

The pandemic and homeless people in the Turin area: the level of housing adequacy shapes experiences and well-being

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Abstract

Purpose – Considering the case study presented, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the impact of the pandemic in local services for homeless people. Drawing from the concept of ontological security, it will be discussed how different services' levels of "housing adequacy" shaped remarkably different experiences of the pandemic for homeless people and social workers in terms of health protection and agency.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper focuses on a case study concerning homeless services for people during the COVID-19 pandemic in the metropolitan and suburban area of Turin, in Northern Italy. In-depth interviews with social workers and participant observation during online meetings of workers from the shelters constitute the empirical data that have been collected during the first wave of the pandemic in Italy.

Findings – According to the findings, the pandemic showed shelters as unsafe places that reduce homeless people's decision power and separate them from the rest of the citizenship. Instead, Housing First projects emerged as more inclusive and safer spaces, able to enhance people's power over their own lives. The pandemic did not create emerging issues in the homeless services system or discontinuities: rather, it amplified pre-existing problematic aspects.

Originality/value – The case study presented provides empirical insights to recognise at the political and organisational level the importance of housing as a measure of individual and collective security, calling for an intervention to tackle homelessness in terms of housing policies rather than exclusively social and emergency treatment.

Keywords Homelessness, Pandemic, Housing First, Housing, Shelter, Social policy, Ontological security

Paper type Case study

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1. Introduction

As widely reported by international literature (Brodkin, 2021; Benavides and Nukpezah, 2020), all over the world homeless people have been particularly exposed to the risk of contagion in the COVID-19 pandemic. Housing conditions, indeed, are an essential factor for determining one's risk exposition level and for guaranteeing health prevention. In the literature on homelessness and poverty, housing has been associated with the concept of "ontological security" defined by Anthony Giddens (1990) as a sense of continuity and order in events and defined as a feeling of well-being "arisen from a sense of constancy in one's social and material environment which in turn provides a secure platform for identity development and self-actualisation" (Padgett, 2007, p. 1926). Indeed, secure housing allows several conditions of ontological security: among them, the availability of a "site of constancy," of daily routine, of intimacy free from surveillance and a secure basis for identity construction (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998, p. 29). Ontological security is also associated with people's power over their own lives and future: it comes from the perception of having some

degree of control over and being able to predict one's immediate future. Nowadays, these considerations are shared among institutions and entities aimed at tackling homelessness at the international, national and local levels. Although Italy is lacking a centralised national policy for tackling homelessness, several public and/or third sector entities are allied at the national level in developing adequate networks of services that guarantee impoverished people's right to housing and do not treat homelessness exclusively as an emergency. Moving from these assumptions, we discuss how the pandemic renovates the importance of housing as a basis for "ontological security" and well-being for the homeless people, as much as for the rest of the society.

In the last eight years, we have been researching local services for homeless people in Turin area, in the Northwest of Italy ([Leonardi, 2019](#); [Porcellana et al., 2020](#)). During the first wave of the pandemic in Italy, from February until June 2020, we have kept on observing the reorganisation of these services, collecting news, participating in meetings held by local public officers and carrying out interviews with social workers of shelters and housing services. The pandemic and correlated lockdown have restricted our mobility too, so all the data have been collected through online meetings and interviews, speeches and telephone contacts. In particular, 15 in-depth interviews with frontline workers and social services managers from five municipalities around Turin [1], and 13 in-depth interviews with social workers of eight Turin public shelters were collected [2]. When the conditions allowed it, opinions from services' recipients were added. All the interviews have been fully transcribed and, subsequently, thematic qualitative analysis was conducted. Notwithstanding the constraining conditions of the pandemic, our previous extended participation in the local system of services for homeless people has allowed us to collect meaningful information. Drawing from these data and from the concept of "ontological security," we analyse how different services' levels of "housing" adequacy have shaped the experience and impact of the pandemic for homeless people and social workers during the period considered.

In the next two sections, we describe the progressive reorientation of Turin's shelters to reduce risk in the face of the pandemic. Several economic and human resources have been mobilised to this end. We analyse the paradoxical finding that the well-being of homeless people hosted in Turin's shelters improved during the first months of the pandemic, owing to the organisational changes implemented. As we discuss below, these data illuminate the structural condition of users' precarity promoted by the very structure and organisation of shelters, already before the pandemic. The measures adopted to transform shelters contributed to improving users' living conditions but only partly reduced the risk of contagion. Far from fulfilling "housing needs," in the pandemic, too, shelters have contributed to promoting and perpetuating marginality, rather than reducing it.

