

# The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Life of Italian Mobile Peoples

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## Abstract

This report provides an account of the research conducted in Italy and relates to the most relevant and evident effects of the pandemic on the lives of some families of nomadic service providers (mainly Sinti fairground workers and Roma scrap metal collectors from Emilia Romagna). This was part of a wider research conducted within the framework of the “Re-imagining Development for Mobile and Marginalised Peoples” (ReDeMP) project (financed by the John Fell Fund at Oxford University in 2021) on the sedentist bias in development policies towards mobile peoples.

What emerged from research was an explicit sedentist bias pervading housing policies toward Roma and Sinti in Italy, in the guise of the restricted access to social services as a result of the bureaucratic trap of registered residence; a more implicit sedentist bias in Italian work regulations, which hamper the itinerant activities of fairground workers and scrap metal collectors.

**Keywords:** development; sedentist bias; nomadic service providers; Roma and Sinti; Covid-19 pandemic

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## Introduction

Within the scope of the “Re-imagining Development for Mobile and Marginalised Peoples” (ReDeMP) research, financed by the John Fell Fund at Oxford University (UK) from 01-02-2021 to 30-06-2022, a group of researchers (diverse in training and fields of study), carried out research on sedentist bias in development policies towards mobile peoples<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/research/re-imagining-development-for-mobile-and-marginalised-peoples>.

The term “mobile peoples” refers to an ensemble of heterogeneous and diverse groups, which includes mobile pastoralists and itinerant service-providers. These groups differ from refugees and migrant workers in that their mobility, rather than being a strategic response to displacement or poverty, is central to cultural, economic, and political organization as well as a unifying value for group identity.

Mobile peoples are often invisible and marginal in mainstream development, which can favour sedentary populations by promoting static infrastructure, fixed residence, urban service provision and private ownership of land and resources.

Broadly speaking, the aim of the ReDeMP project was to build a cross-regional base of evidence about the effects of sedentist development policies on mobile peoples. Nevertheless, since the fieldwork was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the researchers also decided to carry out particular case studies on the impact of this crisis on the lives of the mobile peoples involved in the various research contexts<sup>2</sup>.

Some of the results of this research were presented at the 9th Conference of the Italian Society of Applied Anthropology (SIAA) (Rome, 15-18 December 2021)<sup>3</sup> and at the ReDeMP project’s final conference in (Oxford, 7-8 January 2022), while several publications are currently being compiled both on covid case studies and on the local forms of sedentist bias in development policies that the field research uncovered<sup>4</sup>.

This report<sup>5</sup>, merely provides a brief account of the research conducted in Italy and relates to the most relevant and evident effects of the pandemic on the lives of some families of nomadic service providers (mainly Sinti fairground workers and Roma scrap metal collectors from Emilia Romagna).

## **The Italian covid case study for the ReDeMP project: site introduction and Covid-19 overview**

Italy was the first country in the “Global North” to be heavily affected by the epidemic. After a state of emergency was declared in March 2020, the initial institutional response was to create a special task force to deal with the emergency, implement measures of social distancing (lockdown and travel ban) and enforce the mandatory use of DPI (personal protective equipment). Subsequent measures included a vaccination campaign and the institution of a Covid Health Pass (known as the ‘Green Pass’) as a mandatory requirement for all employees and customers in public and private workplaces until the end of the state of emergency.

National authorities also tackled the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic through measures such as increasing remote working from home and redistributive interventions like

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<sup>2</sup> Cory Rodgers (Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University) and Greta Semplici (European University Institute) worked on the Kenyan case; Dawn Chatty (Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University) on the Lebanon case; Ariell Ahearn Ligham (School of Geography and the Environment at Oxford University) on the Mongolian case; Matthew Porges (Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University) on the Mauritanian case; Marco Solimene (University of Iceland) and Stefania Pontrandolfo (University of Verona) on the Italian case. All the researchers, due to covid restrictions on mobility, worked in cooperation with local consultants. For the Italian case study, the local consultant was Laura Secchi (PhD student, University of Seville).

<sup>3</sup> As part of the panel co-ordinated by Stefania Pontrandolfo, Cory Rodgers, Greta Semplici and Marco Solimene entitled “Addressing the sedentist bias in development”, which featured Dawn Chatty as discussant, see: <http://www.antropologiaapplicata.com/ix-convegno-siaa-2021/>

<sup>4</sup> For the research conducted in Italy, see, for example, Pontrandolfo and Solimene (currently under preparation).

