

DEFEN-CE:

**DEFEN-CE:**

**Understanding Vulnerability: A Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

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# Introduction

This working paper is part of the DEFEN-CE project and seeks to:

* review the existing literature defining vulnerability and vulnerable groups;
* develop an own, multi-faceted conceptualization of vulnerable groups, based on the available literature
* Find theoretical relevance on the issue of vulnerability
* Conceptualize vulnerability and vulnerable groups in order to guide empirical research within the DEFEN-CE project

The report collects relevant theoretical concepts and approaches to understand vulnerability as a basis for identifying the vulnerable groups and their operationalization and measurement in the project. We applied a heuristic approach to define the vulnerability/ties and got inspired by the meaning of the concept of the vulnerability and related concepts beyond social sciences or labour market concepts. Basically, we are looking for heuristic matric of vulnerability help us to detect what is the construction of the “vulnerable group”.

# Theorizing the concept of vulnerability

European Commission’s definition (EC, 2010): ‘vulnerable group’ refers to ‘groups within our societies facing higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to the general population. The definition is too narrow and needs to be revised and extended by new vulnerabilities stemming from COVID.

The pandemic exacerbates the situation of the groups of people already in a vulnerable situation before the outbreak of the pandemic. This definition usually includes groups such as the disabled, migrants and ethnic minorities, homeless people, children, isolated elderly, low-income families (especially lone parents). However, the exceptional COVID-19 pandemic, via initiating a sudden stop of public life and leading to grave social-economic insecurities, is likely to expand this definition of vulnerability to a broader group of people, perhaps including those not considered as vulnerable in the past.

The working definition of the vulnerable groups indicated in the project proposal is: **vulnerable groups are groups whose social and employment situation have been hit hardest by the economic and social damage by the COVID-19 crisis.**

The vulnerability and consequently vulnerable groups are often selected and researched without proper theoretical background, assuming that the understanding of vulnerability is universal and considered for granted. Some studies simply list various negative aspects of the labour market or other areas of society and derive vulnerability automatically by itemizing diverse groups that might be exposed to that vulnerabilities (see, for example, Saunders, 2003; Bodnárová, 2005).

It is obvious that vulnerability has no universal definition. Experts from various disciplines use the concept and define vulnerability, which leads to diverse measuring methods to serve their purpose and interests (Shitangsu, 2013). The term is used in various ways by scientists from different knowledge areas and even within the same research area. For example, natural scientists and engineers use the term descriptively while social scientists use it in a specific explanatory model (ibid.). Most commonly, vulnerability studies use few overlapping concepts such as vulnerability, risk, exposure, sensitivity, resilience, adaptive capacity, coping and marginality, deprivation, etc. These terms are in most cases not clear but indistinct and the same concept is used by various scholars in different contexts (ibid.). The term vulnerability is interchangeably used to assess the risk of poverty (see Gallardo, M. 2020).

One can find three distinct themes in vulnerability studies: vulnerability as risk/hazard exposure, vulnerability as social response; and vulnerability of places. Vulnerability as hazard of place concept combines elements of potential exposure or risk and societal coping response, but it is inherently more geographically centered. In this perspective, vulnerability is conceived as both a biophysical risk as well as a human/social response, but within a specific area or geographic domain (Weichselgartner, 2001).

In the systems-based approach the risk, vulnerability, and resilience are inherently and fundamentally functions of the states of the system and its environment. Vulnerability is defined as the manifestation of the inherent states of the system that can be subjected to a natural hazard or be exploited to adversely affect that system. Resilience is defined as the ability of the system to withstand a significant disruption within acceptable degradation parameters and to recover within an acceptable time, and composite costs, and risks. On the other hand, risk is probability-based, defined by the probability and severity of adverse effects (i.e., the consequences) (Aven, 2011).

Despite that the vulnerability has no universal definition, it is a powerful analytical tool in describing the existing condition of susceptibility to harm, powerlessness, and marginality of both individuals or the systems. At the same time, for guiding the normative analysis of measures to enhance well-being by reducing risk.

