

**Micro-politics  
of agency taken by  
residents living in  
Antwerp's as a consequence  
of COVID-19.**

Policy Brief: 9  
October 2023

# Authors

**Hannah Robinson, Jil Molenaar & Lore Van Praag**  
(University of Antwerp)

To cite this report: Robinson H., Molenaar J. & Van Praag L.(2023) Micro-politics of agency taken by residents living in Antwerp's as a consequence of COVID-19, Policy Brief 9, October 2023. COVINFORM H2020 Project No. 101016247.

## Disclaimer

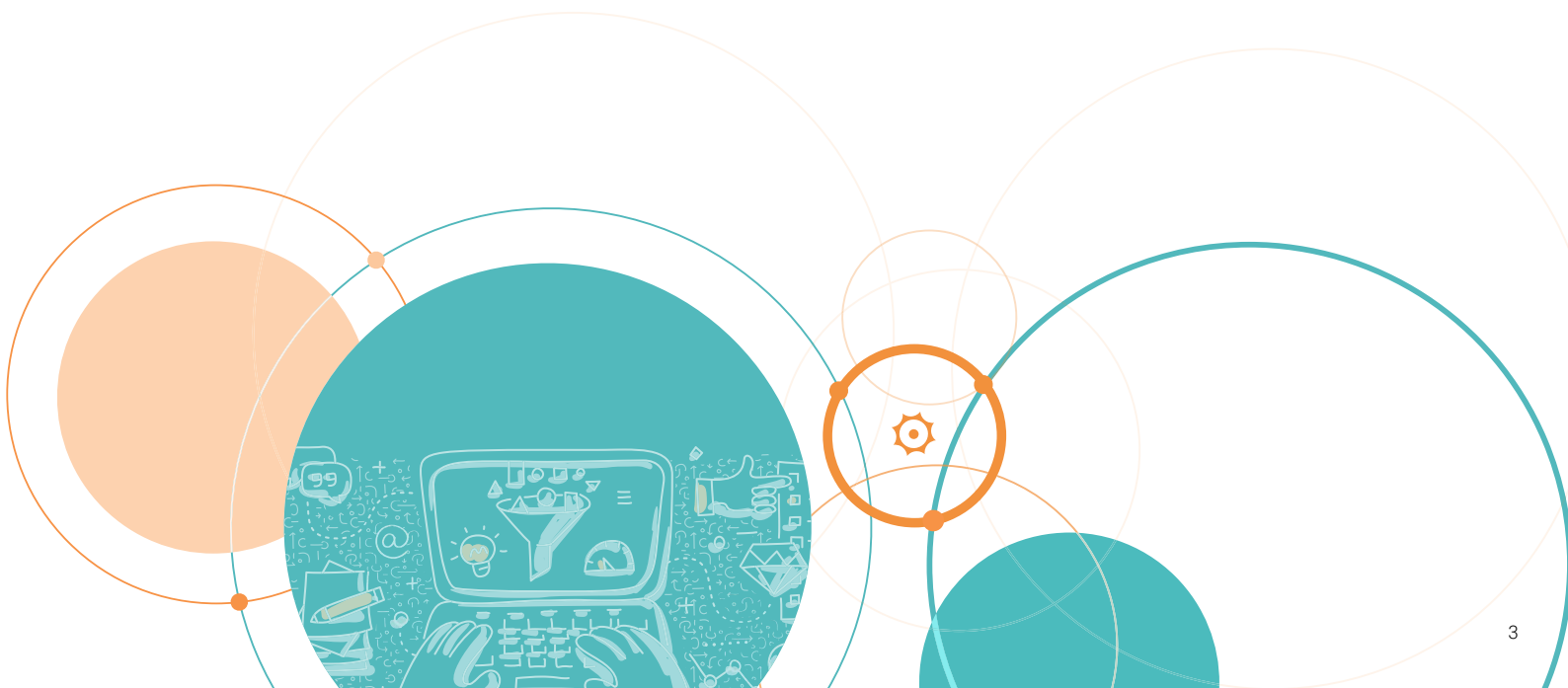
Disclaimer: The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the authors, and in no way represents the view of the European Commission or its services.



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No 101016247.

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction .....	4
Research and Analysis.....	4
Key findings.....	5
Recommendations .....	6
References.....	7
The COVINFORM project.....	8



## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the impact of spatial inequalities on vulnerable communities, particularly lower-income migrants, residing in Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout. Drawing from interviews conducted with residents, the findings emphasize the importance of access to

green and public spaces, affordable housing, and community support networks. This brief calls for a comprehensive approach that combines sustainable urban planning, social housing provisions, and tenant protections to create resilient and inclusive cities.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated urban spatial inequalities, particularly for socially disadvantaged populations, including lower-income groups, ethnic minorities, and migrants (Beeckmans et al., 2022; Preece et al., 2021, Jané-Llopis et al., 2021). The pandemic disrupted people's strategies of adaptation, particularly those living in crowded or poor-quality housing

without access to private open space (Beeckmans et al., 2022). Limited attention has been paid to the individual choices made by residents to deal with their unfavourable housing and living situations. We aim to give an overview on the micro-politics of agency taken by residents living in two of Antwerp's more socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods, in response to the consequences of COVID-19.

## Research and Analysis

This case study realized with COVINFORM activities (WP3) focuses on migrants in Borgerhout and Antwerpen-Noord who arrived in Belgium over 5 years ago. The range of years lived in Belgium varies from 5 to 39 years, with an average of 11 years. The study recruited 25 participants through community health workers, or CSOs/NGOs working with migrants in Borgerhout and Antwerpen

Noord. The participants originate from various countries across different regions worldwide, including eight individuals from Morocco and three from Afghanistan. Their ages span from 20 to 65, comprising 9 men and 16 women. Data was collected during 2022. Analysis of the interviews was performed using NVivo, combined with a literature review and field visits.





