

Special Issue Combining Safety  
and Equity in the Post-Covid City:  
New Trends between Local Policies  
and Bottom-Up Practices

# FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,  
Tourism, Technology

*Guest editors*

**Gabriele Manella**  
**Madalena Corte-Real**



Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero  
Editorial manager: Carmine Urcioli

YEAR VII - Vol 19 - Number 2 - September 2024  
FedOA - Federico II University Press  
ISSN (online) 2723 - 9608 - ISSN (print) 2532 - 750X

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English text editors: Pietro Maturi,

Cover by Fabio Improta, from an original photo by Madalena Corte-Real.

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**FedOA - Federico II University Press**  
**Centro di Ateneo per le Biblioteche "Roberto Pettorino"**  
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Fedoa adopts and promotes specific guidelines on editorial responsibility, and follows COPE's Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors.

Authorization of the Court of Naples n. 59 of 20 December 2016. Director: Carmine Urciuoli  
ISSN 2723-9608 (online publication) ISSN 2532-750X (paper publication)

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In evaluating the proposed works, the journal follows a peer review procedure. The articles are proposed for evaluation by two anonymous referees, once removed any element that could identify the author.

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Fuori Luogo is indexed in: DOAJ Directory of Open Access Journals - ACNP Catalogue code n. PT03461557 - Index Copernicus International ID 67296. The journal is part of CRIS Coordinamento Riviste Italiane di Sociologia.

Fuori Luogo is included in the LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe) network of the Public Knowledge Project (PKP PLN)

The contents are published under a Creative Commons 4.0 license. What is a city? This is the question

# Safety, Mobility and Sociality in Urban Spaces during the Health Emergency in Italy<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented situation regarding the policies adopted to combat the spread. According to the WHO (2023), Italy was among the first Western countries to record cases of contagion and among the first to suffer the most significant morbidity from the Sars Cov2 virus. For this reason, it is an interesting case for the radical measures which were adopted to contain the pandemic.

Before going into the research method and results, it is important to reflect on some of the changes which took place due to Covid-19. On the one hand, the pandemic seems to have challenged the urban models that have prevailed in recent years, including not only structural aspects (types of private dwellings and public spaces, distribution of services to citizens and viability), but also ways of working, of being together and everything that induces the mobility of people and goods.

An unprecedented global urbanisation process characterised the first two decades of the twenty-first century. One need only think of the shapeless territorial expansions that have sprung up in just a few decades in Africa, Asia and the Americas, based on extreme forms of labour and environmental resources exploitation that have produced irreconcilable (at present) contradictions and severe social, redistributive and environmental inequalities; contradictions that, at least in terms of extension and populations involved, are not even comparable with the forms of exploitation of the working class (well described by Friedrich Engels) of the first European and North American industrial cities.

This concept is related to the inhuman living, working, and housing conditions of all those people crowded around these agglomerations. It must be said, however, that the progressive growth in the consumption of natural resources has gone hand in hand with an improvement in the average standard of living of the populations involved, albeit with numerous imbalances and factors of extra- and intra-urban duality (Borja & Castells, 2002), starting with the advanced-development countries that constituted a model of economic development that could be replicated everywhere, and then extending to the rapidly developing countries. This has helped to trigger a spiral process: new social needs have expanded and individual demands for goods have been renewed, accelerating the process of land and natural resources consumption.

Despite the profound structural changes of these decades, some features stand in continuity with the urbanisation processes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, albeit presenting themselves today in a paroxysmal manner. The characteristics of this process are essentially based on three elements: mobility (of people, goods and capital); the concentration of the population in delimited, albeit increasingly extended, spaces, and consequently, the concentration of the universe of goods and services; and lastly the exploitation of natural resources, despite the cultural and social awareness of their finiteness. These characteristics have determined a high cost in terms of social and environmental sustainability that technological refinement has not only failed to mitigate but also, on the contrary, has accelerated the processes of consumption, producing adverse effects and dimensions that cannot be confined to where they are generated - Edward Lorenz's much-quoted 'butterfly effect' - nor can they be circumscribed in time.

