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Learning City and Inclusion. The Street Competences of Homeless People in a Lifelong Learning Perspective

Learning city e inclusione. Le competenze di strada delle persone senza dimora in una prospettiva di lifelong learning

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ABSTRACT

Access to learning is a crucial element in an inclusive learning city perspective. Homelessness is one of the most serious forms of exclusion. From the perspective of lifelong learning, a commitment is needed towards strengthening individual resources and, at the same time, recognising competences gained in all contexts, including the daily life of homeless people. In this regard, theoretical approaches to learning that are the result of experience are central. The article presents the results

[1] The contribution is the result of the joint work of the two authors. The writing should be attributed as follows: Paolo Di Rienzo is responsible for paragraphs 1 and 2, Giovanni Serra for paragraphs 3 and 4, and both for paragraph 5.

of research on the competences developed by homeless people, compared with the European LifeComp framework for personal, social and learning to learn key competence. From the self-evaluation of those who live on the street, dominance and self-care (self-regulation), adaptation (flexibility) and the management of interactions in an uncertain and often hostile context (communication and empathy) emerge.

Keywords: lifelong learning, adult education, inclusion, LifeComp, homelessness.

RIASSUNTO

L'accesso all'apprendimento è un elemento cruciale in una prospettiva di learning city inclusiva. La condizione di homelessness rappresenta una delle forme più gravi di esclusione. Nell'ottica del lifelong learning, è necessario un impegno volto al rafforzamento delle risorse individuali e, al contempo, al riconoscimento delle competenze maturate in tutti i contesti, tra i quali è compresa la vita quotidiana delle persone senza dimora. A tal proposito, gli approcci teorici sull'apprendimento frutto di esperienza sono centrali. L'articolo presenta i risultati di una ricerca sulle competenze sviluppate dalle persone senza dimora, confrontate con il quadro europeo LifeComp delle competenze chiave personali, sociali e di apprendere ad apprendere. Dall'autovalutazione di chi vive in strada emergono soprattutto il dominio e la cura di sé (autoregolazione), l'adattamento (flessibilità) e la gestione delle interazioni in un contesto incerto e spesso ostile (comunicazione ed empatia).

Parole chiave: lifelong learning, educazione degli adulti, inclusion, LifeComp, homelessness.

1. LIFELONG LEARNING AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING CITY

The subject of this contribution, from the perspective of Lifelong Learning (LLL), concerns a study on the recognition of daily life competences acquired particularly in cases of fragility and extreme poverty, including homelessness, in order to broaden the audience for educational processes, within a concept of an open and inclusive learning city for vulnerable groups (UIL 2021). Indeed, LLL represents a central category in human development processes and is considered an essential factor for a sustainable approach to building a learning city, as established by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Cotera, Weidlich, Wang, & Diederichs, 2018). Among other things, LLL is not only characterised by the *lifelong* dimension, but also requires the valorisation of the *lifewide* dimension, understood as the significance of learning processes in all contexts: formal, non-formal and informal (Aleandri, 2019). It is known that, at an institutional level, the purpose of LLL is to promote people's personal development and initiative, their integration into active life and society, their participation in democratic decision-making, and their ability to adapt to economic, technological and social changes.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals represent a new effort to improve people's lives, protect the planet's ecosystem, ensure prosperity for all, and promote peace through multi-level and inter-sectoral partnerships, with the collaboration of all involved parties considered central to success. These goals include the eradication of poverty and hunger, access to education, decent employment, healthy living and well-being, the reduction of inequalities, the promotion of just and peaceful societies and cities, as well as ensuring sustainable systems for water, energy, production and consumption. A crucial aspect that intertwines with all other goals is the sustainable development of cities, highlighted in SDG 11: Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Cities are not only places where people live and move daily and can contribute to sustainable development, but they are also spaces where poverty, inequalities, conflicts and the impact of pollution emerge, making it necessary to address such challenges (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).
Learning cities provide LLL opportunities for all ages, responding to the learning needs of all groups in society, fostering equity and inclusion. This is of particular importance for the marginalised or most vulnerable (UIL, 2017). To this end, we know that the UNESCO Global Network of Learning has adopted the definition of a learning city as a city that effectively mobilises its resources in every sector; it has identified, among other objectives, the promotion of inclusive learning and the promotion of lifelong learning. In an inclusive sense, a learning city refers to a humanistic approach to LLL that, far from economic-productive drifts, embraces the universalistic principle of human capacitation and is able to welcome even the grey areas of adult life, characterised by vulnerability and fragility, including extreme poverty and homelessness (Di Rienzo, 2024; Evangelista, 2010). This defines an area of intervention for adult education that is able to see itself as decisive for addressing the demands arising from life trajectories in which existential precariousness has fallen, from a formative and not exclusively assistance-based and containment perspective (Cornacchia & Tramma, 2019).