Selected definitions of vulnerability:

* Vulnerability is the degree to which a system acts adversely to the occurrence of a hazardous event. The degree and quality of the adverse reaction are conditioned by a system’s resilience (a measure of the system’s capacity to absorb and recover from the event) (Timmerman, 1981)
* Vulnerability is operationally defined as the inability to take effective measures to ensure against losses. When applied to individuals, vulnerability is a consequence of the impossibility or improbability of effective mitigation and is a function of our ability to select the hazards (Bogard, 1988)
* Distinguishes between vulnerability as a biophysical condition and vulnerability as defined by political, social and economic conditions of society. She argued for vulnerability in geographical space (where vulnerable people and places are located) and vulnerability in social space (who in that place is vulnerable) (Liverman, 2001)
* Vulnerability is the differential capacity of groups and individuals to deal with hazards, based on their positions within physical and social worlds (Dow, 1992).
* Vulnerability is the likelihood that an individual or group will be exposed to and adversely affected by a hazard. It is the interaction of the hazards of place (risk and mitigation) with the social profile of communities. (Cutter, 1993).
* Vulnerability is defined in terms of exposure, capacity and potentiality. Accordingly, the prescriptive and normative response to vulnerability is to reduce exposure, enhance coping capacity, strengthen recovery potential and bolster damage control (i.e. minimise destructive consequences) via private and public means (Watts and Bohle, 1993)
* By vulnerability we mean the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone’s life and livelihood is put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or in society (Blaikie et al.,1994).
* Vulnerability is best defined as an aggregate measure of human welfare that integrates environmental, social, economic and political exposure to a range of potential harmful perturbations. Vulnerability is a multi-layered and multidimensional social space defined by the determinate, political, economic and institutional capabilities of people in specific places at specific times (Bohle et al.,1994).

From the above definitions, it reveals that the vulnerability of any system or person/social groups at any scale is a function of the exposure and sensitivity of that system/groups to hazardous/risky conditions and the **ability or capacity or resilience of the system to cope, adapt or recover from the effects of those conditions**. In general, the exposure means the degree, duration, and/or extent in which the system and/or the social groups are in contact with or subject to adverse conditions. **Sensitivity** is ‘the extent to which a human or natural system can absorb shocks without suffering long-term harm or other significant states of change. This relates to **social resilience** as the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances due to social, political, and environmental change (Shitangsu, 2013).

Watts and Bohle (1993) developed the casual space of vulnerability, encompassing risk, exposure, coping capacity and recovery potential (see Figure 1). The space of vulnerability is demarcated by three idiosyncratic processes. For example, three sides of analytical triangle are human ecology, expanded entitlements, and political economy. The intersection of these axes creates three parallel analytical concepts central to vulnerability analysis.

Figure The Causal Structure of Vulnerability

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Source: Watts and Bohle (1993).

## Entitlement approach to vulnerability

Social scientists consider people’s inability to cope with various socio-economic factors to describe vulnerability. For example, the vulnerability concept in social sciences appeared as a vital theme after Sen’s research on famine and entitlement failure (Sen, 1981, 1983). Entitlement-based literature of vulnerability is exclusively focused on the social realm of institutions, human well-being, class structure, social status, gender, etc. Based on Sen´s theory of entitlements, the primary causes of hunger are the failure to distribute entitlement and the fundamental needs of society. The entitlements are then ‘the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces’ (Sen, 1994).

Further approach considers vulnerability as a synonym of poverty. Poverty denotes the unachieved needs and limitations of access to resources, while vulnerability refers to the lack of capacity to safeguard oneself and survive against environmental or other extremes. The lack of capacity approach of vulnerability research emphasised empowerment that directly allied with the theories of Sen on entitlements, functioning and the expansion of capacities (Sen, 1981, 1983, 1994). To empower and entitle a person means providing the person with the capability to use freedom and to enhance their own capacities (Sen, 1993). The opposite is then vulnerability, which means the lessening of capacities and the ‘power’ of action and realisation. Based on these considerations, the prescriptive and normative response to vulnerability is to reduce exposure, enhance coping capacity, strengthen recovery potential and bolster damage control via private and public means (Shitangsu, 2013).