The second part of the paper analyses the situation of homeless people hosted in Housing First projects [3]. These projects did not need any substantial transformation in budget allocation, organisation and provision. Based on the recognition of people's housing rights, during the pandemic Housing First was confirmed as a paradigm capable of promoting people's well-being and giving them power over their lives. Indeed, users of Housing First apartments have lived through the pandemic in (almost) the same situation as other citizens. They have been able to choose how to navigate their daily routine, face the risk of contagion and consider to what extent to follow the lockdown measures imposed by the government.

Finally, from this analysis emerges that the pandemic has confirmed housing as a central issue in promoting individual and collective well-being and "ontological security," a consideration that should be kept in mind by policymakers and officers in deciding how to shape local, regional and national answers to the homelessness issue. On this basis, we advocate the importance of addressing homelessness in terms of housing policies rather than exclusively targeting homeless people for social treatment.

2. Transforming the shelters at the pace of emergency

In March 2020, Italy “closed down” because of the lockdown measures to curb the pandemic’s spread. In Turin as in other cities, homeless people remained the sole inhabitants of the public empty space. Homeless people are widely affected by deteriorated health conditions, also owing to the daily life in the streets and shelters [4]. Then, considering the characteristics of COVID-19, they are at risk of complication if infected. Furthermore, they are at risk of contagion owing to the nature of their routines and hospitality services. The City of Turin managed eight public shelters for homeless people [5]. Although in recent years the Municipality has been investing in other kinds of services such as Housing First projects, shelters still receive the largest amount of public funds dedicated to structures for homeless people. Although the critical aspects of the staircase approach – of which shelters are a core element – are well known, it is still a widely spread model in Europe, and it has shown a conspicuous power of survival (Sahlin, 2005; Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007). Most of the local homeless population taken in charge by the municipality’s public service at the beginning of the pandemic was either sleeping in shelters or on a waiting list for this.

Owing to the characteristics of the virus and its spread, shelters emerge as particularly dangerous places (Tobolowsky *et al.*, 2020) [6]. Indeed, they force people to live collectively, to share living spaces like toilets, bedrooms and spaces for eating. Moreover, at the beginning of the pandemic, they were open exclusively by night. While a major part of Turin’s citizens was requested to stay at home, the shelters’ functioning hours did not exempt homeless people from circulating in the city. In the first weeks of lockdown, local libraries, bars and restaurants shut down, as did the two daily centres in the city and other associations where homeless people spent their days resting, volunteering or doing some kind of low-paid work or internships. The main city soup kitchen, managed by a Catholic organisation and sustained with private and public funds, kept on working, delivering lunchboxes with sandwiches. In the first weeks of the pandemic, at 8 A.M. homeless people leaked out of the public shelters and spent their days around in the empty city, waiting in line for the lunchbox, running a risk of being fined by the police and often meeting homeless people from other shelters. Coming back to the structures by the evening, they brought with them the risk of being infected and transmitting the virus to other roommates.

The municipality and third sector entities that managed the public shelters cooperated to transform them to face the risk of contagion. The perception of these facilities as potentially dangerous places was spreading especially among frontline workers. Giorgio, a young man coordinating a shelter, claimed: “In the shelter, everybody is at risk, us and them [the homeless people].” [7] The risk was because of the collective dimension of living, to the functioning hours, to the number of people hosted and to the system of rotation that regulates access. According to this system, one can sleep in the same shelter for 30 nights [8] and then has to move to the access list of another structure.

As the pandemic advanced, the municipality worked to modify these features to make the shelters safer places (Campagnaro *et al.*, 2020). Firstly, the rotation system was interrupted, and new admissions blocked: from the 12th of March, the population hosted in the shelters remained the same, except for people who (voluntarily or forcibly) left the structures. This decision reduced the number of shelter users and the workers’ risk of infection but at the same time left a huge part of the local homeless population to rough sleeping, lacking any kind of support. Luciano, a middle-aged Italian man that was staying in a shelter during the first lockdown, explained during an online interview in May 2020: “I was lucky. I arrived here just the day before the rotation stopped. A few days’ difference and now I would have been sleeping outside for two months in a ‘closed down’ city!”