2. EVERYDAY COGNITION: THE STREET COMPETENCES OF THE HOMELESS

The issue of homelessness, although of great importance in terms of the credibility and effectiveness of welfare systems and democratic institutions, is still debated scientifically. Firstly, there is no agreement on the definition of the phenomenon (Amore *et al*., 2011; Ravenhill, 2016) and, consequently, on the criteria for measuring it. The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) has produced a classification that has gained considerable recognition among professionals (Edgar, 2009), based on inclusion/exclusion with respect to three domains that define dwelling: physical, social and legal. Edgar defines them as follows:

> "*having a decent dwelling (or space) adequate to meet the needs of the person and his/her family (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy social relations (social domain) and having exclusive possession, security of occupation and legal title (legal domain)*" (p. 15).

The intersection of the three described domains gives rise to different configurations falling into the category of homelessness. In particular, the condition where there is exclusion regarding all three domains is that concerning the roofless, people who do not have a decent and adequate physical place to live, do not have legal possession of the place they occupy and do not have privacy in their living.

This category also includes those who are temporarily accommodated in emergency dormitories and who must spend a large part of their days outside.

A second debated issue concerns the causes of homelessness. In this regard, the discussion is structured around two theoretical poles, between those who emphasise the structural causes of the phenomenon (poverty, unemployment, unavailability of affordable housing, failure of welfare systems) and those who highlight the subject's deficits, linked to psychological disorders, alcohol or drug addictions, shortcomings in socialisation processes, etc. (Barnao, 2004; Decembrotto, 2019). A third aspect of the scientific debate concerns the development or regression processes of people experiencing homelessness. Some authors emphasise the processes of de-capacitation that street life entails (Meo, 2009; Evangelista, 2010), thereby contributing to reinforcing stereotypes about the homeless as people lacking resources (will, skills...) and settled in a passive and fatalistic attitude. Other studies, however, indicate that street life can promote the development of new competences, linked to the need to survive in the difficult street context (Barnao, 2004; Bender *et al*., 2007; Tweed, Biswas-Diener & Lehman, 2012).

The last question is of particular relevance due to its applied implications. Thinking of homeless people as individuals lacking resources or, conversely, as people capable of exercising competences and developing others through street experience can significantly influence public policies, the organisation of services, and the attitude of social workers towards their users. In the first perspective, predominantly welfare-oriented approaches will be favoured, while the second could encourage the adoption of models more oriented towards promoting autonomy. This is not to downplay the importance of structural dimensions that affect the phenomenon of homelessness – and that heavily condition people's life trajectories – thereby placing responsibility solely on the shoulders of those experiencing it, in an essentially neoliberal perspective. However, it is intended to highlight that, should it be demonstrated that street life promotes the development of new competences, these should be recognised and valued by policies and services and become part of the system of levers to be activated in pathways out of marginalisation.

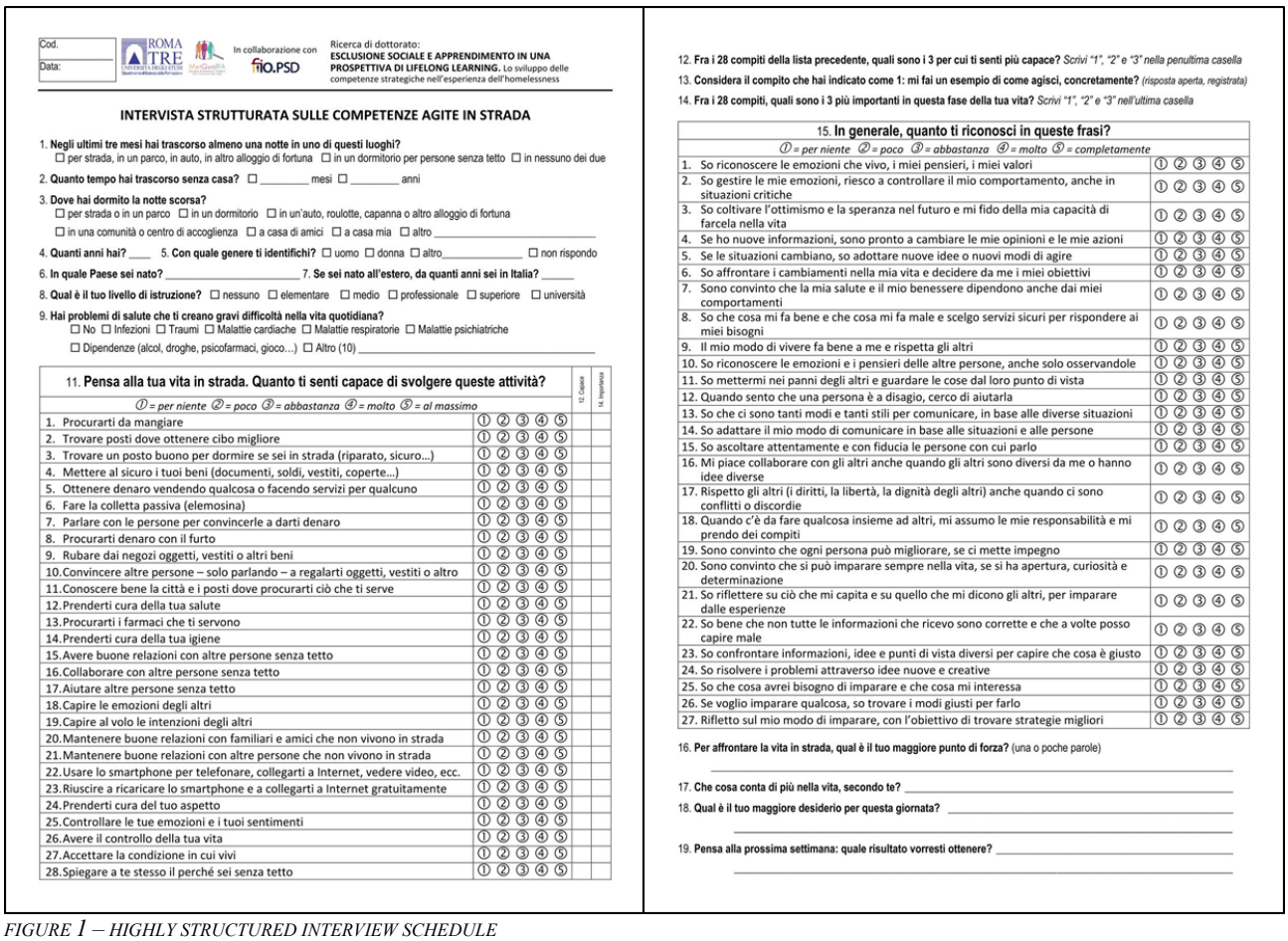
Indeed, the humanistic perspective of LLL, based on the universalistic principle of auto-formative potential, highlights the role played by learning developed in daily life on a typically experiential basis. In the LLL perspective, informal learning contexts represent the elective sphere of learning resulting from experience, recognised equally with other formal and non-formal contexts. Experience as a generative factor of learning is developed in numerous studies, including classic ones, relating to adult education (Di Rienzo, 2024; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). If experience is considered the main domain of learning, influenced by various contexts, it seems plausible that the experience of street life can also serve as a space for learning, where certain competences are developed and implemented. Studies concerning competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts have predominantly focused on adults with low qualifications and skills. The specific case of homeless people has been neglected, leaving vast areas of knowledge related to their lives and the resources they could activate to overcome social marginalisation unexplored. Indeed, attention has often focused on technical-instrumental competences usable for accessing work, or on those acquired before the experience of marginalisation. In both cases, competences that could represent fundamental interpretative keys to the condition of homeless people have been overlooked: the experience of the street and survival competences. The latter concern cognitive, personal and interpersonal abilities that are crucial for facing life on the street and that contribute to the development of dimensions such as resilience, the