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2 Received: 13/09/2023. Revised: 27/03/2024. Accepted: 16/07/2024. Published: 30/09/2024.

Antonietta Mazzette wrote section 1, Daniele Pulino wrote sections 2 and 3.3, Sara Spanu wrote 3.1 and 3.2.

Discussion and Conclusions are the result of a common work

All this was well known before the health emergency caused by the spread of the Sars-CoV-2 virus. However, this pandemic has made immediately visible the numerous perverse (and intentional) effects of the capitalist development model that has prevailed (Florida *et al.*, 2023), undermining at least the first two characteristics that made possible and accelerated the global processes of urbanisation. At the same time, with regard to the third characteristic, there continues to be, so to speak, much 'distraction' about political and governmental choices, the effects of which go beyond the choices made to manage the pandemic that has led to reflection on the political category of "state of exception" (Agamben, 2021).

First of all, it has put mobility at risk since the Coronavirus 'travels' with human beings. The containment of the risks of contagion thus required a limitation of movement, particularly when a large part of the population was not yet vaccinated, with consequences which have been promptly debated (Cresswell, 2021; Daconto *et al.*, 2020; de Haas *et al.*, 2020; Freudendal-Pedersen & Kesselring, 2020).

It is enough to think of the deep crisis for airlines, resulting in a further increase in unemployment in this sector. One may also consider the collapse of tourism in 2020, whose 'destiny', as it is well known, is closely linked to the ability of people to move quickly within their own country and from one point to the other on the planet (Gössling *et al.*, 2021; Corbisiero, 2020; Koh, 2020). Secondly, the concentration of a N number of people at the same time-space, in collective, public and private spaces, is one of the main causes of the transmission of the virus (Ilardi *et al.*, 2021). This means that urban density, especially in public places, has become a source of risk. This evidence questions one of the historically given pillars of the city and, more generally, of urban settlements since it is equivalent to the fact that many co-existing social interactions have been and might be a possible source of danger. However, this type of interaction is constitutive of the creation of spaces for collective use, which for Urban Sociology are spaces that fulfil a primary function in social action, since they are the containers within which ideas, cultures, practices and diversity are born and nurtured (Pratt, 2020). In short, that «mosaic of social worlds in which the transition from one world to the other is sudden» and which only the city can produce, seems to have entered into a crisis today (Wirth, 1938, also 1971, p. 417).

The condition of hypersensitivity to risk and insecurity must be elements that already defined societies of the so-called "second modernity" (Beck, 1986), where fears of epidemics are connected with the emergence of new threats caused by the modernisation process itself and the weakening of social protection systems (Giddens, 1990; Castel, 2004). On the one hand, this condition of insecurity is closely connected with the insecurity described by Bauman (1997), or like an overlapping of its threefold dimension (security, certainty, and safety). On the other hand, it is closely related to the widespread erosion of trust in institutions (Rosanvallon, 2012). Moreover, it is historically present in those countries such as Italy, where there has been a weak institutional legitimacy (Donolo, 2013) and where they suddenly found themselves having to govern an emergency widespread throughout the country. From this perspective, it is interesting to point out that during a pandemic, it is possible to identify the evolution of individuals' attitudes of anxiety along with the progression of the spread of the virus. For example, observing the case of the A/H1N1 pandemic, a 'cycle of fear' has been identified (Surrenti, 2011), divided into three phases: the prodrome, the acute phase and the trend towards normalisation. The prodromes are linked to the outbreak of the pandemic and the dissemination of the first information on the contagion, information which is also contradictory in terms of the interaction between mass media, with messages ranging from recommendations of institutions to reassurances from economic actors. On the other hand, the acute phase corresponds to the peak period of the pandemic, during which fear is the emotion that conditions social action. In addition to morbidity, this phase is marked also by an increase of contradictory messages from the press and of specialist knowledge. Moreover, it is also during this phase that, because of the danger under control, institutions adopt mechanisms to regulate public behaviour. Finally, the phase of the normalisation trend corresponds to the attenuation of the spread of the pandemic and the



relative reduction of fear. This refers to a different perception of risk and the idea that the real danger has been amplified by the media or by other institutional actors, at different levels of government. Although this analysis is related to risk communication, this division substantially resembles what happened with Covid-19, but with a crucial difference, which is the fact that throughout the health emergency we detected a circular pattern with a transition from normalisation to a new acute phase.