The entitlements approach to vulnerability is associated with or leads to social rights and the components of the European social pillars as relevant context indicted in the project proposal.

## Social vulnerability

The review of existing disaster literature reveals that social vulnerability is seen as a dual process concerning exposure to risk, shocks, and lack of coping capacities common to different approaches. Social vulnerability includes the susceptibility of social groups or society to potential losses from extreme events and the ability to absorb and withstand impacts (Shitangsu, 2013).

**Social vulnerability refers thus to the inability of people, organisations, and societies to withstand adverse impacts from multiple stressors to which they are exposed**. These impacts are partly due to characteristics inherent in social interactions, institutions, and systems of cultural values. The capacity of individuals, communities and systems to survive, adapt, transform, and grow in the face of stress and shocks increases when conditions require it (Palling, 2003).

The literature on ‘social vulnerability’ also relates to disaster studies and disaster risk management. However, the concept is applicable to explore the COVID-19 impact on certain groups critically. Instead of abandoning or universalizing the idea of individual vulnerability, the concept of social vulnerability allows focusing on the social determinants of vulnerability. (Mladenov and Brennan, 2021).

Social vulnerability from the labour market and well-being studies **refers to individuals and households who are not formally socially excluded but characterized by a fragile integration into the traditional systems of social protection and resource distribution (welfare, family and the labour market**) (Maestripieri, 2015). The definition was used to point to the relationship between female participation in the labour market and social vulnerability into perspective arguing that local production systems and provisions of local welfare are crucial to better understand the determinants of women’s social vulnerability in 11 European cities. It is argued that either or both higher level employment and better employment of women determines a lower social vulnerability level, but its intensity and shape can change according to local contexts, characterized by the different conditions and criteria by which women access citizenship and take positions in local production systems. The first aspect is related to the conditionality and generosity of welfare benefits that are relevant in order to allow women to work (elderly care and childcare) and to be protected from social risks. The second aspect is related to the chance of women to be (or not to be) segregated and discriminated in their local labour markets. The analysis aimed to understand the extent to which different patterns of participation in the labour market in different local contexts determine exposure to poverty, social vulnerability and low social participation (Maestripieri, 2015).

The well-developed concept of social vulnerability in disaster studies allowed to construct Social Vulnerability Index.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the index, the social vulnerability refers to the potential negative effects on communities caused by external stresses on human health. Such stresses include natural or human-caused disasters, or disease outbreaks. Reducing social vulnerability can decrease both human suffering and economic loss. The CDC/ATSDR Social Vulnerability Index (CDC/ATSDR SVI) uses 15 U.S. census variables to help local officials identify communities that may need support before, during, or after disasters.

## Labour market vulnerability

Saunders (2003) does not define any general concept of vulnerability but directly points to different types of vulnerability, respectively diverse risks of vulnerability. According to Sounders, **workers are vulnerable in that their participation in the labour market leaves their well-being at risk.** Relevant is the broader context of labour market vulnerability, described by key principal forces of the labour market changes: globalisation of competition, technological advances, and changes in the demographic structure of the workforce.

The globalisation of the economy is then characterised by mobile capital, freer trade in goods and services, enhanced mobility of highly-skilled jobs and workers, the growth of multinational corporations with head offices in one country, and components produced in others. Globalisation heightened the need for economic and social policies to foster competitiveness. It has also put a higher premium on workplace practices that support flexibility and adaptability, such as multi-skilling, teamwork, and pay-for-performance schemes, search for greater flexibility has contributed to the decline of the ‘standard’ job (Sounders, 2013).