management of uncertainty and complexity, as well as the protection of essential health levels despite critical conditions.
In the experience of street life, as in any other human experience, learning can develop. In particular, the need to adopt survival strategies, linked to the acquisition of essential material and relational goods, can lead to the maturation and/or development of strategic competences that can fall within the scope of life competences provided by the European LifeComp framework. The EU Recommendation 2018 on key competences for LLL introduced PSL (Personal, Social and Learning to learn) competences, considering as essential the abilities to reflect on oneself, to effectively manage time and information, to work constructively with others, to remain resilient and to manage one's own learning. LifeComp considers PSL competences as those that apply to all spheres of life and that can be acquired through formal, informal and non-formal education (Sala *et al*., 2020).
Within the described framework, therefore, this study poses the following question: what are the strategic competences that homeless people believe they develop through street life experience, and to what extent are these competences consistent with the European LifeComp framework for personal, social and learning to learn key competences? The reference to the LifeComp framework responds to the need to understand whether potentially detectable street competences can be correlated to a standard that facilitates their recognition, formalisation and communicability to third parties, from the perspective of their validation.

3. METHODOLOGY

To explore the representations that homeless people develop regarding competences acquired through street experience, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014), overcoming the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative perspectives and integrating both closed and open data for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. To this end, a data collection instrument was developed that allows for the simultaneous acquisition of numerical and textual data. The instrument is a highly structured interview schedule (Trinchero, 2002), composed of closed-ended questions and a few open-ended questions, which the researcher personally administers to a sample of homeless people, recording the answers on a dedicated form. The schedule is divided into five main sections: socio-demographic data; self-assessment of competences related to activities carried out on the street; prevalent competences in terms of personal ability and importance for street life; self-assessment of personal, social and learning to learn competences (LifeComp framework); self-assessment of one's strengths, values and desires. Overall, the schedule includes 72 questions, five of which are open-ended.
The first section collects socio-demographic information through closed-ended questions, such as experience of sleeping rough or in a dormitory in the last three months, total time spent homeless, location of last overnight stay, age, gender, country of birth, duration of stay in Italy for foreigners, education level and health problems that cause difficulties in daily life. The second section presents a list of 28 activities related to street life, for each of which the respondent self-assesses their ability on a scale of 1 to 5. This list was developed based on the results of a previous exploratory research (Serra, 2024), based on focus groups with operators of services for homeless people. The third section investigates prevalent competences through three questions: indicating up to three activities in which the interviewee feels most capable from the list in section 2 (closed numerical response); an open and

audio-recorded description of a concrete example of the exercise of one of these activities; and indicating the three activities considered most important for street life (closed numerical response). The fourth section focuses on the self-assessment of PSL competences from the LifeComp framework. 27 behaviours are presented, for each of which a self-assessment of one's ability on a scale of 1 to 5 is requested. The items in this section are taken from the LifeComp framework descriptors and have been simplified and contextualised to street experience to facilitate understanding by interviewees. The fifth section includes four open-ended questions, aimed at exploring personal dimensions such as self-efficacy, values and motivations that influence the exercise of competences. The questions concern the greatest strength for facing street life, what matters most in life, the greatest desire for the current day and the desired outcome within the following week. Figure 1 displays the highly structured interview schedule. The texts are presented in the language of administration.