Therefore, the municipality extended shelters’ operating hours from 12 to 20 and then to 24. The round-the-clock functioning brought new issues along: how to guarantee three meals a

day to the recipients? As we analysed elsewhere (Porcellana *et al.*, 2020), the public contracts held by social cooperatives do not cover food provision. In past years, some cooperatives developed a network of alliances with volunteering associations and minor projects to guarantee cooked meals almost every night in their structures. On the other hand, others continue to follow the city's contract and do not provide any answer to the need for food of the people they host. Then, opening shelters for 24h led to increased expenses – for meals, utilities and workers' extended presence. These emerging costs have been almost totally covered by draining the public fund dedicated to experimental projects proposed by third-sector entities in the previous months. These projects should have made 2020 into a year of experimentation towards the personalisation of services, but the pandemic absorbed all funds to face the emergency.

Facing the emergency was the principle leading the system's actions. While the municipality was struggling to make the shelters less risky, the very likely question of contagion began to be raised. If (when) a shelter user tested positive to COVID-19, where would all the other users spend their quarantine? How would it be possible to guarantee isolation in a collective structure? During an interview, a shelter manager stated: "We do not succeed in anticipating the emergency. We chase it. We look for a solution the moment the problem appears. One week ago, we asked one another: how will we react to the first infection [in a shelter]? Now it's happened and we don't know how to manage it."

Indeed, the first infection in a Turin shelter occurred in an unprepared situation which has seen poor commitment from health services and generated a conflict among the various actors involved: the municipality, the frontline workers and the homeless people. The infected person was transferred to a hospital, but there was no facilities dedicated to the preventive quarantine that other shelter users should follow. The collective structure of the shelter had potentially exposed all the people, workers and users, to contagion. According to the social workers of the cooperative, remaining in the shelter was not a protective solution for people's health. In the following critical days, the city struggled to find an adequate solution for shelter users, receiving little support from the local health agency. Frontline workers stopped working inside the structure and engaged in "outdoor support": from outside the shelter, they kept on supporting people, providing them with food, medicines and information. Some of them expressed frustration in adopting that role, others tried to make the situation better by fulfilling some requests from the people inside the structure: a special food, a book. Together with the social workers, a police patrol surveilled the shelter from outside to avoid potential COVID-positive people getting out of it, making the situation even more critical. As time went on, other shelter users showed virus symptoms and were transferred to the COVID hospital. Finally, after a week, the city found a solution for the remaining people, and the shelter was fumigated. After this critical event, the municipality equipped two additional structures for homeless people and other target groups of social services.

3. Shaping marginality

In the transition described above, Turin shelters deeply modified their functioning. Users created stable groups in each one of them. Social workers started to think of them as "residential communities" more than as shelters. From the interviews we carried out regarding the ongoing changes, unexpected data emerged. Several social workers interviewed declared that homeless people in shelters seemed to feel better in that situation. Carlo, a young man working in a shelter, told us:

We notice that the relationships among them have gotten better. Not all have become friends, but they are supportive of each other. Moreover, I've seen someone doing unbelievable progress. For instance, there is a man who suffered from continuous panic attacks when he arrived in the shelter. [...] Now [...] I wouldn't say he feels at home, but he's more relaxed, he makes some friends. [...] The stability makes a big difference. Usually, the shelter, with its

continuous sense of emergency, of total precarity [...] does not allow several things that at this moment the shelter does allow. The rotation system among shelters does not allow stability. People get stuck in the rotation system (Interview with Carlo, May 2020).

The reduction of the number of hosted people and some space rearrangement also proved to be a welcome change in some cases. A social worker from another shelter explained that they moved cabinets from the walls to the middle of the bedrooms, to create different separated spaces for each person and reduce interactions. Despite the evident precarity of the arrangement, several people from that shelter appreciated the privacy that it gave them. Others started to take care of the space itself: in a shelter, the homeless people actively asked for cleaning equipment to ameliorate their rooms; in another one, they started gardening in the little outdoor space available.

The paradoxical improved sense of safety expressed by some people staying in the transformed shelters is not surprising. All the measures adopted to reduce the structural riskiness of these facilities answer to needs preexistent to the pandemic: among them, the need to sleep in a place with more extended and flexible functioning hours; to have some privacy; to share living spaces with fewer (neither chosen nor known) people; to know that cooked meals will be available for sure; to be sure to sleep in the same bed and buildings in future nights without a time limit (FEANTSA, 2019).