From March to May 2020, the Italian government decided for a nationwide lockdown that forced most of the population to stay cooped up at home. Since the very beginning of the first lockdown period, our aim was to investigate how the health emergency, the containment measures and the physical distancing were having an impact on the sense of security and trust, social relations and individual behavior, as well as the very use of public and private urban spaces. The purpose of this contribution is thus to offer an overview of the impact of the pandemic on Italian territories and cities, by presenting some results of a study conducted in 2020, and to discuss on the challenges that Italian cities would face in the immediate future considering the Covid-19 pandemic experience.

The study will be presented as follows: Section 2 describes the research methodology; Section 3 presents the most relevant findings; Section 4 discusses the results; Section 5 outlines the conclusions.

## **1. A Sociological Survey on Citizens' Perceptions of the Health Emergency**

In times of total physical segregation, locked inside our homes due to the health emergency, we asked ourselves about the changes produced by the new situation. We asked ourselves: How does it feel to experience such an exceptional situation? How much has the perspective from which the world is observed changed? How are social relations perceived, both the closer and the more distant ones? But also, how much do people miss the casual and spontaneous relationships in meeting places and the choice to be together, namely all those relationships that are denied today? And again, how has the sense of security and trust towards oneself and others, one's affections (parental and friendship) and institutions changed?

The survey was launched after the Italian government's decision to implement the national lockdown (March 8, 2020) and ended in November 2020. It was developed in three phases corresponding to three different surveys designed to delve into the various themes from both a quantitative and a qualitative point of view.

In the first phase, an online questionnaire was administered (from the March 25 to April 5, 2020, when the majority of the Italian population was forced to stay at home due to the aforementioned lockdown) and it was designed to investigate, on the one hand, the new everyday life in relation to forced cohabitation in domestic spaces and the modes of interaction in open spaces and, on the other hand, the degree of social security and institutional trust. Two thousand four hundred fifty-five people submitted replies.

In the second phase (from the May 25 to June 8, 2020), an array of open-ended questions on 'cities and sociability' were submitted, to which those who had been willing to be contacted in the first phase responded: approximately 150 people. In this phase, information was collected on the behaviour adopted in using urban spaces (both open and closed, public and private ones) after the peak of the emergency and when a "return to normality" seemed to have begun.

In the third phase (between the end of October and the beginning of November 2020), further questions on the governance of the health emergency were posed to the same interlocutors as in the second phase but mainly addressed to researchers and experts, in order to collect evaluations on the effectiveness of the policies adopted and the necessary changes that emerged during the pandemic<sup>3</sup> (Mazzette *et al.*, 2021; Mazzette, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Respondents' opinion about vaccination was not investigated as COVID-19 vaccine was not yet available when the survey was launched, and data collected.

The research steps were developed over a period of time, making the use of web surveys unavoidable due to the acute limitations to the co-presence activities in force. This made the choice of a snowball type of sampling unavoidable, whereby the results that emerged have no claim to representativeness and can only be attributed to the universe of people who participated in the survey. The use of the autofill web survey involves some risks linked to possible difficulties in the interpretation of the questions or the instructions for filling them in, which may affect the reliability of the response. In this respect, specific attention was paid to the wording of the questions and the lexical choices to minimise ambiguities and misunderstandings. Finally, a self-administered web survey does not allow the control of the response process, the degree of attention in filling in the questionnaire, etc. In this regard, if, on the one hand, we relied on the sense of responsibility of those who participated in the survey both in terms of the truthfulness of the answers and of non-repeated compilations, on the other hand, we proceeded ex-post to the removal of records (157) with missing values concerning gender, age and place of residence. Finally, a final limitation to be pointed out is related to the highly blurred boundary between the observer and the one observed in this specific situation, given that in our dual capacity of being both citizens and researchers, we experienced the exact condition of forced closure as the respondents. This exposed us to several risks, one of which was that of “losing sight” of our being impartial with respect to value judgements, as Max Weber suggested back in 1917. It should be remembered, however, that for all objects of social knowledge, a constant exercise and tension between *Wertfreiheit* and reference to values is necessary. This entails the fundamental processes of distancing and approaching the object studied, not least in order to make knowledge a helpful tool for critiquing social reality (Gallino, 2002, pp. 73-90).