Cod.
Data:

In collaborazione con fiO.PSD

Ricerca di dottorato:
ESCLUSIONE SOCIALE E APPRENDIMENTO IN UNA PROSPETTIVA DI LIFELONG LEARNING. Lo sviluppo delle competenze strategiche nell'esperienza dell'homelessness

INTERVISTA STRUTTURATA SULLE COMPETENZE AGITE IN STRADA

1. **Negli ultimi tre mesi hai trascorso almeno una notte in uno di questi luoghi?**
☐ per strada, in un parco, in auto, in altro alloggio di fortuna ☐ in un dormitorio per persone senza tetto ☐ in nessuno dei due
2. **Quanto tempo hai trascorso senza casa?** ☐ _____ mesi ☐ _____ anni
3. **Dove hai dormito la notte scorsa?**
☐ per strada o in un parco ☐ in un dormitorio ☐ in un'auto, roulotte, capanna o altro alloggio di fortuna
☐ in una comunità o centro di accoglienza ☐ a casa di amici ☐ a casa mia ☐ altro _____
4. **Quanti anni hai?** ____ 5. **Con quale genere ti identifichi?** ☐ uomo ☐ donna ☐ altro_____ ☐ non rispondo
6. **In quale Paese sei nato?** _____ 7. **Se sei nato all'estero, da quanti anni sei in Italia?** _____
8. **Qual è il tuo livello di istruzione?** ☐ nessuno ☐ elementare ☐ medio ☐ professionale ☐ superiore ☐ università
9. **Hai problemi di salute che ti creano gravi difficoltà nella vita quotidiana?**
☐ No ☐ Infezioni ☐ Traumi ☐ Malattie cardiache ☐ Malattie respiratorie ☐ Malattie psichiatriche
☐ Dipendenze (alcol, droghe, psicofarmaci, gioco…) ☐ Altro (10) _____

11. **Pensa alla tua vita in strada. Quanto ti senti capace di svolgere queste attività?** ① = per niente ② = poco ③ = abbastanza ④ = molto ⑤ = al massimo		12. Capace	14. Importanza
1. Procurarti da mangiare	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
2. Trovare posti dove ottenere cibo migliore	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
3. Trovare un posto buono per dormire se sei in strada (riparato, sicuro…)	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
4. Mettere al sicuro i tuoi beni (documenti, soldi, vestiti, coperte…)	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
5. Ottenere denaro vendendo qualcosa o facendo servizi per qualcuno	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
6. Fare la colletta passiva (elemosina)	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
7. Parlare con le persone per convincerle a darti denaro	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
8. Procurarti denaro con il furto	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
9. Rubare dai negozi oggetti, vestiti o altri beni	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
10. Convincere altre persone – solo parlando – a regalarti oggetti, vestiti o altro	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
11. Conoscere bene la città e i posti dove procurarti ciò che ti serve	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
12. Prenderti cura della tua salute	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
13. Procurarti i farmaci che ti servono	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
14. Prenderti cura della tua igiene	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
15. Avere buone relazioni con altre persone senza tetto	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
16. Collaborare con altre persone senza tetto	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
17. Aiutare altre persone senza tetto	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
18. Capire le emozioni degli altri	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
19. Capire al volo le intenzioni degli altri	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
20. Mantenere buone relazioni con familiari e amici che non vivono in strada	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
21. Mantenere buone relazioni con altre persone che non vivono in strada	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
22. Usare lo smartphone per telefonare, collegarti a Internet, vedere video, ecc.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
23. Riuscire a ricaricare lo smartphone e a collegarti a Internet gratuitamente	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
24. Prenderti cura del tuo aspetto	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
25. Controllare le tue emozioni e i tuoi sentimenti	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
26. Avere il controllo della tua vita	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
27. Accettare la condizione in cui vivi	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
28. Spiegare a te stesso il perché sei senza tetto	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		

12. **Fra i 28 compiti della lista precedente, quali sono i 3 per cui ti senti più capace?** *Scrivi "1", "2" e "3" nella penultima casella*
13. **Considera il compito che hai indicato come 1: mi fai un esempio di come agisci, concretamente?** *(risposta aperta, registrata)*
14. **Fra i 28 compiti, quali sono i 3 più importanti in questa fase della tua vita?** *Scrivi "1", "2" e "3" nell'ultima casella*