<sup>5</sup> The report is the result of the joint work of the three authors in all phases of planning, drafting and reviewing.

furloughing, income of citizenship and extra economic support for the most exposed categories (see MEF 2020). These measures partially contributed to the national economy's recovery process. Besides being a health crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic can also be described as a socio-economic, ecological, and cultural crisis which clearly brought many of the national system's structural problems to the surface. In fact, the chances of catching Covid-19, disease prevention and treatment, the severity of contagions and mortality rates as well as living conditions during the pandemic, were all deeply affected by a person's position within a landscape of structural inequalities and a hierarchical system of social relations (see FRA 2020; Associazione 21 Luglio 2021; Della Puppa and Sanó 2021; Ardolino and Miscioscia 2021; Sarafian 2022; Tagliacozzo *et al.* 2021)

Healthcare facilities were overwhelmed during the pandemic and the extra measures (such as the recruitment of temporary health workers) did not solve these structural problems, which are the result of “decades of state disengagement in public health, budget cuts, staff reductions, abandonment of territorial medicine, the concentration of medicine in large hospitals, distancing from a genuine concept of public health and social medicine” (Perocco 2021: 243-244). As for the economic system, some categories were obliged to continue working in unsafe conditions, others were forced to a standstill and others had to adjust to remote working. The rise in mortality rates among the working classes and those with a lower level of education (ISTAT 2020: 88), however, show that health inequalities were connected to wider societal inequalities. Housing conditions played a major role in terms of exposure to the virus and contagion severity. They also impacted the capacity to endure the crisis, especially during the lockdown phase. The highest toll was paid by people living in small, overcrowded housing with poor infrastructures and those without an house, for example, people living in so-called “nomad camps” located on the outskirts of Italian cities.

As for education, remote schooling was promptly implemented but students belonging to underprivileged groups encountered problems in accessing the necessary equipment and a stable internet connection.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Covid-19 impacted more harshly on social sectors such as prison detainees, migrants, the homeless and discriminated minorities such as Roma and Sinti living in difficult dwelling conditions.

## **Development policy framework**

The specificity of the Italian case study requires a short explanation of the political and institutional framework. Historically, the governance of Roma in Italy has lacked any formal national structure. Since the end of WWII, and for decades thereon, state authorities showed a high level of prejudice towards so-called *Zingari* (Gypsies) — considered dangerous due to being considered outsiders and their nomadic way of life — and maintained total disregard in terms of policies. The consequent lack of legislation on a national scale meant that the only measures implemented were on a local level and these usually consisted of repressive interventions such as local ordinances prohibiting nomads from setting up camps. The 1980s witnessed a change as the presence of people categorized as *Zingari* (Gypsies), *Nomadi* (Nomads) and sometimes *Rom* (Roma) started receiving institutional attention. This translated into a series of Regional Laws, which, in various and often controversial and counterproductive ways, led to particular forms of soft recognition of these groups' right to mobility (see Associazione 21 Luglio 2010; Clough Marinaro and Sigona 2011; Piasere 2012).

Things have started to change since the European Union also introduced a framework strategy for Roma development/integration/inclusion among its cohesion policies<sup>6</sup> (as of 2010), which obliged member states (including Italy) to equip themselves with “national strategies” to combat the inequalities these communities were subject to in their territories.

At the time of the research, the development policy framework outlined in the Italian case study was involved in the EU, national and local policies listed below:

## EU level

- “2020-2030 EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation”, developed along 7 axes of development/integration: anti-Gypsism, inclusion, participation, education, work, health, housing (7 October 2020)<sup>7</sup>. This framework already clearly highlighted how the Covid-19 pandemic revealed “the extreme exposure of excluded and marginalised Roma communities to negative health and socioeconomic impacts” (EU 2021: 2).