Technological changes shifted the economies from industrial structure away from primary and manufacturing industries and towards services. Mass-production systems (large scale, standardised methods, highly delineated jobs) have been transformed into production systems characterised by more minor scale and greater flexibility. Technological change has also increased the demand for highly skilled workers relative to less-skilled workers (ibid.).

The ageing of the workforce has contributed to a flattening of corporate structures and a greater prevalence of ‘spiral’ (lateral moves on the way up) and ‘transitory’ (different occupations, often short-term jobs, some self-employment) career paths. Changes in family structure, including dismantling the one breadwinner model and increasing the number of two-earners families and single-parent families, increase employees’ need for flexible (or, in some cases, part-time) hours (Sounders, 2013).

Workers are vulnerable in that their participation in the labour market leaves their well-being at risk. The author identifies various components/aspects of labour market vulnerability, which are not all mutually exclusive:

* Workers, such as the own-account self-employed, who are outside the scope of coverage of employment standards legislation.
* Employees who are covered by employment standards laws, but who have difficulty accessing these rights, because they are unaware of them or reluctant to complain for fear of losing their jobs.
* Those who lack access to non-statutory benefits such as extended medical insurance, dental plans, disability coverage, and private pension plans.
* Workers who are unable to qualify for such programs as Employment Insurance or to fully benefit from public pension plans.
* Adult workers whose earnings are very low over long periods of time, because of low wages and/or lack of stable employment.

Labour-market risk originates from the possibility of unemployment or inactivity during people’s careers. During such episodes of unemployment or inactivity, contributions set aside to finance retirement may be discontinued (OECD, 2011).

## Multiple vulnerabilities and the theory of intersectionality

Intersectionality theory provides a critical framework for understanding and examining how the interconnections and interdependencies between social and political identities, various factors contribute to varying modes of discrimination and privilege (Atewologun, 2018). An intersectional analytical approach allows us to view how experiences of disadvantage are shaped by the interaction of different social factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, age, religion, and migration status. These social factors create “multi-layered and routinized forms of domination that often converge” (Crenshaw, 1990). In other words, connected systems and structures of power create interdependent systemic bases of privilege and oppression. As a theory with broad relevance, intersectionality theory provides a “lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects” (Crenshaw, 2017).

Intersectionality approaches have gained traction in global health studies to analyze and address the interplay between different vulnerabilities and advantages – including those related to gender – by trying to uncover complex social factors and power structures that create and sustain them. Intersectionality can also facilitate links across single-group campaigns to open the power of solidarity and coalition building to tackle social and health inequities. An intersectionality analysis allows for more nuanced understandings of how intersecting factors and processes of power across geopolitical contexts shape risks, needs, experiences and capabilities of differently situated women and men (Hankivsky and Kapilashrami, 2020).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, an intersectional lens facilitates a move away from thinking merely about clearly delineated groups or single risk factors. Instead, it encourages us to take into account the multitude of inequalities and disadvantages which determine how the impact of the pandemic is experienced by communities and individuals (Hankivsky and Kapilashrami 2020). As a result of interacting social factors, people often belong to more than one social group. For example, an elderly immigrant woman living with disability may be disadvantaged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in several different ways. Using an intersectionality approach provides the mind-set and language for examining for how members of heterogeneous groups of people may experience the COVID-19 pandemic differently depending on their gender, ethnicity, occupation, and other social characteristics (Molenaar, 2021).

The intersectionality framework helps shed light on how it is typically the multiply disadvantaged that are at highest social and employment risks induced or strengthened by the COVID-19 pandemic and its policy responses. Those who are disadvantaged in various ways – e.g. those with lower-paid jobs, without car access and living in cramped housing – are most exposed. Going beyond a focus on a single socio-economic factor such as ‘low-income’, the framework demonstrates how the simultaneous and interconnected influence of issues like the gendered division of labour (e.g. the overrepresentation of women in lower-paid care jobs) and the overrepresentation of ethnic minority groups among frontline ‘essential workers’ (Sze et al., 2020) contribute to the unequal social and employment impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Molenaar, 2021).