15. **In generale, quanto ti riconosci in queste frasi?** ① = per niente ② = poco ③ = abbastanza ④ = molto ⑤ = completamente	
1. So riconoscere le emozioni che vivo, i miei pensieri, i miei valori	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
2. So gestire le mie emozioni, riesco a controllare il mio comportamento, anche in situazioni critiche	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
3. So coltivare l'ottimismo e la speranza nel futuro e mi fido della mia capacità di farcela nella vita	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
4. Se ho nuove informazioni, sono pronto a cambiare le mie opinioni e le mie azioni	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
5. Se le situazioni cambiano, so adottare nuove idee o nuovi modi di agire	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
6. So affrontare i cambiamenti nella mia vita e decidere da me i miei obiettivi	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
7. Sono convinto che la mia salute e il mio benessere dipendono anche dai miei comportamenti	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
8. So che cosa mi fa bene e che cosa mi fa male e scelgo servizi sicuri per rispondere ai miei bisogni	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
9. Il mio modo di vivere fa bene a me e rispetta gli altri	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
10. So riconoscere le emozioni e i pensieri delle altre persone, anche solo osservandole	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
11. So mettermi nei panni degli altri e guardare le cose dal loro punto di vista	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
12. Quando sento che una persona è a disagio, cerco di aiutarla	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
13. So che ci sono tanti modi e tanti stili per comunicare, in base alle diverse situazioni	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
14. So adattare il mio modo di comunicare in base alle situazioni e alle persone	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
15. So ascoltare attentamente e con fiducia le persone con cui parlo	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
16. Mi piace collaborare con gli altri anche quando gli altri sono diversi da me o hanno idee diverse	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
17. Rispetto gli altri (i diritti, la libertà, la dignità degli altri) anche quando ci sono conflitti o discordie	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
18. Quando c'è da fare qualcosa insieme ad altri, mi assumo le mie responsabilità e mi prendo dei compiti	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
19. Sono convinto che ogni persona può migliorare, se ci mette impegno	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
20. Sono convinto che si può imparare sempre nella vita, se si ha apertura, curiosità e determinazione	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
21. So riflettere su ciò che mi capita e su quello che mi dicono gli altri, per imparare dalle esperienze	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
22. So bene che non tutte le informazioni che ricevo sono corrette e che a volte posso capire male	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
23. So confrontare informazioni, idee e punti di vista diversi per capire che cosa è giusto	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
24. So risolvere i problemi attraverso idee nuove e creative	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
25. So che cosa avrei bisogno di imparare e che cosa mi interessa	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
26. Se voglio imparare qualcosa, so trovare i modi giusti per farlo	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
27. Rifletto sul mio modo di imparare, con l'obiettivo di trovare strategie migliori	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

16. **Per affrontare la vita in strada, qual è il tuo maggiore punto di forza?** (una o poche parole)
17. **Che cosa conta di più nella vita, secondo te?** _____
18. **Qual è il tuo maggiore desiderio per questa giornata?** _____
19. **Pensa alla prossima settimana: quale risultato vorresti ottenere?** _____

FIGURE 1 – HIGHLY STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Prior to its administration to the sample, the interview schedule was piloted with a group of four homeless individuals attending a different service and subsequently refined.

The interviews were conducted in April 2024 at the Fondazione Don Calabria soup kitchen in Rome. This soup kitchen is frequented by both homeless people and individuals in conditions of economic hardship with housing. The sample was constructed by identifying all homeless users present during the survey period, with the support of service operators, and asking for their willingness to participate. To encourage participation, posters were displayed and the researcher carried out voluntary work at the soup kitchen in the preceding month. Most of the people contacted agreed to be interviewed. The

interviews lasted an average of 25-30 minutes and took place in a reserved space, during the time intervals allowed by the service. Out of a total of 57 interviews collected, 7 were excluded from the analysis for various reasons, including absence or limited experience of street life, difficulty in understanding or communicating in Italian, refusal to answer most questions, emotionally too strenuous interviews or answers considered unreliable due to concentration or cognitive problems. Consequently, 50 interviews were considered valid.

Quantitative data were digitised and transformed into a data matrix on an Excel© spreadsheet for subsequent processing. Open-ended responses received different treatments: four short responses were entered into the data matrix, while the audio-recorded responses from section 3 were transcribed into a separate text file. Quantitative data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics (Trinchero, 2002), generating frequency tables and graphs. Qualitative data were treated with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring patterns in respondents' representations.

Given the sample size, the results of this study are not generalisable to the entire homeless population, but offer valuable qualitative insights for future research and targeted interventions.

Figure 2 summarises the main characteristics of the respondent sample. In particular, it is noted that two-thirds of the interviewees stated that they had spent the night before the interview in makeshift accommodation (38%) or on the street (28%), while 28% had spent the night in a dormitory. Furthermore, in the last quarter, 80% had spent at least one night in extreme conditions (on the street, in a park, in a car, etc.) and 16% in a dormitory.