Since its introduction by the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1965) and its adoption in sociological debate thanks to Giddens' (1990) work, the concept of "ontological security" has been widely adopted in studies regarding housing (Padgett, 2007; Hiscock *et al.*, 2001; Cairney and Boyle, 2004; Vinai, 2018; Dupuis and Thorns, 1998). Ontological security consists in the "perception that the world's stability can be taken for granted"; it is a subjective condition of safety that depends on several structural and material elements (Madden and Marcuse, 2020). Indeed, it is a condition rooted in the perception of an acceptable degree of constancy and predictability of the reality we inhabit. The above-mentioned researchers explored the role of housing in providing ontological security. Dupuis and Thorns (1998) identify four main areas where houses play a core role in ensuring one's ontological security. Firstly, home is a place of constancy in the material and social environment. Then, home is a space where routines take place, making each day less unpredictable. Moreover, people feel "safe" at home because it is a place where they can feel free from the surveillance that characterises life elsewhere. Finally, it is a material basis where identities are shaped. It seems to us that ontological security has also to do with power: people need some degree of control and power over their own lives, to develop a routine, shape their identity, enjoy a space free from surveillance and perceive the environment as not threatening.

Our observation of daily life in shelters shows that they do not seem to provide any tools for improving ontological security. Shelter users' sources of security are fragile: they know where they will sleep for a small amount of time, sometimes they change bed and roommates each night. Shelters' rules and functioning leave users little control over their lives. They must adapt their daily routines to the rigid opening times, instead of adapting their use of the place to needs emerging from their own life (Leonardi, 2020). Therefore, shelters have a core role in hindering users' active adoption of protective behaviours health-wise. Food-related pathologies, for instance, are very hard to manage there meals are not guaranteed, soup kitchens feature a standard menu for all users and people lack a place where to cook according to their needs. The situation is even more critical for people with serious pathologies: if they need surgeries, they often delay them, sometimes for years, because they lack a place for pre- and post-intervention recovery. It seems more likely that the organisation of shelters takes away from homeless people control over their health than that they are not aware of health-related issues. Reducing concern over one's own health condition could be a coping strategy to diminish anxiety in the context of a lack of power over one's own life.

Paradoxically, the transformations of Turin shelters owing to the pandemic improved the well-being of many recipients. The structural precarity of life in these facilities was reduced: people were sure to have cooked meals and a place to stay for a longer period. While the whole population of Turin was experiencing a disturbing loss of security and power over their routine, life and future, they regained some (small) degree of predictability over their routine. This paradox is related to the very nature of shelters: indeed, their structure, organisation and functioning substantially contribute to producing the same marginality they are supposed to reduce ([Arapoglu et al., 2015](#)). They play a role in worsening the psycho-physical health of homeless people and in distancing them from the rest of the citizenry. COVID-19 did not turn shelters into dangerous structures owing to the virus's exceptionality: the shelters were already "pathogenic" structures. The pandemic simply highlighted in a more evident way the dangerousness of shelters and provided a favourable framework for public entities' investment in improving their functioning.

At the same time, the improvement here described is deeply ambivalent. First, if stopping the rotation among shelters offered to some people a more stable situation for a few months, it also completely denied any kind of support to a larger amount of the local homeless population, who spent the lockdown period in the streets. These individuals were often the most marginalised: migrants without regular documents who cannot access the shelters; people with addictions or serious mental health issues who do not want to stay there. Some of them were expelled by the reoriented shelters during the lockdown period because they did not comply with the stricter rules imposed to face the pandemic. Another ambivalent point regards the fact that the described transformation was late and partial, and it did not succeed in avoiding outbreaks of the virus a city shelter, issue that highlighted the crucial need for socio-sanitary integration of services.