Intersectional analysis also reveals how policies impact people differently. Overcrowding, precarious housing or homelessness make self-isolation especially difficult for poor, minority populations and for people in low- and middle-income countries. Migrants and refugees in camps and detention facilities, and people living in poverty may be unable to access resources needed for preventive measures, like hand sanitizers and water for hand washing, or practice physical distancing. Quarantine measures pose significant risks for women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Reports from several countries, including Australia, China, Brazil, Germany and the UK, show increased rates of sexual and gender-based violence. It is important to note, however, that these experiences won’t be uniformly experienced by for example older women, those with disabilities, or migrants. And, each country will also have different responses in terms of supports and services available (Hankivsky and Kapilashrami, 2020).

Risk factors do not operate in isolation. Different factors intersect in different ways to shape experiences of COVID-19. Intersecting factors are, in turn, embedded in socio-political processes and power structures that create disparate risks and exposures for different people. These processes and structures include globalization, capitalism urbanization, climate change, patriarchy, racism and xenophobia.

The limits of the of the intersectional theory lays in the difficulties to generated testable predictions and for inadequately explained causal methodology and say incorrect predictions about the status of some minority groups. Further criticisms relate to the assertion that intersectionality is ambiguous and open-ended, and its "lack of clear-cut definition or even specific parameters has enabled it to be drawn upon in nearly any context of inquiry." Additionally, the concept does not always offer a clear set of tools for conducting social research. Instead, it offers varied strands of thought, pointing to different methodologies and methods for doing intersectional research.

Anthias (2012) in her analysis points to range of approaches to intersectionality and does not refer to a unitary framework but a range of positions, and that essentially it is a heuristic device for understanding boundaries and hierarchies of social life. The theoretical framing of intersectionality attends to different levels of analysis in terms of what is being referred to (social categories or concrete social relations); societal arenas of investigation; and historicity (processes and outcomes). She argued that argued for the need to go beyond a focus on intersectional categories and to look at the broader social landscape of power and hierarchy, and the need to consider the categories themselves and not only focus on their intersection. To apply the intersectional approach, we need to be clear about the level of the analysis. One issue is the extent to which intersectionality can be incorporated within social policies that are concerned with multiple inequalities. The issues raised are difficult, as indicated by discussions of the multiple discrimination frameworks. In terms of legal or policy initiatives, legal frameworks identify fixed legal categories and may have difficulty in dealing with complexity. This also relates to the problem of dealing with social correction on the basis of identifying people in terms of the social categories they inhabit (however intersectional) as opposed to dealing with inequalities in a more systematic structural way. It is also difficult to identify points of intersection. There is also the danger of fixing some categories and making others invisible.

# Identifying vulnerable groups in the context of COVID-19

## Defining vulnerability in the context of precarious work

Precarious work is a concept that does not have a universally accepted definition across Europe. Nevertheless, the need to address this complex phenomenon is widely recognised, given its multifaceted nature.

Kahancová et al. (2020) approaches the precarity as multidimensional concept and identifies the six dimensions:

1. **Income:** This dimension of precarity relates to the incidence of low income identified as income below two-thirds of median gross hourly wages. The concept of income captures the fact that on-demand platform workers often work on service contracts not regulated by relevant labour codes and are thus formally not in an employment relationship with wage entitlements.
2. **Job security:** Along this dimension, precarity refers to lower job security as in a standard employment relationship (SER), i.e., in terms of flexible work arrangements, seasonal fluctuations in work and fluctuations directly derived from customer ratings and evaluation systems by the platform, and lack of employment protection in case of firing.
3. **Social security:** Precarity derives from limited or no social security entitlements, including constrained holiday and collective benefit entitlements, depending on the specificities of work arrangements (small contracts, zero hours, self-employment, and similar).
4. **Working time:** Precarity derives from unpredictable working hours and overall working time, meaning also excessive and often unpaid overtime.
5. **Autonomy at work:** Precarity may originate from the lack of appropriate working conditions including limited access to training and skill development, lack of career opportunities, greater exposure to work-related stress
6. **Collective interest representation:** precarious work demonstrates a lack of interest in workers’ collective representation. Traditional trade unions often lack the capacities required to organise precarious workers, or precarious workers themselves are not able to demand interest representation.