## National level

- 2012 National Strategy for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC) (implementation of the Recommendation of the European Commission n. 173/2011; based on the 2010-2020 EU framework; adopted by the National Office against Racial Discrimination – UNAR). Note that since Roma and Sinti are not legally recognized as national minorities, they are not addressed by any special national policy. The national health system also maintains a mainstream approach (with no special interventions/projects for Roma and Sinti communities)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The opportunity of speaking about “development policies” for the European context was discussed within the ReDeMP project research group from the very onset of the project. For a thorough reflection on the appropriateness of defining European “cohesion policies” (including those regarding Roma) as “development policies”, we would refer to the work of Pontrandolfo and Solimene (under preparation), while we limit ourselves here to pointing out that the literature has repeatedly emphasized that “development” is a “buzzword” (Edelman and Hagerud 2005), “a discursive shell capable of modifying and legitimizing its largely arbitrary content in a particular manner” (Ziai 2009: 199). Development could be better understood in its connection to globalization processes and the advent of neoliberalism as globally widespread, like something extremely dynamic, constantly adapting to local contexts, readjusting to changes and able to absorb critical stances against it (e.g. Hadjimicalis and Hudson 2014; Hout 2010). The existence of development policies implemented within the European space is nothing new. In the 1950s, in the aftermath of WWII, the risk of internal inequalities turning into a trigger of a new conflict within Europe pushed the newly made European community to envisage so-called “cohesion policies”. Funded on the principle of solidarity, based on the principles of subsidiarity and partnership, these policies have historically addressed areas struggling with poverty, lack of infrastructures and transportation as a result of the late conflict (such as Eastern Germany) but also the legacy of structural inequalities historically rooted in specific areas (such as southern Italian regions) (Di Sciascio 2014; Viesti 2011). These EU cohesion policies include the EU framework strategy for development/integration/inclusion of Roma, adopted since 2010, on which all the current member states’ “national strategies” are based. This means that policies aimed at Roma and Sinti in Europe are not really part of the more general welfare policies that apply to all other European citizens.

<sup>7</sup> This was preceded by the “2010-2020 EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies”, that already described the Roma as a highly discriminated minority in need of support along 4 axes of development/integration: education, work, health, housing.

<sup>8</sup> It is hereby pointed out that, just after the ReDeMP project terminated, the Italian National Office Against Racial Discrimination (*Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali* – UNAR) adopted the “National Roma and Sinti equality, inclusion and participation strategy (2021-2030), on 23 May 2022, as an enactment of the EU Council Recommendation of 12 March 2021 (2021/C 93/01), which requested a renewal and review of national strategies for Roma inclusion. The

## Regional level

- Regional Laws, first introduced in 1980s, then reframed according to the 2012 National Strategy
- Emilia-Romagna Regional Law (11/2015)

## Local level

- Municipal ordinances (Bologna, Modena, Spilamberto)
- Dedicated sectors of city administrations (e.g., Modena Municipality's Special Project Office and Bologna Municipality's Social Services)

The complexity, and at times hiccups, within the implementation of the EU framework into the national and (especially) local frameworks, has resulted in the situation where development policies towards Roma and Sinti are actually proposed and implemented locally (normally through cooperation between local authorities and the Third Sector). This explains our decision to focus on the local level. We chose the Emilia-Romagna Region (see figures) and three, different-sized sites in particular: Bologna (the regional capital, with 394,449 inhabitants), Modena (187,360 inhabitants and the highest number of fairground workers in the region), and Spilamberto (12,735 inhabitants). Emilia Romagna was one of the first Italian Regions to adopt a Regional Law for the inclusion of Roma and Sinti, which introduced innovative measures in terms of housing policies (in fact, the idea of *micro-areas* sprang from there). Following the National Strategy's critical stance toward the segregating effects of the so-called camp system, the more recent 2015 Emilia-Romagna Regional Law (11/2015) - followed by the 2016 Emilia-Romagna Regional Strategy for the inclusion of Roma and Sinti (402/2016) - focused on the transition from 'nomad camps' (*campi nomadi*) to places for temporary stopovers (*aree di sosta*) to *micro-aree monofamiliari* (small scale settlements permanently inhabited by extended Sinti families). In fact, this progression often goes no further than the stopover areas. Another reason behind our choice was that Emilia Romagna has a historical presence of Italian Sinti and Roma who practice an itinerant lifestyle while also maintaining a stable dwelling space. Most are service providers who carry out itinerant working activities (fairground attractions, scrap metal collection and peddling). These activities often involve every family member and are carried out eclectically. Besides mobility, therefore, a fundamental characteristic of this population is economic eclecticism, which also proved useful when coping with the pandemic. As for the juridical situation, all persons involved in the research have Italian citizenship. However, most (especially, but not exclusively, those involved in scrap-metal collection) work informally (i.e., without all the permits required and/or formal registration). There are also those who lack the registered