Finally, the changes introduced had a limited impact in altering the very nature of shelters: collective structures, exposed to social stigma, closer to a total institution ([Stark, 1994](#)) than to a home. Between May and June 2020, when the first peak of the pandemic in Italy was passing and the citizens of Turin were slowly regaining some freedoms, the reoriented shelters showed once again their marginalising function. The collective nature of shelters, indeed, makes them a place of extended risk even after the peak of the pandemic. Law decrees published by the State were written considering the situation of people living in a house. People with a safe housing situation must assess how to behave considering how much their other housemates will be exposed to risk. When one has more than twenty housemates, as in some Turin shelters, the situation is more complicated. Then, social workers decided to maintain shared rules stricter than those prescribed by national decrees, to restrict the mobility of hosted homeless people and their outdoor activities. Some of them had to choose between maintaining irregular work and having a place in the shelters, others were not allowed to spend time having dinner outside with relatives. Social workers described in the interviews how the feeling of safety and relaxation gave way to a growing sense of revolt among homeless people caused by perceiving the different treatment they received compared to the rest of the population. The shelter once again acted as a "separating" dispositive dividing homeless people from the rest of the citizens, shaping their condition of "otherness." Although improved, the shelters continued to perform their function of what Michel [Foucault \(1984\)](#) called "heterotopies": spaces that hide specific exclusions and in which the simple fact of entering means to be excluded from society [9].

3.1 Housing first: an opportunity for safe housing during the pandemic

Not all the homeless people in Turin metropolitan and suburban area were in a dangerous situation at the outbreak of the pandemic. Following the success of the model in other countries ([Busch-Geertsema, 2013](#)), in 2014 the Italian Federation of the Organisations for Homeless People (fio.PSD), an institution that plays a key advocacy role, proposed that the

federation's member organisations should introduce this paradigm into Italy (Cortese, 2016; Consoli *et al.*, 2016; Lancione *et al.*, 2018). The proposal acquired concrete form with the launch of "Network Housing First Italia" (NHFI). It was made up of a network of 54 public, private and third-sector organisations from ten regions, which together have launched a national HF experiment.

The spread of Housing First in Italy was enhanced by the publication of the "Guidelines for tackling severe adult marginalisation in Italy" (2015), the first policy document at the national level to state the intention to overcome an emergency-based approach to interventions [10].

Italian Housing First implementation at the local level is inspired by the main principles of the Housing First model conceived in 1992 by Sam Tsemberis (2010):

- *Housing*: immediate access to housing with no readiness conditions;
- *Choice*: consumer choice and self-determination;
- *Recovery*: recovery orientation;
- *Support*: individualised and person-driven supports; and
- *Community*: social and community integration.

The Municipality of Turin has been part of the NHFI from the beginning. Since 2018, it has managed the new project "Housing First," which aims to host 50 people. Turin HF implementation addressed two different targets of homeless population. The Res.TO project targets chronic homeless people, often suffering from addiction or mental illness, whereas the Abi.TO project comprises homeless people with a less critical situation and often a background experience of working and living alone.

Considering Piedmont region, the HF paradigm has recently spread in the suburban area beyond Turin. Thanks to the funds allocated by Avviso 4/2016, five geographical areas in Piedmont, besides Turin (Asti, Alessandria, Biella, Cuneo, Novara) have experimented with innovative interventions to tackle homelessness. As a public manager from the city of Asti stated, "It was an opportunity to change the assessment of the needs of homeless people."

From an analysis of the empirical data in the case study presented, we can draw some conclusions regarding the functioning of this intervention model during the pandemic. It has highlighted and amplified some of the characteristics of reception in HF and has made it possible to reflect on similarities and differences with the reception in shelters.

In most cases, we have intensified mutual/reciprocal contacts, just with the same media as we [interviewee and researcher] are speaking with. The relationship has changed because at certain times, especially in March, in the first lockdown period, people were daily in touch with one another, which was not the case before. We [social workers and beneficiaries] had to learn how to make requests online, and from that point of view, it was also an opportunity for people to learn how to do these things (Luca, HF social worker in Turin).

On our territory, among people in HF, we have not had a single case of infection (Stefania, caseworker in Alessandria).

Accommodating people in HF means protecting their health and that of others. There is no risk of creating any Covid clusters. People are much more relaxed (Claudia, social worker in Biella).

It is interesting to highlight that this model of intervention during the pandemic brought the homeless people who benefited from it, closer to the lives of the rest of the population. As pointed out by the interviewee, like happened to the rest of the housed people, they amplified the use of media for communication with the outside world, were able to choose whether to meet people indoors or outdoors and learned how to deal with institutions and bureaucracy online.