The Covid-19 pandemic presents yet another set of challenges to our understanding of precarious work and feed into the revision of the concept of precarious work (Holubová and Kahancová, 2022). First, precarity intensified from the perspective of **health and safety at work**, due to threats to bodily integrity, unmanageable mental stress, and a lack of autonomy to refuse exposure to hazardous working conditions exacerbated by the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE). Second, as a kind of flexible work arrangement, **telework** turned into mandatory work arrangements during the pandemic and yielded multiple risks of precarity. Elements such as ICT inaccessibility, extra hidden costs or extreme surveillance practices are only a few examples. Third, the precarious work can be conceptualised as a **gendered phenomenon**. The gendered stratification of society creates and reproduces unequal labour market conditions for women, intensified the work-life imbalance during the Covid-19 crisis and exposing thus women to a higher risk of precarity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has served as a catalyst for gendered work precarity. The gendered nature of precarity strikes across all dimensions of precarious work and operates as a multiplier of these dimensions. The phenomena described built additional layers to the dimensions of precarious work already known before the pandemic. While the changes to working conditions during the pandemic do not constitute precarity as such but are likely to trigger the emergence of precarity from new sources (Holubová and Kahancová, 2022).

## Defining vulnerability based on risks

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge and unprecedented impact on the EU/EEA and the UK, both in terms of morbidity and mortality, but also in social and economic terms. Some individuals are much more vulnerable than the rest of the population, whether to COVID-19 itself, insofar as they are **at elevated risk of severe disease and death**, or to the consequences of the public health measures that have been imposed in order to control the spread of the virus, which have exacerbated their already challenging life situations. These people could be described as **medically or socially vulnerable**, respectively. Many people have experienced both medical and social vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, while others have faced a particularly extensive set of challenges due to their belonging to two or more recognised categories of social vulnerability.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Being vulnerable or belonging to the vulnerable groups means being exposed to hazardous/risk situation potentially composed of multiple stressor and adverse circumstance. Despite that the framework of the DEFENCE project, the core vulnerability relates to labour market position/status, also other kinds of risks might contribute or even caused the vulnerable labour market position/status. We distinguish several kind of risks: economic risk, employment risk, social risks, and health and security risks (examples, not an exhaustive list).

**Economic risks– related to the changes labour market:**

* + Working in a most impacted sector due to COVID-19
  + Working in a declining sector the lower demand
  + Working in a declining sector due to the supply cuts
  + Working in declining sector/occupation due to digitalisation
  + Working in declining sector/occupation due to automatisation

**Employment risks**

* + loss of employment
  + be on furlough
  + loss of income
  + work under dangerous working conditions (broad range: without protective gears, with high risks of being affected)
  + insufficient income/underpaid (working poor)
  + low intensity work
  + precarious working conditions (see the dimensions above)
  + weak attachment to the labour market[[3]](#footnote-3)
  + undervalued work/employment
  + unpaid work (unpaid care work)

**Social risks**

* + Social exclusion – (definition)
  + Being discriminated on the ground of various attributes (gender, age, disability, ethnicity, etc.)
  + Being not recognized
  + Lack of opportunities
  + Lack of freedom
  + Lack of power to decide
  + Lack of action/to move/force to move
  + Access to welfare state recourses
  + Poor housing conditions
  + Inadequate - limited transportation

**Health and security risks**

* + Hampered/insufficient access to healthcare
  + Risk to be infected (the rate, level of risk)
  + In risk of being exposed to long-term Covid (based on the adverse pre-existing health conditions)
  + Working in essential - first-line services
  + No or limited accessibility to vaccination
  + Being abused/attacked
  + Being exposed to hazardous working conditions

It is obvious that some of the risks might be difficult to operationalize into meaningful indicators or variables, not speaking about the empirical covering even with any proxy indicators.