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new Italian strategy seems an interesting document because it also acknowledged and explicitly took into account how the living conditions of Roma and Sinti in Italy worsened during the pandemic crisis. "Discrimination, social exclusion and the segregation that affect the lives of Roma and Sinti people living in contexts at risk of exclusion and marginalisation have been mutually reinforced and exacerbated by the conditions generated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. [...] Given their previous situation of limited access to quality education and their difficulty in entering the labour market, some particularly vulnerable Roma and Sinti groups were more exposed to unemployment and job insecurity, limited access to quality health care and precarious living and health conditions during the pandemic" (UNAR 2022: 7).

residence even when domiciliated in camps and micro-areas. This condition of dwelling and work (in)formality sometimes creates friction with local administrations.



Figure 1. Map of the Emilia Romagna Region with its provinces (source: <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emilia-Romagna>)

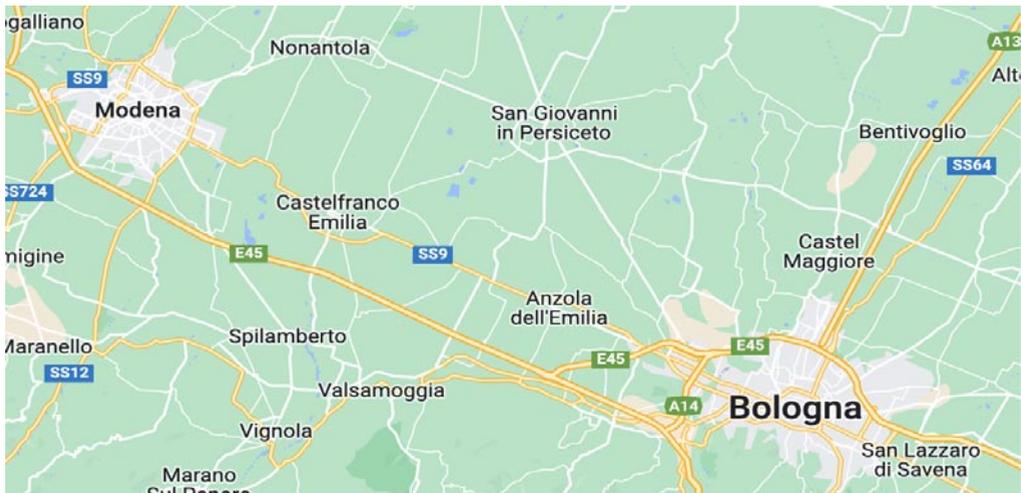


Figure 2. Geographical location of Bologna, Modena and Spilamberto (Image from Google Maps reworked by Authors)

## Research method

The field research was conducted between June and August 2021 by Laura Secchi with the coordination and supervision of Stefania Pontrandolfo and Marco Solimene. Restrictions due to

the Covid-19 pandemic were partly sidestepped thanks to the network of contacts that Laura Secchi had already established, particularly in the area of Modena city and province, with many Sinti living there with whom she was able to have several ethnographic conversations on the topics of the research. In addition to these informal contacts, 20 semi-structured interviews (recorded and transcribed) with Sinti, several non-Sinti travelling showmen, some institutional representatives (local administrators, school personnel) and Third Sector players (Red Cross, charity associations, Fairground Workers' Union) also took place.

The interviews were accompanied by fieldnotes that the local consultant wrote throughout the research period in which she noted down the context of each interview as well as all the information collected through informal conversations with her informants. These fieldnotes contributed considerably to contextualizing the knowledge obtained from interviews and, at the same time, to accessing an ethnographic depth that interviews alone do not provide. This was especially true in our case since our field assistant's well-established contacts, particularly with some of the Sinti interviewees, meant that regular contacts throughout the research could be maintained. These regular contacts were of particular importance in accessing the internal point of view of the Sinti in the absence of public advocacy actions or Roma/Sinti and/or pro-Roma/Sinti associations or institutional actors not reporting situations of distress (as was the case during the pandemic period in other local contexts)<sup>9</sup>. In the context of our research, we found instead a certain restraint from public speaking about Covid-19 cases and/or outbreaks in Sinti settlements for fear of worsening relations with non-Roma/Sinti society, for instance, triggering the mechanism of victim blaming. A fear justified by cases of negative public reactions with strong visibility in the media following cases of presumed or real outbreaks in Roma settlements (see for example the cases of Rome and Campobasso denounced by FRA 2020: 11). The three authors of this report accompanied and followed up this fieldwork with numerous moments of sharing and commenting on all these research materials. These exchanges were of fundamental importance for the comparative analysis and theoretical reflections that are emerging in the scientific publications currently under preparation.