Looking at some of these aspects in more depth, people living in the Housing First apartments had at their disposal more agency, power and control over their own health and lives. They were enjoying the material and structural conditions to cope with the pandemic by being effectively part of the citizenry instead of being considered as a distinct target. The interviewed social workers described a situation of extremely different attitudes towards the emergency on the part of people in the services. Some of them were frightened and kept on avoiding going out even when the incidence of COVID-19 in Piedmont was decreasing. Others were more sceptical and did not follow the rules strictly, “but at least they could choose whether to do it” commented a social worker, comparing this situation with the lack of freedom in the shelters. This does not mean that they experienced the pandemic crisis like everyone else. Indeed, the measures aimed at blocking contagion impacted citizens’ lives in several different ways depending on one’s income and working condition, housing, family ties, gender, etc. People living in Housing First apartments often live on a very poor monthly income, coming from a traineeship contract provided by the social services, irregular jobs or the minimum wage subsidy recently introduced in Italy [11]. They often rely on a “bricolage” scheme of gigs, supports, use of homeless services such as soup kitchens. The pandemic hindered several of these practices and reduced these people’s already low income. The social cooperatives responsible for the services took action, providing a new kind of support to these people. Generally, however, they are able to face the pandemic in a safe space, facing challenges analogous to the rest of the population (as fear, loneliness, bore). Social workers said that the situation in which the person lived alone in the apartment, as suggested by the pure Housing First model, where the best one, because does not force people to an intensive cohabitation in the lockdown moment. Nevertheless, in the considered Piedmont geographical areas that were experimenting with HF, this was not possible and people lived in co-habitation. Seen the features of HF houses, the project did not need to undergo an intense transformation, neither had to attract new economic resources as happens to the local shelters.

During the first pandemic wave, indeed, HF’s users continued to face difficulties they had already faced in previous times: economic subsistence concerns and loneliness. Before the pandemic, HF’s users struggled to make ends meet and during the lockdown period, they saw their economic strategies for survival reduced or hindered, as we have already mentioned. Loneliness is a further remarkable challenge of the HF project, as Federico, a social worker, said: “Once one is in a house, loneliness often becomes difficult to manage.” Obviously, the pandemic worsened this situation. However, HF’s users shared these difficulties with a significant part of the population: being in a house allows them to experience a dramatic situation such as the pandemic while being included in society.

During the interviews, we also had the opportunity to analyse the working conditions and perceived safety of social workers in HF. Compared to shelters, the situation is very different. As Luca, a Housing First social worker, told us:

We, as workers in HF, have had no safety problems during the pandemic. We have given a smartphone to people who did not have one [...] Of course, everyone’s life has changed, so we may no longer have a timetable, but no one has felt in danger.

When you go to a person’s apartment, first of all, you can always choose to see each other outside on a bench. If you really have to go, you can stay on the balcony. Then it’s a one-to-one interaction, it is different [...] We were able to work in a safe situation and that makes a difference.

To sum up, during the pandemic Housing First showed the following strength points:

- a time dimension marked by less precariousness, as the person can have unlimited access to accommodation;

- ontological security but also more “material” security during a pandemic, as people are not exposed to the risk of contagion;
- no need for significant extra economic resources to adapt the service to the pandemic;
- more agency allowed to beneficiaries, as they can choose whether and how to meet and to what extent to comply with the instructions for containing the pandemic; and
- a condition for homeless people similar to that of the rest of the population, in a less ghetto-like model of intervention.

We notice that our results for Piedmont are in line with the findings of the national instant report: “To be sure, a better response to the emergency has been possible for the Housing first. [...] Several organisations we interviewed praised the ability of housing-oriented services to offer physical safety to guests, on the one hand, and to bring out the resources of homeless people on the other” (fio.PSD, 2020, p. 5) [12].

The experience of COVID-19 reinforces the evidence that the Housing First paradigm has more efficacy in protecting the health, dignity and rights not only of the HF recipients but often of workers, too. Housing is a basis for citizenship (Appadurai, 2013), but HF currently affects only a small number of beneficiaries [13]. This is an important step in the direction of considering homeless people as full citizens, but an intervention to prevent evictions would be even more important, with a view to better guaranteeing the right to decent and safe housing, which was manifested in all its urgency during the pandemic.