Gender	
Man	86,0
Women	12,0
Other / Prefer not to answer	2,0
TOTAL	100,0
Age	
27-35	8,2
36-45	20,4
46-55	24,5
56-65	30,6
65+	16,3
TOTAL	100,0
Nationality	
Italians	48,0
Foreign nationals	52,0
TOTAL	100,0
Years in Italy, for foreign nationals	
<1	7,7
1-5	11,5
6-10	15,4
11-15	11,5
16-20	15,4
21-25	15,4
26-30	11,5
30+	11,5
TOTAL	100,0
Last overnight stay	
On the street or in a park	28,0
In a car, caravan, shack, or other makeshift accommodation	38,0
In a dormitory	28,0
Other	6,0
TOTAL	100,0

At least one night in the last quarter	
On the street, in a park, in a car, or in other makeshift accommodation	80,0
In a dormitory for homeless people	16.0
In neither of the two	4,0
TOTAL	100,0
Number of years homeless	
<=1	31,3
1-5	20,8
5-10	33,3
10-15	2,1
15-20	2,1
20+	10,4
TOTAL	100,0
Level of experience in formal education	
Primary School	14,0
Lower Secondary School	28,0
Vocational School	14,0
High School	26,0
University	18,0
TOTAL	100,0
Reported pathology	
Psychiatric disorders and pathological addictions	18,2
Endocrine, nutritional, and metabolic diseases	15,9
Traumas and burns	13,6
Musculoskeletal system diseases	11,4
Circulatory system diseases	11,4
Digestive system diseases	6,8
Respiratory system diseases	6,8
Cancers / Neoplasms	6,8
Skin diseases / Diseases of the skin	2,3
Eye diseases / Diseases of the eye	2,3
Nervous system diseases	2,3
Infectious diseases	2,3
TOTAL	100,0

FIGURE 2 – SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The proportion of men (86%) is largely predominant compared to women (12%). The average age of the sample is 53.1 years, with a standard deviation of 12.4. The youngest interviewee is 27 years old, the oldest 77. The most represented age group is 56-64 (30.6%). 58% of interviewees attended school beyond lower secondary level. Among these, the figure of 18% of interviewees with university experience is significant. 14% have only primary school education.

48% of interviewees were born in Italy. Among foreigners, Europeans prevail (28%), followed by South Americans (12%), Africans (6%) and Asians (6%). The average length of stay in Italy for foreigners is 17.1 years, but the distribution is very dispersed, as shown by the standard deviation of 11.1. The individual figure ranges from a minimum of a few months to a maximum of 40 years.

Compared to the general data available for Italy (Istat, 2015), the sample in this study is largely aligned in terms of gender and nationality, but exhibits a more advanced average age, a longer period of homelessness, and a higher level of education.

61.2% suffer from health problems that create severe difficulties in daily life. The most frequent pathologies include psychiatric disorders and pathological addictions (18.2%), diabetes (15.9%),

traumas and burns (13.6%), musculoskeletal system diseases (11.4%) and circulatory system diseases (11.4%).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Areas of Competence

Previous research (Serra, 2024) identified various tasks effectively performed in street life. These were traceable to competences, understood as the ability to mobilise internal and external resources to satisfactorily address a task (Pellerey, 2004). This resulted in a catalogue of "street competences" (Figure 3), structured into four categories linked to different objectives: surviving, obtaining and managing resources, relating and navigating socially, and managing one's well-being.

1. Surviving	3. Relating and navigating socially
• Getting food • Taking care of one's hygiene • Taking care of one's health • Finding a good place to sleep if on the street (sheltered, safe, etc.) • Quickly understanding others' intentions [This is crucial for immediate safety]	• Understanding others' emotions • Having good relationships with other homeless people • Helping other homeless people • Collaborating with other homeless people • Maintaining good relationships with family and friends who do not live on the street • Maintaining good relationships with other people who do not live on the street • Talking to people to convince them to give money [Even if aimed at obtaining resources, this requires relational skills] • Quickly understanding others' intentions [Even if related to survival, it implies social understanding]
2. Obtaining and managing resources	**4. Managing one's well-being**
• Knowing the city well and places to obtain what you need • Using a smartphone to make calls, connect to the Internet, watch videos, etc. • Obtaining necessary medication • Finding places to obtain better food • Being able to charge your smartphone and connect to the Internet for free • Securing your belongings (documents, money, clothes, blankets, etc.) • Obtaining money by selling something or performing services for someone • Talking to people to convince them to give you money • Convincing other people – by talking alone – to give you items, clothes, or other things • Engaging in passive begging (alms) • Obtaining money through theft • Stealing items, clothes, or other goods from shops	• Explaining to oneself why one is homeless • Controlling one's emotions and feelings • Taking care of one's appearance [Even if linked to hygiene, it has a dimension of self-care and social presentation] • Trying to have control over one's life • Accepting the condition in which one lives; understanding others' emotions [Emotional understanding of others also contributes to one's own psychological well-being]

FIGURE 3 – CATALOGUE OF STREET LIFE TASKS ARTICULATED INTO AREAS OF COMPETENCE

These areas do not define a universally valid profile for the homeless, but a set from which each person selects their own "constellations" of competences based on history, context and specific situations (Richen & Salganik, 2007). This study investigated the self-assessment of homeless people's ability to mobilise resources to face the challenges of street life, using the catalogue of street competences as a reference.

