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Exploring the relationship between energy poverty and mental wellbeing: a qualitative study

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Background: Rising rates of energy poverty in Europe, affecting 11% of households, are a serious public health concern. The inability to meet energy needs impacts mental wellbeing, preventing people from productively engaging in society. Our objective was to explore this relationship within the context of three European cities, each characterized by distinct climatic conditions, cultural and societal characteristics and governance arrangements. This work is part of the European funded research project WELLBASED, grant no. 945097.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews (n = 34) were conducted with people experiencing energy poverty in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Spain. Purposive sampling ensured the representation of a diverse range of family and household types, gender and experiences with energy poverty. Thematic analysis was conducted using MaxQDA software.

Preliminary results: The analysis resulted in six themes: (1) worries and fear (2) stress (3) value of the home and neighborhood, (4) caring for others, (5) engaging with daily life and (6) autonomy in managing the situation and seeking for and receiving support. Participants were worried and stressed about the rising energy bills, the thermal discomfort, and health impacts of their poor housing conditions. In relation to caring responsibilities, participants were especially concerned about the impact on their children and prioritized children's needs. Participants also expressed a strong will for independence and having control over their lives, but at the same time valued being seen and supported.

Conclusions: The persistent worries, fear and stress highlight implications of failure to meet energy needs for mental wellbeing. Caring responsibilities, engaging with daily life and autonomy proved important for mental wellbeing among people living in energy poverty. Our findings call for addressing energy poverty challenges in public health programs to improve mental wellbeing of vulnerable citizens.

Key messages:

- People experiencing energy poverty in the United Kingdom, Spain and the Netherlands recognize the impact of their energy poverty situation on their mental wellbeing.
- The public health community needs to be informed and engaged about the impact of energy poverty on mental wellbeing in order to take action.