The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity intensified hardship for low income households as well as the middle classes, creating new vulnerabilities across Europe. Rising unemployment and cuts in public spending widened material deprivations, increased debt burden, social exclusion, insecurity and reduced autonomy with rising dependency. Though traditionally confined to poverty studies, interest is growing in discussing these issues with reference to ‘resilience’ against major shocks and adversities. It argues against the idea that the poor are passive victims, with little control over their circumstances. Rather, focus should be placed on the resourcefulness and agency of people, particularly regarding their ability to overcome crises and multiple pressures.
Our own research on household resilience in Europe, in collaboration with eight research teams in Europe, covered Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, the UK, Finland, Poland, Germany and Turkey. We demonstrate that ‘resilience’ may accurately reflect households’ ability to survive and adapt in the face of adversity. However, it also hides negative consequences of having to make tough decisions with little resources. Thus social and institutional support is crucial in augmenting households’ ability to adapt.

Institutional social protection has been important in supporting resilience, save some exceptions. Extensive austerity in Greece significantly compromised social rights. Aggressive use of benefit sanctions in the UK created new vulnerabilities, increasing reliance on foodbanks. Households compensate for this through use of debt, alongside support from kinship, solidarity and faith-based networks. Negative side effects include unmanageable debt and stigma associated with charity use:

[S]ometimes you just spend on the card and the bank keep charging you because you just say to yourself, say “listen we’ve got to feed these kids” [Mary, 45 years old, single parent, 3 children, East London]

Austerity and an unstable labour market increased tendencies toward accepting low pay, low grade, precarious jobs and occasionally unreported work. A key informant in Cornwall’s reflections captures these trends succinctly:

it’s a bit of a standing joke locally that you’ll meet somebody who’s painting a neighbour’s house and then you’ll see them again after lunch behind the desk in the bank and then in the evening you’ll go to the pub and they’ll be playing a guitar there and earning a bit of money…. that’s life in Cornwall, it’s self-employment, it’s two or three jobs, it’s patching it all together

The most common household response to hardship was to reduce living costs by economising on essential (especially heating) and non-essential (such as ‘going out’, risking social exclusion) consumption, bargain hunting and greater self-provision. This sometimes had severe results, such as going hungry, signifying limited choices.

Resilience may prove a novel and sustainable way of overcoming and staying out of hardship. Yet, it can carry significant risks to individuals’ and households’ overall wellbeing that is often
glossed over in some of the current scholarship. Well-developed social and economic support structures are required to counter the risks of resilience.

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