4.2. Street Life Tasks

The section of the interview dedicated to street life tasks asked respondents to indicate up to three activities considered most important among the 28 proposed. 36 out of 50 people responded. Figure 4 illustrates the percentages of responses for all options, excluding those not indicated by any respondent.

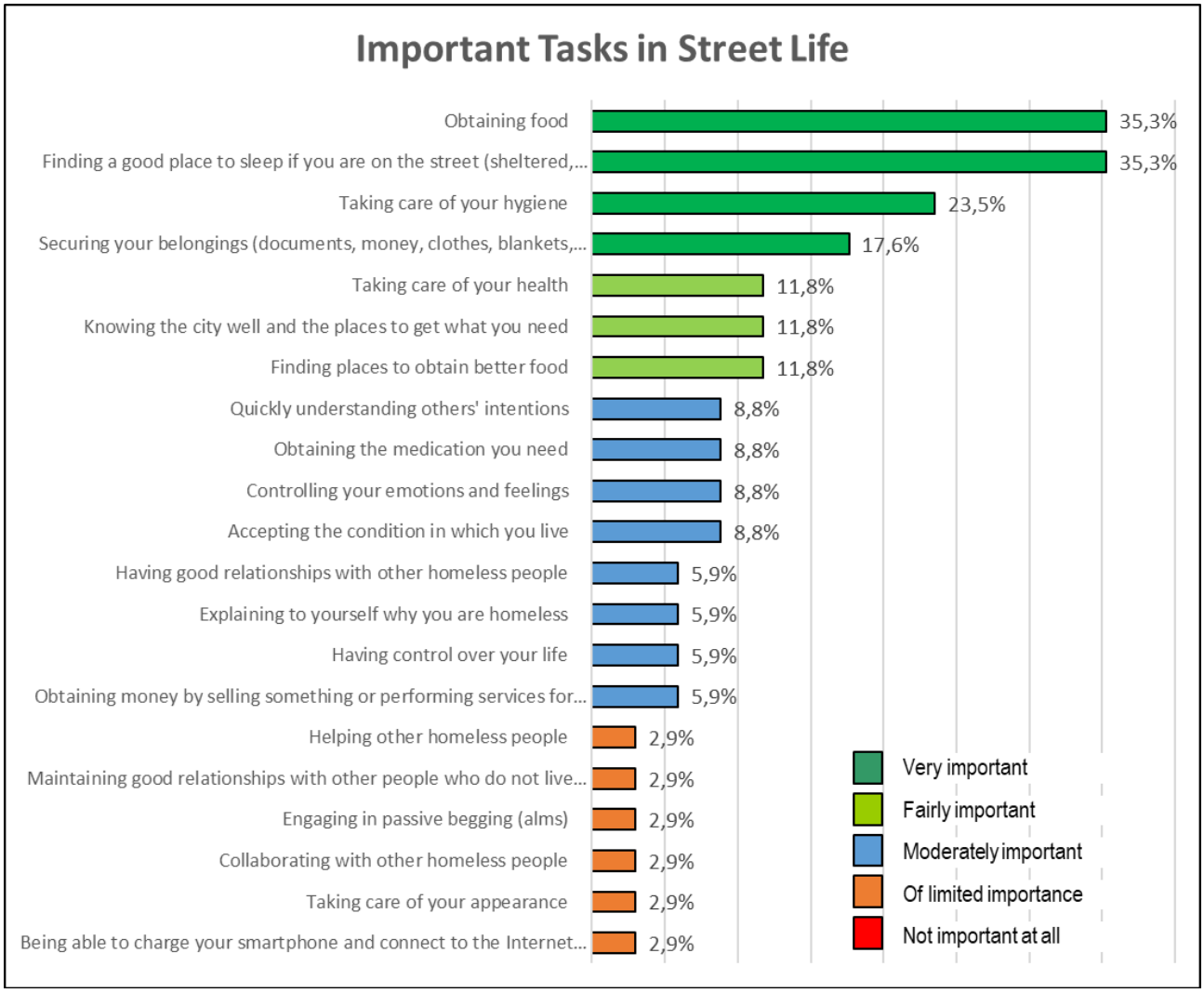


FIGURE 4: MOST IMPORTANT TASKS FOR STREET LIFE IN THE VIEW OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

The results show that priority activities are related to survival: getting food (35.3%) and finding a good place to sleep if on the street (35.3%) are in the top positions, followed by taking care of personal hygiene (23.5%). Securing one's belongings (17.6%), classified in area "2 - Obtaining and managing resources", is also considered relevant by homeless people. Activities related to the relational dimension and managing one's well-being, however, are considered very unimportant.

However, analysing the self-assessment of individual abilities (Figure 5), a different picture emerges. Personal hygiene care is largely in first place, with 83.7% of respondents stating they are very or completely capable of it. Getting food also maintains a high position (77.6%). In contrast, few consider themselves effective at securing their belongings (43.8%) and finding a good place to sleep (37.8%).