The quantitative survey results are based on 2298 questionnaires, collected through Google Forms, 64% of which were completed by females. Overall, the respondents are in the 41-55 age group with high educational qualifications (university degree and post-graduate). From a territorial point of view, we observe a distribution of respondents residing mainly in Sardinia (72%). The remainder part is located in the country's North-West, Centre, South and North-East regions. In the light of the imbalances predicted by self-selected sampling, the cases were analysed using weights by sex, age group, and municipality of residence as of January 1, 2020. Data collected in the quantitative survey will be presented in Section 3.1 and 3.3.

The qualitative survey was developed as follows:

1. A first wave of structured interviews was carried out through open-ended questions addressed to a small group of the sample who had given their permission to be re-contacted for the subsequent stages of the research. More specifically, 125 interviews, administered from the 25th of May to the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, explored the plan of institutional responses, the changes in daily habits and transformations that have affected the city. Specifically, the sub-sample is relatively homogeneous in terms of gender composition but unbalanced towards the older age groups and it appears to have a high cultural capital. Nearly a third of responses (27%) come from university professors and researchers and 25% from teachers. The share of public administration employees, officials and clerks also was significant (18%). Furthermore, this sub-sample lived predominantly in urban areas (85%) at the time of data collection.
2. A second wave of structured interviews was administered in October 2020, with the flare-up of the pandemic, and they consisted of two open-ended questions concerning public policy interventions, with a sub-sample consisting mainly of university lecturers. We collected 35 interviews. In both waves, after labelling relevant words and sentences with codes, data were conceptualized and interesting relationships between social experiences and urban spaces emerged, as it will be presented in Section 3.2.

## 2. Survey Results

### 2.1 *The Gaze Beyond the Window*

If we think back to the moment when the most restrictive restrictions were introduced in Italy to combat the circulation of Sars-Cov2 (Table 1), it is as if someone had suddenly turned off the spotlights in offices, gyms, kindergartens, university classrooms, museums and libraries and decreed the end of the show. Borrowing the metaphor of Erving Goffman (1974), the curtain had come down on those stages on which we were used to stage our social life daily, playing the various roles according to the situation in which we found ourselves involved. Everything is confined within domestic walls, in those spaces of daily life that we were used to consider almost exclusively as backstage, the dimension of our private life, the same walls that very abruptly became the stage of a new reality instead. A reality that continued to be made of our daily relationships related to work and study and that, took place within a very unusual framework, in a totally different setting, which required an effort to redefine those «organisational principles that govern events» and orient us with respect to our involvement in them (Goffman, 1974, p. 10).

*Table 1 - Covid-19 Confinement Measures in Italy (Chronological order)*

March 4, 2020	Schools closing
March 8, 2020	Localized lockdown (Lombardy and 14 other Italian provinces)
March 9, 2020	Nationwide lockdown
March 20, 2020	Ban on park use
March 22, 2020	Ban on intra-municipal travels
April 1, 2020	Extension of restrictions
April 10, 2020	Reopening of retailers (i.e. bookshops)
May 4, 2020	End of nationwide lockdown

