

# Homelessness since Covid: an opportunity to re-imagine policies?

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

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# Covid and homelessness

- In March 2020, Italy “closed down” because of the lockdown measures to contain the pandemic’s spread. Since the beginning of the **Covid-19** pandemic, **homeless people have had unprecedented visibilisation in empty cities** (Leonardi and Stefani, 2021);
- **The Covid-19 pandemic had a very severe effect on the homeless population**, especially during the periods of lockdown: **initially the approach toward them was criminalizing** then there was a rapid change in approach partly due to the advocacy work of fio.PSD, the Third sector and the religious world;
- **The unprecedented visibilisation and the situation of emergency** have created some equally unprecedented **possibilities for the rethinking of interventions** aimed at the homeless population.

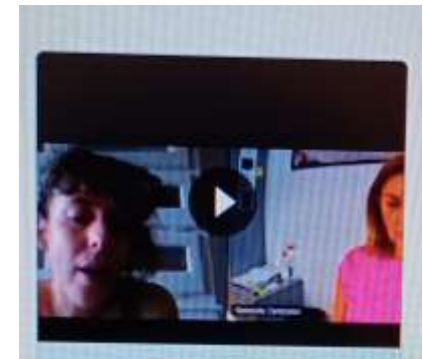
# Research Question

- In time of social and health crisis, what about the **adjustments**, the **changes**, the **innovations** made to **public policies** regarding the interventions aimed at people experiencing homelessness?

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# How to?

- The data, and the consequent reflections, come from a research project that I am currently still working on for Ires Piemonte. It consists of **monitoring and evaluating the implementation of Notice 4/2016** in Piedmont;
- **Case study concerns interventions for homeless people funded by Notice 4/2016**, in particular the **changes and accelerations decided during the COVID-19** pandemic in the **suburban area of Turin**, in Northern Italy;
- The empirical data that have been collected during the first wave of the pandemic in Italy (April 2020 - March 2021). A follow-up is now ongoing (November 2021- March 2023);
- **Documentary analysis**;
- **In-depth interviews** with public managers, social workers, people in HF programs, trainers of fio.PSD, members of associations with an advocacy function, policymakers. All the interviews have been fully transcribed and, subsequently, thematic qualitative analysis was conducted.



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# Notice 4/2016

- Public notice for the submission of **proposals for intervention to tackle the severe adult marginalisation and homelessness**;
- In the text of the call, it is made explicit that the document that should inspire the interventions is the "**Guidelines for contrasting severe adult marginalisation in Italy**". The guidelines stress the determination to overcome a conception of interventions based on an emergency perspective and advocate the principles of **Housing First and Housing led**, which consider reintegration housing as the starting point of social inclusion intervention (ISMERI 2021; Cugno and Leonardi 2021; fio.PSD; 2020);
- **In Piedmont, projects submitted by 5 territorial areas were funded: Alessandria, Asti, Biella, Cuneo, Novara.** The regional agency provided project coordination and, through an agreement with fio.PSD, training interventions.

## The Italian context

The last twenty years have been destructive regarding social equity: the share of national wealth in the hands of the richest 10% has increased by 7.6%, while that of the poorest half of the population has decreased more and more, reducing by 36.6% (Oxfam Report, 2022)

**Homelessness** is a social phenomenon present in all cities, **increasing in quantitative dimension** since 2009 (Consoli, 2020)

Available quantitative data are few and outdated. The latest **2014 ISTAT** survey estimates **50724 homeless people in Italy**. The population is **heterogeneous**: migrant people coming out of reception projects, women victims of domestic violence often with minor children, young people sometimes with addiction problems, caregivers who have lost jobs and housing

At the national level there is no unified framework of interventions, the main paradigm is still the staircase approach but more and more HF and housing led interventions are being implemented.



## The context of the research

The 5 territorial areas object of the research are: **Asti, Alessandria, Biella, Cuneo, Novara.**

The number of people experiencing homelessness over the 5 territorial areas is about 1000. The latest 2014 ISTAT survey estimates 2259 homeless people throughout the Piedmont region.



Interviewees from the 5 territorial areas describe the homeless population as very heterogeneous, and increasing. Some underline how, compared to large cities, there are more options for intervention and how people are less deprived.

From the perspective of interventions, the 5 territories are different from each other in terms of the role of the public sector body and have different levels of development of the reception system. As far as the HF paradigm is concerned, all of them, thanks to Notice 4/2016, were able to take their first steps

# Adjustments, changes, innovations during the pandemic



«The **pandemic** has relentless negative effects, but it also **puts us in the position of having to find effective solutions quickly**. We had a man we didn't know what to do with anymore, it was impossible to take him out of the hospital waiting room. With the pandemic we had to, and thanks also to Notice 4 - which gave us a chance to try things out - we said, **it's do or die. Let's put him directly from the street in a home alone**» (public manager, Asti).



# Adjustments, changes, innovations during the pandemic



«The pandemic has highlighted the importance of public health, the fact that no one is excluded. That's where this operational protocol originated, to make sure that **people experiencing homeless can be visited by a general practitioner like anyone else**» (member of association with an advocacy function).

# Adjustments, changes, innovations during the pandemic



«Previously by 9 a.m. people had to leave, **now the situation has changed and since March 2020 the shelter is open 24 hours and we provide lunch and dinner 4 times a week** » (frontline worker, Novara).

«We addressed the Covid emergency by converting temporary shelters into Housing First. **We did not want to create more shelters, but we tried to ride the wave and enhance this approach.** Because, even in light of pandemic, it seemed to us that the most manageable way was to put people in apartments on their own or with two or three other people, so they had a place to stay even during the day and if someone got sick, if it really happened, two people got infected and not twenty» (public manager, Biella).

# Adjustments, changes, innovations during the pandemic



«With the pandemic I believe that people have realized that they are vulnerable. All of them. **The lesson we need to learn is to remember this fragility and not go back.** Shelters are not adequate, and the pandemic has shown us that. We need accommodations with single rooms, single bathrooms, let's not go back. **I am afraid because sometimes we tend to have short memories**» (member of association with an advocacy function).

# Conclusions:

## the ambivalent effects of the pandemic

- **Internal fractures within the homeless population:** those living on the streets saw their conditions worsen (Brodkin, 2021; Benavides and Nukpezah, 2020) those who were in shelters stayed inside for a long time (the rotation usually in place was stopped) **those who were in HF were more protected** and experienced the pandemic in the same way as the rest of the population (Leonardi and Stefani, 2021);
- The **pandemic** acted as an **amplifier of critical aspects**;
- Unseen possibilities, **accelerator of change, increased funding allocation**;
- At a time of renewed focus on public health issues and on the importance of local welfare systems, **the pandemic has also been an opportunity to re-imagine policies**, important changes have occurred, more space for debate has been created, and there has been greater visibility of the phenomenon;
- Will these effects last over time? **Will the changes become structural? This is the challenge.**

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Thanks for your attention!

Report as part of the evaluations concerning the Regional Operational Program of the European Social Fund POR FSE 2014- 2020 of the Piedmont Region

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