## **Main findings**

The research revealed several examples, both explicit and less blatant (but not less impactful), of sedentist bias in local policies towards Roma and Sinti.

Since the Covid-19 crisis in Italy was managed with a mainstream approach, no special policies for Roma and Sinti were implemented on either a national or local level.

As for many other rights implied by citizenship, the criterion for accessing support/aids from local social services during the pandemic was having a registered residence, which is also the fundamental requirement for being eligible for any kind of assistance from local administrations.

In order to obtain registered residence in Italy, not only is Italian citizenship or a valid residence permit required, a person must also have a regular work contract and a fixed abode in line with the strict housing standards established by local administrations. This is an example of ex-

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<sup>9</sup> See for example the statements of "Associazione 21 luglio" for the condition of Roma in the city of Rome; of Foundation "Casa della Carità" and NGO "Naga" for the Roma condition in Milan; or the "Nazione Rom" association statement for the Roma condition in Florence. See for example the public plea to Italian municipalities against the adoption of discriminating criteria preventing access to solidarity measures during the pandemic by ASGI and UNAR. These denouncing and advocacy actions are outlined in the FRA report on the implications of Covid-19 pandemic on Roma communities in Italy (2020), but nothing similar has been observed in the local context of our research (to our knowledge, this research is the only attempt to detect and make public these Sinti and Roma voices and perspectives).

plicit sedentist bias: obtaining registered residence is difficult for Roma and Sinti who live in spontaneous/informal settlements or in authorised “camps” or micro-areas, even if they have integrated and are rooted in the local context and live in abodes, such as mobile homes, which not all local administrations consider suitable.

Just as in our research context, the inhabitants of camps and micro-areas in Bologna and in Modena were also Sinti and Roma with registered residence although there were also those (often connected to the former by family linkages) whose residency there was not formally registered (even if they had been living there for some time). We also encountered Sinti families who had been stranded by the lockdown in Bologna and Modena due to the temporary halt in fairground work and, since their residency was registered in other municipalities, these families were not entitled to institutional help from local authorities and could not even rely on informal support from their family network (at the time living elsewhere).

One of the most explicit examples of this evident sedentist bias was Italian Civil Protection Decree No. 658 of 29 March 2020<sup>10</sup>, which foresaw assigning an extraordinary fund to Italian municipalities to finance urgent measures of food solidarity. “Thanks to this fund, Italian municipalities could provide during the emergency period store credits (*buono spesa*) in the form of food vouchers to spend in supermarkets and other food stores, to buy food and other essential goods. However, the Decree established that these resources were to be destined to the population legally residing in the municipality’s territory, meaning that only the people enrolled in municipal civil registries are eligible for this welfare provision: the Decree did not go into details in the procedures’ governance, leaving room to the regulatory power of municipal authorities. [...] It is possible to stress the imposing the legal residency as the primary criterion to benefit from store credits, would entail some of the most vulnerable social groups, such as homeless people (who have not a legal residency in the municipal territory), third-country citizens with an irregular administrative status and Roma people living in informal encampments” (FRA 2020: 4). In order to try to help all those excluded from this food aid distribution system by means of “shopping vouchers”, in the localities where our research took place, additional measures were adopted to distribute food parcels to those in the territory without registered residence, either on the initiative of the third sector (this is the case of the Red Cross in Modena) or on the initiative of local administrations (this is the case of the social cooperative Società Dolce, which manages the social services of the Municipality of Bologna).