In terms of exposure to multiple risks we can refer to a concept of syndemics,[[4]](#footnote-4) a kind of synergistic epidemic, when more stressors occur in the same time and interact in cumulative ways. The concept of syndetic then resembles to the concept of intersectionality, indicating a sort of intensity, level or rate of the vulnerability, considering also the time of exposure.

## Defining vulnerable groups based on impact/effects of COVID-19

The working definition of the vulnerable groups indicated in the DEFENCE project proposal is: vulnerable groups are groups whose **social and employment situation have been hit hardest by the economic and social damage** by the COVID-19 crisis.

The impact of COVID-19 on social and employment situation need to be draw from an in-depth and country-specific statistical analysis of the comparable Eurostat indicators and its evolution during the pandemic time spam.[[5]](#footnote-5) Analyzing the impact of the pandemic to identify the most vulnerable groups could be also deducted from a country specific statistics in specific areas, sectors and targeting specific segments of labour market and populations. Basically, the vulnerable groups could be constructed - selected at three dimensions/axis:

1. Sectors most hit – based on the statistical analysis
2. Labour market segments – types of employment status/occupations most impacted
3. Pre-existing conditions (existing stressor/risks before the pandemic outbreak) - e.g. working in precarious work, single parent, adverse health conditions (disability), etc.

Results: combination of factors/risks constitute the vulnerable groups scaled by a degree of vulnerability (from high, middle, low).

The research program (COVINFORM) **identifies as vulnerable the groups of people that were affected (physically, economically, socially, and mentally) by the pandemic and the governmental responses to COVID-19**. In this terms, a person can became vulnerable also by the inadequacy of the policies taken, considering is at least **eligibility criteria** such as exclusion or omitting/non-recognising of particular groups of employees or persons from the measure, **conditions of entitlement** to draw allowances or benefits set in the policies, and **contribution amount sufficiency.** In these terms we can speak about the level of effectiveness of the measures taken to prevent people to became vulnerable.[[6]](#footnote-6)

## Defining vulnerable persons/groups by EU level organisations

EU level and international organisations define vulnerable group by simple listing the specific groups of persons with specific attributes. The reasoning/justification is not usually included, but deduced from previous analysis and experiences.

1. EU Migration and Home Affairs: vulnerable person**[[7]](#footnote-7)**

[Minors](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/minor_en), [unaccompanied minors](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/unaccompanied-minor_en), disabled people, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of [trafficking in human beings](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/trafficking-human-beings_en), persons with serious illnesses, persons with mental disorders and persons who have been subjected to [torture](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/torture_en), rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence, such as victims of [female genital mutilation](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/female-genital-mutilation_en).

1. European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE): People in vulnerable situations.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Certain groups of people are particularly vulnerable during the Covid-19 pandemic due to their disadvantaged situation in society:

* Refugees and migrants
* People with disabilities
* Roma people

1. European Center for Disease Prevention and Control: medically and socially vulnerable population[[9]](#footnote-9)

* Ethnic minorities
* Irregular migrants
* LGBTI communities
* People at elevated risk of severe COVID-19-related disease
* People experiencing homelessness
* People living in abusive household settings
* People with alcohol or drug dependence
* People with disabilities
  + People with intellectual and developmental disabilities
  + People with mental illnesses or psychosocial disabilities
  + People with physical and sensory disabilities
* Sex workers

The European pillar for social rights (EPSR) does to define vulnerability or vulnerable groups as such but refer to specific vulnerable groups based on exposure to social exclusion and poverty, inequalities, averse and precarious working conditions and other risks.[[10]](#footnote-10) The EPSR refers or identifies following vulnerable groups:

* Special attention needs to be devoted to **young people and the low skilled**, who are more vulnerable to the fluctuations in the labour market (p. 16).
* Another important emerging trend is the blurring of traditional lines between a worker and a self-employed person, and a growing heterogeneity among the self-employed. A case in point is the emergence of **vulnerable self-employed working through platforms and operating under precarious conditions**. The pandemic has highlighted this for delivery workers, in particular, regarding their access to social protection, and health and safety risks (p. 18).

