Homeless people, prison, and de-institutionalization: access to alternative measures to detention in Italy

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Historical framework

- from 23 February to 8 March 2020, COVID-19 outbreaks are discovered in Italy; some cities are quarantined; schools and universities temporarily closed, and also prisons, with no explanation

- from 9 March, in Italy there is a ban on travel for unnecessary reasons and the suspension of common activities

- from 7 to 9 March in some prisons there are protests and riots, with different levels of tension and severity

Historical framework: "60 hours of anti-Covid riots"

Bologna
GIANLUCA PERTICONI/Eikon studio

Historical framework

- in February Italian prisons housed 61,230 prisoners compared to 50,931 available places; a 120% overcrowding rate, more realistically 130% due to unavailable places in many of the institutions

- main aim: reduction of prison overcrowding due to the reduction of the risk of spreading the infection from COVID-19 in prison

- ministerial strategy: **increase the access to alternative measures to detention**

Theoretical framework

- **Many homeless have had experience of detention** (Commissione di indagine sull'esclusione sociale, 2003)
- in the bibliographies of homeless people there is a growing correlation between homelessness and periods of detention (and/or internment in psychiatric institutions) (Bergamaschi, 2017)
- this has been found also in some proximity services for homeless to Bologna (Decembrotto, 2017; 2019)
- the issue of a potential reciprocal relationship between homelessness and incarceration is known (Metraux, Roman, & Cho, 2007; Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010; Herbert, Morenoff, & Harding, 2015; Moschion, & Johnson, 2019)

Consequences

- It's possible to find experience of homelessness among the prison population AND experience of incarceration among homeless population (are not strictly the same)
- "less prison and more territory" is not an accessible policy for them
- **recourse to alternative measures to detention usually is not possible in Italy**

Ministerial proposal after Covid-19

- on 3 April to reduce the number of prisoners and to protect their right to health is released a national project for **people "persons without family, financial and housing resources"** (homeless people in prison) **eligible for an alternative measure** called **"Progetto di inclusione sociale per persone senza fissa dimora in misura alternativa"**

- Aim: the identification of organizations on territories available for the reception of prisoners with few resources, but with the requirements for access to alternative measures, in order to facilitate their gradual reintegration into the society

Requests and context notes

- promote processes of social inclusion to reduce prison overcrowding and recidivism;
- promote processes of learning and experimentation of new and different lifestyles, preparatory to active citizenship, through the acquisition of awareness and responsibility for crimes committed and their consequences
- develop psycho-social support to implement the post-penalty reintegration phase with accompanying and guidance actions
- cooperate with UEPE (External Penal Execution Office / Probation Offices, Ufficio esecuzione penale esterna)
- hospitality for a period of six months and not exceeding eighteen months
- territorial projects on a regional basis: (1) CALABRIA; (2) CAMPANIA; (3) EMILIA ROMAGNA; (4) LAZIO – ABRUZZO – MOLISE; (5) LOMBARDIA; (6) MARCHE; (7) PIEMONTE – VALLE d'AOSTA – LIGURIA; (8) PUGLIA – BASILICATA; (9) SARDEGNA; (10) SICILIA; (11) TOSCANA – UMBRIA; (12) VENETO, FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA, TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE/Südtirol
- **there is no final public report** (the end of projects changes on a regional basis)

Research

- Objectives of the research: know the experiences of organisations with skills in homelessness, identify good practices in access to alternative measures for homeless (with a focus on educational activities) and highlight the limits of these projects

- Reference group: Fio.psd members (organisations) who participated to this ministerial/regional call with local projects

- Methodological steps: (1) identification of organisations involved; (2) realization of an online focus group with the coordinators of these projects; (3) analysis of the focus group (with Atlas.ti)

Organisations involved

- 4 organisations (+1 out of ministerial call and use of public funding, excluded from the analysis)
- 3 regions involved: Emilia Romagna, Lombardia, Piemonte
- Total number of persons accepted (beneficiaries): 50
- Duration of projects at the time of the FG: 12-18 months

Who are the (potential) beneficiaries

- young and very young foreigners, whose homeless status is more related to insecure or inadequate accommodation, rather than to houseless or roofless ETHOS conceptual category
- people who suffer multiple disadvantages at the same time (multidimensional poverty) and known to local social services
- people considered dangerous for society, in prison for a long time, with security measures renewed at intervals of six months, following an assessment of dangerousness
- people who commit domestic violence (gender-based violence), so they have lost their homes and relational networks, and become homeless
- homeless before the prison
- specific cases: very old persons, transgender people (no cisgender woman reported)

Who are the (potential) beneficiaries: initial information

- lack of a document (passport, residence permit, etc.)
- high level of poverty, material deprivation
- lack of accessible family network
- addictions and mental health (and severe cognitive delay)
- psychological distress

Main issues, difficulties and obstacles to project

at the beginning of the design

- the service network does not receive the person in community
- "**some of these people were not considered suitable for entry into the community or even in some apartments by the associations of the network, because frankly hyper complex**"
- lack of a legal document
- "**the civil registry did not accept the possibility of creating a residence and therefore access to all the services related to the residence; and this was a great problem for us, because although with the entry into the apartment we had the opportunity to ask for residence, this was not accepted**"
- persons who must return to prison