The survey results showed that the most detrimental effects of physical segregation occurred mainly in demographically small and medium-sized contexts. In municipalities with up to 10,000 inhabitants, the most critical positions emerged during the national lockdown, for example, regarding the quality of forced cohabitation, with a worsening that was felt on average by about half of the respondents (47.9%), whereas respondents living in large cities expressed a less critical position (18.9%). As regards this specific interpretation, what is striking is not only the sharpness of the critical judgments expressed by those who were spending the quarantine in small municipalities (less than 5,000 inhabitants), but also the detachment observed with respect to more extensive territories, in which more stable scenarios prevailed and in which changes in relations with cohabiting relatives tended to be evaluated more positively than negatively. On the whole, this type of discomfort came mainly from young students who, due to the pandemic and the closure of schools and universities, had to radically reorganise their time and learning spaces under not always ideal conditions in terms of software and hardware infrastructures that could enable them to regularly attend e-learning activities. In this regard, it should be borne in mind that in small and very small municipalities (up to 2,000 inhabitants) almost 40% of households did not have a computer during the most acute phase of the pandemic (Istat, 2020).

Not only was domestic isolation experienced with difficulty within the family, but spending almost all the time at home does not seem to have represented a particularly favourable opportunity for strengthening ties of proximity. This condition is shared by the majority of respondents living both in small/medium contexts and in large cities. As a matter of fact, if more than a half of those interviewed (58%) declare that, before the health emergency, they did not use to have any relations with their neighbours, during the lockdown, relations on average appear to have neither improved nor worsened. However, there are also significant differences in this regard, both

positive and negative, and in relation to the age of the respondents. In territorial contexts where ties pre-existed, the weeks of domestic confinement led less than elsewhere to consolidating those relationships. In small communities, everyday life during the lockdown immediately appeared to be more isolated than elsewhere and less inclined to reciprocal relationships within proximity networks.

This happened despite the often-problematic conditions referable to these settlement contexts in terms of dependence on the more prominent centres for supplying and accessibility to various services. In other words, a picture immediately emerges that is relatively distant from a predominantly journalistic narrative which, precisely during the period in which this survey was conducted, nurtured the strengthening (if not the discovery) of neighbourly relations as a necessity for coping with domestic segregation: one thinks of the frequent *flashmobs* which, in the very early stages of the quarantine, aimed to build or consolidate neighbourly sociability.

## *2.2 Urban Places and Urban Reorganization "After" the Pandemic*

During the national lockdown most of the population was convinced that this was a momentary phase and that, once it had passed, 'normality' would return, which meant pre-Covid social habits and activities. Both institutional communication and more generally the mass media played a central role: the sentence «tutto andrà bene» (everything will be fine) became the most repeated 'mantra' written on the walls and windows of our cities, at least in the first few weeks of the health emergency.

With regard to our research, if the first (quantitative) phase of the survey is associated precisely with this 'mantra', since it was launched after the first few weeks of the national lockdown when we were still unaware of how long the confinement at home would last, the second (qualitative) phase of the research was initiated just after few weeks since the end of lockdown restrictions. From this point of view, it is interesting to observe the elements that emerged from the interviewees' reflections regarding the relationship between social experiences and urban spaces, with particular reference to mobility and sociality in coexistence.

In relation to mobility, five lines of behaviour emerged: 1) a first line consisting of a concrete fear of coming into contact with other people, and this led to highly cautious behaviours, continuing to stay at home or limiting movements and physical contact as much as possible, even after the end of the lockdown. This conduct has certainly been the most widespread and has united many of our interlocutors, regardless of differences in gender, age, place of residence and occupation; 2) a second behavioural line, on the other hand, was characterized by the fact that the pandemic had imprinted profound changes on daily habits and individual urban rhythms, especially on routes and means of travel; 3) a third behavioural line tended towards a return to normality, namely the recovery of pre-Covid social life; 4) a fourth line did not record important changes between the before and after, especially among people accustomed, even before the health emergency, to having only a few social contacts outside the family network; 5) a fifth line of behaviour united those who had the opportunity to discover new interests or recover old ones that they had forgotten during the health emergency. It is worth emphasizing that this ability to 'reinvent' has emerged to be, above all, a feminine quality:

«In Phase 1 [during lockdown period in Italy, from March 9 to May 4, 2020] I gave up the daily walk, going to the newsstand, cinema, yoga lessons, meeting friends and family members at home or outside, at the bar. I wasn't able to visit the exhibition on Maria Lai at the Ulassai Art Station, nor the exhibition on Raffaello at the Scuderie del Quirinale. I couldn't fly to see my son and grandson. But I took care of my garden, I practiced yoga at home. While reading I went through many places and retraced in my memory the many places of my life. In Phase 2 [when the lockdown ended] I started going to the newsstand again, to the bookshop, and I restarted my daily walk. In a few days I will begin a "Voyage en Sardaigne" in villages that I don't know yet» (retired woman).

These are trends which, on the one hand, contemplated sociality, albeit conditioned by the strict observance of the rules and, on the other hand, contained a reduction, if not a cancellation, of a large part of social relationality.

In relation to sociability and the attendance of urban spaces, both open and closed, both public and private ones, the fear of contagion guided the opinions of the interviewees and this is in a highly diversified way. Alongside those who did not intend to give up any places frequented before the pandemic, there were, in fact, those who preferred open places because they were afraid to go to closed ones while awaiting the evolution of the pandemic. The interviews, in particular, showed that some places were perceived as essential after the lockdown and others were not. By observing the places of culture, the analysis shows that conference rooms, bookshops and museums are the places that the interviewees would not have wanted to give up. At the same time, they were willing to avoid attending universities, libraries, concert halls and fairs.

Regarding indispensable places of consumption, the interviewees indicated pubs, restaurants, bars and supermarkets. At the same time, it is interesting to note that most interviewees included shopping centres among the non-essential places, but neighbourhood shops were mainly indicated as essential places. This result can be attributed to the fact that the local shop appeared safer because it was easily accessible on foot.

Finally, concrete proposals for urban reorganization have emerged, such as the strengthening of public transport; the change of times and spaces of the city to guarantee everyone full access to services in safety; the reduction of gatherings and, therefore, of the occasions that generally lead to gatherings; the increased use of digital technologies and remote working. However, these problems have a structural nature that the pandemic has made even more visible. For example, the issue of urban and extra-urban public transport (Brenna, 2021) is perceived as central by all the interviewees because it involves practically every type of population. How to solve long-term problems such as public transport in a short time period? The indications of our interlocutors were numerous, including higher frequencies of public transport, the flexibility of timetables, according to the needs of the different populations, and the increase of dial-a-bus services.

### *2.3 Insecurity and Trust*

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented condition of insecurity, which quantitative research explored in its various dimensions, considering the evolution of institutional trust in the new condition of risk experienced in the period of maximum diffusion of the pandemic. In particular, three elements for reflection emerged from the results.

Firstly, during the "national lockdown", there was a low level of concern regarding the occurrence of crimes. This concern represents one of the founding elements of the contemporary sense of insecurity. Answering the question (multiple choice): «What crimes are you afraid of suffering these days?», just under 40% of the sample said they were afraid of crimes, with greater emphasis in large urban centres and metropolitan areas.

Similarly, the general concern about crimes, explored through a Likert scale, appeared to be contained, except for the fear that episodes of youth violence could occur, which aroused intense alarm in 34% of the respondents.

Secondly, the research has highlighted the emergence of a widespread awareness regarding the collective and social dimensions of insecurity also explored through a Likert scale. From this point of view, the economic (57%) and political (44%) consequences of the health emergency caused strong concerns, while the levels of concern regarding the possibility of losing one's job (13%) or one's health (11%) were limited. It should also be emphasized that, on a territorial level, the concern for the collective dimension of insecurity appeared to be growing with the size of urban centres.