## 1. Recognising the impact of spatial inequalities:

- a) The pandemic exposed the challenges faced by lower-income migrants living in crowded housing without private open spaces.
- b) Access to public and green spaces became vital during the pandemic, particularly for those residing in poorer housing conditions.
- c) The pandemic disrupted people's strategies for adapting their living conditions. Spatial inequalities including inadequate public transportation and limited access to green and public spaces were evident in more deprived neighborhoods, disproportionately affecting lower-income migrants.

## 2. Shifting dwelling preferences and persisting practices:

- a) Residents sought proximity to green spaces, shared gardens, public amenities, and private outdoor areas due to urban spatial inequalities and the pandemic. Families in crowded conditions and remote workers expressed a greater need for space, whilst older and more vulnerable residents emphasized the necessity of facilities in the neighbourhood.
- b) Intersectional factors such as race and class influenced dwelling preferences and shaped housing practices.
- c) Vulnerable groups faced barriers in accessing quality and affordable housing, due to discrimination and limited economic resources. Gentrification and the rising cost of housing lead to involuntary housing trade-offs, particularly for those with lower incomes.

## 3. Strengthening agency and community support:

- a) Residents demonstrated agency and collective power in contesting gentrification and housing problems.
- b) Community organizations and local networks played a crucial role in supporting migrants during the pandemic, highlighting the importance of investing in these spaces.
- c) Disruptions to community support networks due to the pandemic created additional challenges for vulnerable residents.

# Recommendations



The findings of this study have important policy implications.

## 1. Increase access to affordable and suitable housing:

To address socio-economic inequalities caused by gentrification and displacement, the city should focus on increasing affordable housing options in Borgerhout and Antwerpen Noord. This can be achieved by prioritizing affordable housing in new developments, setting social housing targets, renovating existing buildings to meet affordable housing standards, and implementing rent controls and regulations to protect tenants. Simultaneously, ensuring a balance between housing options and green spaces will help mitigate social-economic disparities resulting from green grabbing and displacement.

## 2. Ensure equitable access to public spaces and amenities

The city should work to ensure that all residents, regardless of income level, have equitable access to green and public spaces and local amenities. This can be achieved by developing new public spaces and amenities in underserved areas, as well as improving transportation options to connect residents to existing amenities. Exploring the redesign of buildings to provide outdoor spaces while maintaining high-density living can offer residents access to outdoor areas within their living environments.

## 3. Address socio-economic and ethnic segregation

Distributing social housing across neighbourhoods rather than concentrating it in low-income areas can help address segregation and stigma. Consider the Vienna model of extensive municipal ownership of residential dwellings as a potential role model for addressing housing challenges.

## 4. Support community-based organizations

The city should support community-based organizations that work to address the housing needs of low-income residents, including migrants. These organizations are often struggling with funding in the current climate, yet they provide much-needed resources and support to residents who are struggling.

## References

---

Beeckmans, L., Oosterlynck, S., & Corijn, E. (2022). De stad beter na corona? Reflecties over een gezondere en meer rechtvaardige stad. Brussels: ASP.

Jané-Llopis, E., Anderson, P., Segura, L., Zabaleta, E., Muñoz, R., Ruiz, G., Rehm, J., Cabezas, C., & Colom, J. (2021). Mental ill-health during COVID-19 confinement. *BMC Psychiatry*, 21(1), 194.

Preece, J., McKee, K., Robinson, D., & Flint, J. (2021). Urban rhythms in a small home: COVID-19 as a mechanism of exception. *Urban Studies*, 00420980211018136.

## Contact

[office@covinform.eu](mailto:office@covinform.eu)

[Hannah.robinson@uantwerpen.be](mailto:Hannah.robinson@uantwerpen.be)

[Jil.molenaar@uantwerpen.be](mailto:Jil.molenaar@uantwerpen.be)

[Lore.vanpraag@uantwerpen.be](mailto:Lore.vanpraag@uantwerpen.be)

# The COVINFORM project

<b>Acronym</b>	COVINFORM
<b>Title</b>	COronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFOrmation dynamics Research and Modelling
<b>Coordinator</b>	SYNYO GmbH
<b>Reference</b>	101016247
<b>Type</b>	Research and Innovation Action (RIA)
<b>Programme</b>	HORIZON 2020
<b>Topic</b>	SC1-PHE-CORONAVIRUS-2020-2C Behavioural, social and economic impacts of the outbreak response
<b>Start</b>	01 November 2020
<b>Duration</b>	36 months

## Contact

**Consortium**

**SYNYO GmbH (SYNYO)**, Austria  
**Magen David Adom in Israel (MDA)**, Israel  
**Samur Proteccion Civil (SAMUR)**, Spain  
**Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC)**, Italy  
**SINUS Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH (SINUS)**, Germany  
**Trilateral Research LTD (TRI UK)**, UK  
**Trilateral Research LTD (TRI IE)**, Ireland  
**Kentro Meleton Asfaleias – Center for Security Studies (KEMEA)**, Greece  
**Factor Social Consultoria em Psicossociologia e Ambiente LDA (FS)**, Portugal  
**Austrian Red Cross (AUTRC)**, Austria  
**Media Diversity Institute (MDI)**, UK  
**Societatea Națională de Cruce Rosie Din România – Romanian Red Cross (SNCR)**, Romania  
**University of Antwerp (UANTWERPEN)**, Belgium  
**Sapienza University of Rome (SAPIENZA)**, Italy  
**University Rey Juan Carlos (URJC)**, Spain  
**Swansea University (SU)**, UK  
**Gotenborg University (UGOT)**, Sweden