Main issues, difficulties and obstacles to project

during the design

- civil registration
- right to health: access to medical care and to family doctor
- confusing access to citizenship income (Reddito di cittadinanza) for matters relating to the sentence
- lack of a residence permit
- "**As regards the design of the paths, it is difficult to make meaningful paths with people who have a limit, which is that of the residence permit, the lack of residence; with the others it has been possible to make projects that have led and are leading to job placements to start internships, prospects for reintegration. With the others it was really tiring, if not the placements in voluntary activities for which a network has been activated**"

Main issues, difficulties and obstacles to project

during the design

- addictions and health
- "**despite this project had not been designed for the reception of people with addiction, we welcomed a person with addictions, with an excellent relationship with addiction service; however, it was very difficult to handle the situation, because in the house began to make use of**"

Main issues, difficulties and obstacles to project

at the end of the design

- accommodation not legally assignable at the end of the project
- "**on residence permits the huge problem is that the majority of crime is an obstacle to planning**"
- "**once the detention has ended, any action taken ends if you have not been able to work on the situation of the residence permit**"
- "**they were really young people for whom we thought that a period of security could have an impact on migration path, even if the insecurity of the documents meant that many of these people, once the journey of imprisonment ended, could not access an administrative**"

Expectations of beneficiaries

- expectations very different from what was achieved with the project
- dissatisfaction, frustration
- "**many of them said – excuse me, beautiful place, much better than prison, but in the end when I was inside, I worked little and bad, but I worked and I had money, I saved that money, I could set them aside for the time of exit**"
- a feeling of frustration very high "**because of the regularity on the territory or because the end of the sentence was very short or because there were no other possibilities**"
- who did not want to leave prison to enter these projects
- "**the more conscious people rejected the proposal because they said: – Let me understand what music is like. Then no, thank you, I'm staying here –. And they stayed in prison**"
- "**the wisest/prudent people had themselves explained a little better what the project consisted of and what were the real possibilities**"

Institutional dialogue

- communication between penal system and territory
- "**communication between institutions to get started on the right foot and also transversal communications to involve pieces of the community that in reality we involved more on our initiative than by request of the project**"
- "**the great result achieved with the project was to allow UEPE to create collaborations with the territories and where UEPE, unfortunately, is above all a very isolated service**"
- institutional commitment to the project
- "**It was interesting to me that within EUPE they decided to assign all the cases to a single social worker, to have a general picture and be able to have a person who had in mind the progress of the various projects**"
- "**there is a person that UEPE has identified, a resource that coordinates all the intervention ... there is this figure that is fundamental because it receives all the reports ... in some way optimizes the resources, sorts the reports, knows all the situations and tries to assign them ... Is an educator paid by UEPE … with him we do the first interviews with the people who are in prison with the prison educator, if they are out with the social worker; then there is a hook up before sending and then we build the rest**"

Institutional dialogue

- limits of communication: verbal information
- "**we have always only received verbal information; we have never had information to which we can refer an analysis sheet**"
- limits of collaboration
- "**UEPE knew the terms of the project from a temporal point of view … more than once we were told that for six months of hospitality, rather than even 12, UEPE did not want to invest: he would not have the funds to invest in possible internships possible voluntary pacts, that instead were indispensable so that the project was not alone, pass me the term – I'll move you in the house and stay in the house –, but if the house becomes a tool to be able to build together something that concerns the territory and the possible network that can be built on the territory**"
- "**sometimes I have the feeling that there is not the will of some individual services to dialogue and sometimes just not only lack information, but these people are perceived only as exceptions**"

Strengths of the organisations involved

- high skills and knowledge on homelessness
- strong territorial network (e.g., legal associations, health care associations, voluntary associations)
- start of collaboration with UEPE and creation of a network between it and the territory
- importance of social and educational support, aimed at autonomy
- doubts about the real possibility of building paths of social "reintegration", without a stronger individual planning and greater institutional involvement (prison, UEPE, magistracy, local authority)

Final thoughts

- there are systemic limits, which cannot fall on the life project of the individual
- it is necessary to finalise more the alternative measure to actions in response to homelessness and other deprivation needs
- we still know little about how to approach the deinstitutionalization process (e.g., some people do not have a vision of themselves other than prison, the projects are not sufficiently attractive, etc.)
- we are faced with an attempt to integrate services (public and private, social and health, local and regional) that speak little to each other and address issues in a sectoral way
- research limitations: small group of participants in focus group, concentrated in the north; missing the voice of organizations who developed the project without having skills and knowledge about homelessness; during the focus group did not emerge enough elements to deepen the proposals of educational paths

The following Fio.PSD members participated in the research

- Caritas Ambrosiana
- Cooperativa sociale Piazza Grande
- Cooperativa sociale Progetto Tenda
- Cooperativa sociale Caleidos

In partnership with

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