Thirdly, the responses showed an increase in trust in the work of institutions, especially the National Health Service (NHS) (53%), the Third Sector and the Government. Similarly, the police forces (38.8%) and civil protection (37.6%) benefited from a more significant increase in confidence. This growth can be traced back to the positive assessment of the role played by these institutions in the first weeks of the lockdown. In particular, the widespread appreciation of the work of the health system should be underlined, which has been under particular pressure since the beginning of the emergency, also as a consequence of the weakening to which it has been subjected over the last few decades and which Covid-19 seems to have suddenly unveiled, even if the problems of underfunding still appear to be open (Neri, 2023). Taken together, these results lead us to carefully consider the emergence of an awareness of the problems of insecurity on a social and collective level and the growth of trust in the institutions directly involved in the fight against the pandemic. Indeed, the decrease in the number of crimes due also to the strict application of the 'confinement' measures could have contributed to shifting attention to the socio-economic problems that these measures could have caused in the immediate future. Nonetheless, between the end of March and the beginning of April 2020, a priority need for solidarity emerged, understood as an awareness of the weight of social ties and reciprocal relationships of interdependence. This need also emerges by observing institutional trust, as the levels of trust recorded in the acute phase can be read as a result of the diffusion of a sense of recognition of collective belonging, which has been more present in urban realities. However, as the investigation has let us foresee, this recognition was configured as provisional, closely linked to the acute phase and its spatial-temporal condition (Lewin, 1942) due to the exogenous shock caused by Covid-19 (Roccatò, 2021).

### 3. Discussion

Our analysis of the impact of Covid-19 in Italy highlights some effects of insecurity and social relations during the national lockdown and problems related to the use of urban spaces in the first year of the pandemic. The results suggest that the pandemic has highlighted a demand for social and collective security, the fragility of the urban development model and the need to reorganize the city, first of all by providing every part of it with essential services for everyday life: schematically represented by the "15-minutes city". In terms of precariousness, the survey made it possible to highlight a prevailing concern for the economic and political consequences of the emergency. On the other hand, fears about the phenomena on which public debate has focused in the last twenty years, such as immigration and crime, seem to be disappearing. Indeed, during the first quarter of 2020, there was a decrease in the number of crimes which may well be related to confinement measures. This could have led to awareness of the lower concrete risk of being the victim of a crime during the peak of the health emergency and confinement measures. However, there was an early recognition of the economic and social risks of the health emergency, due to the emergence of a priority need for solidarity, understood as an awareness of the weight of social ties and mutual interdependence relationships. As regards the fragility of the urban development model, the results underline a need to reduce the concentration of people which questions the very reasons (and urban economies) which generally involve the so-called gatherings, for example those deriving from the well-known dynamics of entertainment and consumption described in the late Nineties by John Hannigan. The need to avoid opportunities for virus transmission has undermined most of the attractive policies adopted in recent decades by many cities, not just in Italy. In short, it has questioned all those processes which, from the Nineties onwards, have transformed cities from containers of events to event cities themselves (Sgroi, 1998), whose success is directly linked to the dual ability to create opportunities for meeting and to increase flows of people and goods to be consumed, both in a material and cultural sense.

Furthermore, the results reveal an essential awareness that the pandemic must be considered an opportunity to rethink mobility, making it sustainable from an environmental and social point of view. This means overcoming the functional division of the city into specialized and separate spaces and thus reducing the elements that induce mobility, especially the one linked to daily life.

## Conclusions

This contribution has illustrated the results of a sociological investigation carried out in Italy aimed to investigate how the health emergency, the containment measures and the physical distancing were having an impact on the sense of security and trust, social relations and individual behaviour, as well as the very use of public and private urban spaces. The study was launched during the peak of the health emergency and confinement measures and was concluded at the end of 2020, thus highlighting a series of problematic changes as the pandemic situation evolved related to trust and a sense of security, social interactions, and the use of physical spaces of the city.