Indeed, in the initial phase of the pandemic, during the lockdown in spring 2020, the Red Cross in Modena and the social cooperative Società Dolce in Bologna distributed food parcels to all the families living in micro-areas, camps or stopover sites irrespective of the registered residence requirement. Given the extraordinary character of the emergency, these agencies side-stepped the need for registered residence to provide support to everyone, including those who were not formally entitled to receive it.

This strategy was more difficult to implement in the second phase of the pandemic when the suspension of economic activities was interrupted at a national level and the supply of food by charity associations decreased dramatically. In this phase, support from local authorities basically consisted of not charging any tax for occupying the public land that the stranded fairground workers, who were not able to work, could access.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/it/normativa/ocdpc-n-658-del-29-marzo-2020—ulteriori-interventi-urgenti-di-protezione-civile-in-relazione-all-emergenza-relativa-al-rischio-sanitario-connesso-all> (Accessed 16/11/2022).

At the national level, the Government provided extra redistributive measures (so-called “*ristori*”) for self-employed workers. The Ministry of Cultural Activities, in particular, redistributed a lump sum payment of 3,000 euros to travelling show operators (including fairground workers). However, in order to be eligible to receive that sum, regular payment of social security contributions was required. This situation hindered access to state help for many small family-owned businesses (the majority of Sinti fairground workers) – many of whom, when the first lockdown was announced, had just invested all their savings in winter work in preparation of the spring season. Without other income, these families used their last savings for daily necessities and were therefore not able to pay their social security contributions.

As for scrap metal collection, while national legislation on recycling regulates the activities of large companies operating in the sector, the small-scale activity of self-employed scrap metal collectors/sellers (an activity in high demand that large metal dealers need since it is the first link in the recycling chain) is not addressed by the law (see Santilli 2017). This legislative void obliges most Sinti and Roma scrap metals collectors to work informally (because small-scale businesses are not regulated) and this, in turn, hindered access to state support during the pandemic.

In short, being designed for workers with stable, regular and non-seasonal forms of earnings, the government’s extra redistributive measures expressed and reproduced an implicit sedentist bias.

At the end of our research (winter 2021), a return to normalcy in terms of working activities led to several challenges. Scrap metal collectors could not work even though the restrictions on mobility had been lifted since they only involved collectors with legal permits. Fairground workers did not recover the initial capital used in preparation of spring itinerance (insurance, vehicle and fairground attraction maintenance, fuel...) and spent before the lockdown. Moreover, in many cases, savings had been gradually eroded to cover the costs of living. Municipalities hindered them even further: many mayors were still opposed to fairground reprisals, even when pressed by townspeople and fairground workers. Many Sinti, as well as non-Sinti fairground workers, complained about the underlying racism behind the mayors’ decisions. In general, only fairground workers with good connections in local administrations and/or large fairground worker organizations (such as ANESV<sup>11</sup>) could restart their activities. Covid-19, therefore, unearthed considerable inequalities within the world of fairground workers, where dominant enterprises have a greater chance when faced with difficulties than small family-run enterprises, such as those of many Sinti. It also highlighted the importance of having good relationships with local institutions and communities when it came to getting back to work.

As for education, online learning for itinerant students (as many Sinti children are) has never been an option. During the pandemic, remote schooling was provided by many schools but students living in camps and micro-areas did not always have access to technical equipment and were often faced with a lack of proper infrastructures (first and foremost, a stable and reliable internet connection). Spilamberto proved to be an interesting case *sui generis*. Here, the smallness of the village and fairground workers’ community, together with a long history of positive social relations between the latter and local teachers, worked efficiently against children temporarily dropping out of school during the lockdown period.

As for healthcare, no specific intervention was envisaged for Roma and Sinti at either a national or local level. The Italian health system ideally ensures all Italian citizens with access to

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<sup>11</sup> *Agenzia Nazionale Esercenti Spettacoli Viaggianti* (National Agency for Itinerant Entertainment Operators)

complete medical assistance as well as to emergency medical care to everyone present on the national territory. The Sinti in Emilia Romagna were treated as other citizens in regard to information, testing, vaccination, case management (isolation and care). However, the difficult living conditions (highlighted also by Red Cross representatives), such as overcrowding, spatial remoteness, poor infrastructures, and possible unhealthy environments, increased the probability of an outbreak and severe spreading of the virus. In case of contagions, the Sinti and Roma spent their quarantine in their settlements, which according to Third Sector workers presented further challenges (they reported, for instance, that bringing food and medical supplies into a camp was more complicated than flats).