3.2 Matter of housing rights

With the pandemic, the usually made-invisible homeless population became extremely visible. As we have seen, the different experiences of housing shaped the experience and impact of the pandemic on homeless people. The inequalities between those who were able to stay at home during the lockdown and those who did not have this possibility were more evident and their consequences even more serious. At the same time, the fractures and inequalities within the homeless population have increased: inequalities between those hosted in shelters and those left on the streets, those hosted in Housing First projects and those in shelters.

Compared to people hosted in the shelters, people in Housing First were less exposed to the risk of contagion and, just like the rest of the population, had some degree of agency and control over their lives during the development of the pandemic. People in shelters ran an increased risk, given the collective dimension of their living and the organisation of hosting structures’ functioning. Their agency and control over their health and daily routine were reduced if compared with the rest of the population (which was also limited in movement by the lockdown measures). However, as we have stated, COVID-19 did not turn shelters into dangerous structures because of the virus’s exceptionality: they were already “pathogenic” structures. The pandemic merely highlighted in a more evident way their dangerousness and provided a favourable framework for public entities’ investment in improving their functioning. The pandemic did not create emerging issues in the homeless services system or discontinuities: rather, it amplified pre-existing problematic aspects.

In our research, we have tried not to consider the homeless population as a separate entity, distinct from the rest of the population. We have highlighted when experiences during the pandemic have been closer and when they have diverged. Poverty is a *relational* concept, as Simmel (1908/2015) taught us, and this is a fundamental aspect for us from an analytical point of view. As shown by the pandemic, until we are all safe, nobody will be safe. Then, shelters cannot be an effective answer to the homelessness issue because, as we have described, they contribute to perpetuating marginality and do not offer tools for improving recipients’ ontological security. From the point of view of policy implications, it follows that

homeless people must be regarded as citizens in their own right and that homelessness must also and primarily be addressed as a question of housing, of housing rights. “At home we can be ‘ourselves’. Elsewhere, we are someone else. At home, we take off our mask” (Desmond, 2016, p. 453).

Notes

1. The interviews in suburban Turin area were part of the monitoring of Avviso 4/2016 in Piedmont, carried out on behalf of the research institute IRES Piemonte. See [Leonardi \(2021\)](#).
2. The interviews to shelters' workers were part of a wider research on Turin services for homeless during the pandemic, carried out with the colleagues Cristian Campagnaro, Giorgia Curtabbi and Nicolò Di Prima.
3. With the expression “Housing First” we refer both to the paradigm and to different projects inspired by this paradigm. The implementation of Housing First approach originates Housing First project that differs among them, according to territorial available resources and governance models ([Molinari and Zenarolla, 2018](#)).
4. See the report *Homelessness and Health: What's the Connection* of US National Health Care for the Homeless Council, available at: <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/homelessness-and-health.pdf>
5. Two of them for women, one mixed and five for men. During the winter, the City opened an additional shelter, bringing the total up to nine. Moreover, a base camp managed by the Italian Red Cross provides a low threshold shelter in winter, but owing to the deep structural differences between this latter shelter and the others, we do not consider it in this paper.
6. In a study published in 2016 regarding the issue of homelessness in Canada, [Gaetz and Bucciari \(2016\)](#), drawing from the experience matured during H1N1 epidemic, described in detail why and how the homeless population and shelters were particularly at risk of contagion in case of the spreading of a likely future pandemic.
7. We use fictitious names to protect the interviewees' privacy.
8. Reduced to seven for people resident in another municipality.
9. The suitability of heterotopy concept for the shelters is an insight of our colleague [Nicolò Di Prima \(2017\)](#).
10. The document represents an important attempt to establish a common framework in a context, such as the Italian one, characterised by huge territorial differences and in which policies aimed at homeless people are often left to the initiative of individual territories and are therefore characterised by a strong discretion ([Leonardi, 2019](#)).
11. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2019/03/29/19A02239/sg> (accessed on 20 February 2021). See [Saraceno et al. \(2020\)](#); [Baldini and Gori \(2019\)](#).
12. See Instant report edited by fio.PSD in collaboration with Caritas Italiana, available at: https://www.fiopsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Instant_report_2020.pdf (accessed 24 February 2021).
13. In the detailed review of services for homeless people in the Turin metropolitan area published by [Bianciardi \(2017\)](#), HF was not present as its implementation was not yet developed.

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