On the one hand the results of the research made it possible to get a snapshot of a significant event from various points of view, such as the need to rapidly reorganize everyday life in the face of profound limitations and new rules, that led to a redefinition of sociality and reorienting perception on urban places due to the fear of contagion. Despite a widespread awareness regarding social insecurity, a low level of concern about crime emerged as well as a positive assessment of the role played by public institutions. On the other hand, results suggest a necessary reflection on the macro and micro physical and social contexts, within which the different everyday lives had to be redefined. In this regard, the study shows that not only demographically small and medium-sized contexts most suffered the effects of physical segregation, but that also young people were experiencing the major discomfort since the early stages of pandemic. Faced with the need to impose pervasive limitations on populations intended to contain the spread of the virus as well as the time needed for a gradual "return to normality", it came to light the inadequacy of cities in facing a health emergency and the inability to readapt to new crisis scenarios. In this sense the study revealed the need expressed by respondents to rethink cities' functioning, beginning with mobility.

More generally, the contemporary city's very nature has been undermined by the health emergency, especially regarding some characteristics that have distinguished it in the last two decades. First of all, commercial transactions and transnational financial flows between cities have disappeared since each one of them seems to have been "locked up" to defend itself from the virus; secondly, in the case of Italy, all those economic processes that are less and less anchored to the territory have made the cities – actually the country as a whole – even more vulnerable. Just think of the fact that during the first phase of the epidemic, a large part of the Italian population could not have access to some safety devices, such as masks and sanitisers, because, in the previous decades, the delocalisation of production had led Italy (nearly all of Europe in fact) to depend entirely on the industrial production of other countries, primarily China; consequently, the transition from an economy based on a material kind of production (which includes the "city of producers" in the Weber's sense) to an economy of knowledge (the creative city), has had positive effects, but also many negative results. Despite the considerable effort made in initiatives for the regeneration of degraded neighbourhoods and districts as a consequence of deindustrialisation, that has attracted a mix of activities, enterprises (technological start-ups, professional studios, such as architects, artists, designers), new trendy places and consumption, financial flows, leisure and entertainment support services, visitors, tourists and consumers, the pandemic has highlighted how all of this has never really become an engine of urban development in Italy. A clear sign of this was the fact that in Italy, all social, educational and work

experiences that fall within the cultural sectors – from schools of all levels (including university) to museums and temporary exhibitions, from theatres to auditoriums, from experiments in the food sector to those of fashion and, more generally, of artisan “know-how”, and so on – were the first to be closed, at first due to the national lockdown, and subsequently in order to limit the contagion in the autumn and winter months and among those who have had to deal with limitations for the longest time.

In subsequent studies, we argued that time would have told whether all the social needs expressed during the peak of the pandemic would have been translated into social policies and behaviours oriented towards a more sustainable urban model. At present, observing how quickly Italian society has forgotten the difficulties experienced in the last four years, we are sceptical in believing that society and the economy are learning from the health emergency to correct sustainable social behaviours and organizational models. Consider how the idea of the “15-minutes city” was recurrent in the public debate during the peak of the pandemic and turned out to be more of a slogan than as a real attempt to structurally redefine cities’ organization and distribution of financial and human resources. For example, the traumatic process of emptying urban areas dense with tourists and consumers appears to have been archived and, in the current state of things, there are no significant changes and/or turnaround in the agendas of local administrations. The void in these areas has again transformed into a pattern of the same flows of people and goods in the aftermath of the so-called post-pandemic phase, without critical second thoughts on the need to bring back stable inhabitants even in central areas with solid tourist vocation, in addition to the temporary inhabitants.

Ultimately, it is as if politics, the economy and society have rewound the tape bringing the urban world back to how it was in the pre-pandemic phase. Just think of the major Italian cities (Rome, Milan, Venice, Florence and Naples) which saw an abrupt transition from over-tourism to under-tourism in the acute phase of the health emergency, sweeping away the overall economic system on which they rested, and then readjust it in 2022 towards renewed forms of over-tourism (Mazzette *et al.*, 2022). In recent years, the studies from various disciplinary perspectives have investigated the social effects of restrictions and physical distancing in cities, in formulating proposals, guidelines and indications also coming from empirical investigations such as the one presented in this contribution, and they converge in outlining a critical profile related to the organization of urban spaces and activities (Nigrelli, 2021, Artelaris *et al.*, 2022, Hama Rada *et al.*, 2022, Bertuglia & Vaio 2023, Shatkin *et al.*, 2023).

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