## **Discussion: Registered residence, work regulations and sedentist bias**

The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore nuances and contradictions in local social cohesion policies and the multifaceted effects of registered residence and itinerant work regulations on Roma and Sinti service providers.

The data that emerged from our research show how the administrative rule of registered residence, which is a central element of Italy's local social cohesion policies (Pontrandolfo and Solimene under preparation), impacted the Roma and Sinti communities involved in our research. Registered residence determines access to constitutional rights such as housing, health-care, employment, education, and political rights. National rules establish dwelling stability as the only requirement for obtaining registered residence. However, they also foresee the possibility (not the obligation) of verifying the stability and suitable conditions of the dwelling. Since this possibility is not clearly defined by national legislation, in many cases, it is arbitrarily and ambiguously interpreted at the local level. In fact, in order to "filter" the people asking to be enrolled in municipal residence registers, local administrations tend to introduce further restrictions which are not foreseen by national rules. The most adopted restrictions include:

- strict selection of dwelling conditions (for example, excluding and discriminating against people living in mobile homes)
- being in possession of a regular employment contract (thus excluding and discriminating against people who survive on informal work – even when simply not regulated - such as scrap metal collectors).

Of the Sinti and Roma service providers involved in our research, only a minority had obtained registered residence, and, in any case, it was not permanent due to the temporary character of a micro-area or an authorised camp in Modena or Bologna. Therefore, only some of the Sinti and Roma were able to access the assistance of local social services during the second phase of the pandemic.

It is clear how the bureaucratic system of registered residence becomes a vehicle and expression of explicit sedentist bias in Italian local policies. Furthermore, more implicit sedentist biases emerge from itinerant work regulations, which hamper the activities of travelling fair-ground workers (subject to the arbitrary choices of local governments) and scrap metal collectors (forced to informality due to legislative voids). Indeed, even the extraordinary redistributive measures that the national government provided to support operators during the pandemic were designed for workers with stable, regular, and non-seasonal forms of earnings. This framework made it impossible for most Sinti and Roma to access any financial aid from the State. Therefore, long-lasting biases in local policies towards Roma and Sinti, together with historical,

well-established, and widespread anti-Gypsy prejudices in Italian society, prevented Sinti and Roma from accessing institutional support during the pandemic.

Finally, due to widespread housing and work informalities, the Roma and Sinti were trapped in a grey space that hindered access to state support and protection. Interestingly, the use of “grey spaces” of (in)formality was also widespread among Third Sector operators. Trapped between people in need of assistance and the restrictions and contradictions of the legislative frame, under the banner of an emergency, these organizations ignored the legal obstruction imposed by registered residence regulations, which somehow ensnare local administrations themselves. In some cases, local administrations used their arbitrariness to do good, especially in the emergency - in the case of the Sinti stranded in Modena, for instance, but it also exposed Sinti to the negative effect of their arbitrariness.

## **Conclusion**

The explicit sedentist bias pervading housing policies toward Roma and Sinti in Italy in the last 40 years became clearly apparent during the pandemic, above all in the guise of the restricted access to social services as result of the bureaucratic trap of registered residence. What emerged was also the effect of more implicit sedentist biases in Italian work regulations, which hamper the itinerant activities of fairground workers (subject to arbitrary choices of local governments) and scrap metal collectors (forced to informality by legislative voids). These long-lasting biases in local policies towards Roma and Sinti, together with historical, well-established, and widespread anti-Gypsy prejudices in Italian society, made it extremely difficult for Sinti and Roma to access institutional support. They also increased Roma and Sinti communities’ distrust in institutions.

To conclude, diffuse housing and work informality trapped Roma and Sinti in a grey space that hindered access to state support and protection. Interestingly, the use of “grey spaces” of (in)formality (Yiftachel 2015; Chioldelli *et al.* 2017) was also widespread among local administrations and Third sector operators. Trapped between the needs of people to assist and the restrictions and contradictions of the legislative framework, these actors ignored, in the name of the emergency, the legal restrictions imposed by registered residence regulations which somehow entrapped local administrations themselves. The latter, in some cases, used their arbitrariness to do good, especially in the emergency, but in other cases, mobile peoples were exposed to the negative effect of their arbitrariness.

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