# Conclusions

This paper is part of the DEFEN-CE project and aims to:

* Review existing literature defining vulnerability and vulnerable groups.
* Develop a comprehensive conceptualization of vulnerable groups based on available literature.
* Establish theoretical relevance concerning vulnerability.
* Conceptualize vulnerability and vulnerable groups to guide empirical research within the DEFEN-CE project.

The paper consolidates relevant theoretical concepts and approaches to understand vulnerability as a basis for identifying and measuring vulnerable groups within the project. It utilizes a heuristic approach and draws inspiration from various disciplines and concepts beyond social sciences or labor market notions to construct a heuristic matrix for identifying vulnerable groups.

The paper acknowledges that vulnerability lacks a universal definition but remains a potent analytical tool to describe susceptibility to harm and marginality in both individuals and systems. It acknowledges the need for a normative analysis to enhance well-being by mitigating risk. In turn, it summarized multiple definitions of vulnerability, highlighting its basis in exposure, sensitivity, and resilience of systems or social groups to adverse conditions. The paper references a causal space of vulnerability encompassing risk, exposure, coping capacity, and recovery potential as critical analytical concepts central to vulnerability analysis.

The pandemic has expanded vulnerability beyond traditional groups like the disabled, migrants, ethnic minorities, homeless individuals, children, isolated elderly, and low-income families to potentially include those not previously categorized as vulnerable. Acknowledging this fact, the paper proposes a working definition of vulnerable groups affected most severely by the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. It highlights the challenge in defining vulnerability due to its varied interpretations across disciplines, leading to diverse measuring methods and contexts.

It outlines three prevalent themes in vulnerability studies: vulnerability as risk/hazard exposure, vulnerability as social response, and vulnerability of places. Various definitions of vulnerability are presented, emphasizing its multi-dimensional nature encompassing exposure, sensitivity, resilience, coping, and societal marginality.

In essence, the paper synthesizes diverse perspectives and definitions of vulnerability, emphasizing its complex and multi-layered nature, and highlights the interplay between exposure, sensitivity, and resilience within the framework of vulnerability analysis.

The proposed multi-dimensional conceptualization of vulnerability shall be used for empirical studies on uncovering, analyzing and scrutinizing vulnerable groups in the post-COVID19 labour markets.

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The European Commission cannot be held responsible for them.

1. CDC/ATSDR Social Vulnerability Index, available at: <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/placeandhealth/svi/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Guidance on the provision of support for medically and socially vulnerable populations in EU/EEA countries and the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic, 3 July 2020. Stockholm: ECDC; 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. OECD: They are not in employment, or they are often not in employment because their employment contracts tend to be of short duration, or they work on a low work load and/or receive low wage, or their employment contracts are otherwise precarious. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The term was developed by Merrill Singer in the mid-1990s, culminating in a 2009 textbook. Disease concentration, disease interaction, and their underlying social forces are the core concepts. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/programintegration/definitions.htm) (CDC) defines syndemics simply as "synergistically interacting epidemics," meaning they are what happens when two epidemics—higher-than-normal levels of an illness in a community—occur at the same time (for more into see <https://www.health.com/condition/infectious-diseases/coronavirus/what-is-a-syndemic> ) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the statistical analysis of the COVID-19 impact see Eurostat (2022a and 2022b). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For the first evalation studies see for example OECD (2022). First lessons from government evaluations of COVID-19 responses: A synthesis. Available at: <https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=1125_1125436-7j5hea8nk4&title=First-lessons-from-government-evaluations-of-COVID-19-responses> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/glossary_search/vulnerable-person_en> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-gender-equality/people-vulnerable-situations> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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