as long as required to respond to the situation”.

The Government positions the Bill as part of a utilitarian endeavour to protect the “[nation's public health](#)”. However, this will disproportionately affect people who are homeless and are unable to self-isolate and other vulnerable groups who depend on services. Is the Government content with excluding these vulnerable people from our nation? Journalist Owen Jones highlights in [the Guardian](#) the “collision” between the COVID-19 pandemic and the systemic inequalities generated under the British class system. By permitting the police to detain those unable to self-isolate, these additional legislative powers go one step further in exacerbating these inequalities. The Government turns away from the needs of the vulnerable by responding to the threat posed by an inability to self-isolate through detention. In essence, the Government is criminalising vulnerability and need.

MPs call for safe spaces

The Lib Dem MP Layla Moran has put forward an alternative approach. She is calling for “[safe spaces must be provided for homeless and other vulnerable people to self-isolate](#)”. This approach complements the broader scale strategy suggested by candidate for Labour Deputy leader Dawn Butler MP. She has taken to Twitter to reinforce the need for a comprehensive social care programme to confront the pandemic.



Despite a call for love and solidarity during this humanitarian crisis, the Government has prioritised operationalizing punitive legislation which expands the carceral net. In effect, the police are coercing people to be screened and detaining those who refuse. The Government and media are prioritizing the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. Those who do not fit into these measures are left unsupported. This in effect creates a hierarchy of vulnerability in which people who are homeless and often have complex needs become invisible.

In spite of compassion and care, people who are homeless and present with symptoms may be detained. There they will be subject to further harm. Activist and author, Angela Davis describes the [prison as a place of isolation, suffering and violence](#). Similarly, [The Royal College of Psychiatrists](#) highlight the likely increase in individual suffering and the risk of self-harming behaviours and suicide whilst in immigration detention. It is clear that detention is the embodiment of suffering and this suffering transcends individual detention contexts.

Care not detention

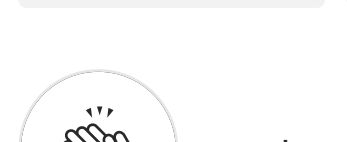
Above all else, we need a robust approach to the COVID-19 health crisis which centres care not detention. Nevertheless, the Government shirks its duty of care to adequately safeguard society. Instead, community organisers lead the way in supporting some of the most vulnerable through [mutual aid groups](#). These small groups equip those at risk from contracting the virus with necessities to help them navigate this unfamiliar terrain. These efforts include running errands, cooking, and alternative forms of socialization. The Big Door Brigade, a group of people based in Seattle, Washington offering mutual aid resources highlight the power of these groups to create more “[survivable](#)” societies. What is clear is that unlike the additional police powers, these progressive mutual aid efforts are underpinned by love, care and compassion.

We are all living in increasingly fragmented societies with narrowing access to healthcare services and basic amenities. We must take seriously the need for “social-distancing” during these unprecedented times. However, these immediate individual efforts must be carried out in plural with a broader scale collective strategy rooted in compassion.

“Social distancing” requires us to be mindful of our physical proximity to limit our collective exposure to the Coronavirus. We follow this guidance out of love for each other. But what this advice does not require is for us to limit our social interactions with our existing communities and beyond. Fortunately, advancements in technology enable our interactions to take a myriad of alternative forms. Nor does the advice invite us to disenfranchise people on the periphery of our society through “emergency” carceral governance measures. We need each other more than ever.

During these uncertain times we must challenge these coercive initiatives which divide our societies and opt for full-scale community solidarity. This means standing strong with our marginalised friends and leaving violence behind to look back on itself. Our efforts must centre the most vulnerable in our collective consciences in order to shield each other and create desirable social worlds.

[Keele Comment](#) [Police](#) [Homeless](#) [Coronavirus](#)



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Net in England for Student Satisfaction (NSS, broad-based) and TEF Gold - it's the #KeeleDifference. Britain's largest single-site campus. Many squirrels.



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Net in England for Course Satisfaction (The Guardian, 2019) and TEF Gold. Britain's largest single-site campus. Many, many squirrels.

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