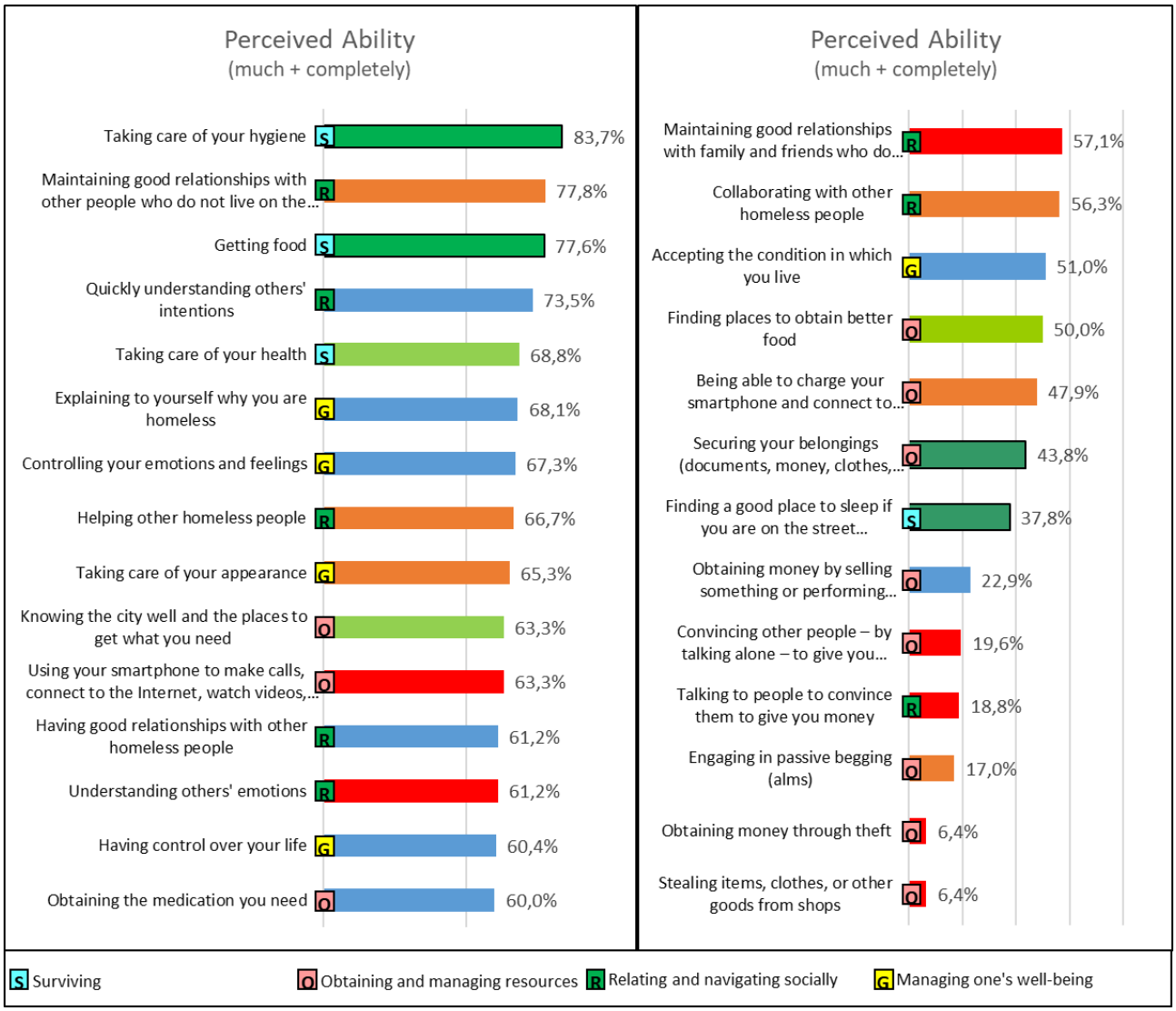


FIGURE 5: SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ABILITY REGARDING STREET LIFE TASKS

Curiously, tasks considered less important emerge among the top positions in terms of perceived ability. This is the case for the ability to maintain good relationships with other people who do not live on the street (77.8%) and to quickly understand others' intentions (73.5%). This suggests a potential discrepancy between perceived competences and those considered essential for street life. Figure 4 highlights that the most highly self-assessed abilities fall into areas “1 – Surviving” and “3 – Relating and navigating socially”. In the first area, taking care of hygiene (83.7%), getting food (77.6%) and taking care of one’s health (68.8%) stand out. In the second, maintaining good relationships with other people who do not live on the street (77.8%) and quickly understanding others' intentions (73.5%) are relevant. Over two-thirds of the sample also feel very capable in tasks related to "4 – Managing one’s well-being," such as explaining one’s homeless condition to oneself (68.1%) and controlling one’s emotions and feelings (67.3%). At the opposite end of the ranking are many tasks related to area "2 - Obtaining and managing resources," particularly obtaining money or goods through illicit means (6.4%) or begging/persuasion (less than 20%). This trend is further clarified by Figure 6, which shows the average percentages of those who expressed positive self-assessments (4 or 5) for each of the four areas of street competence.

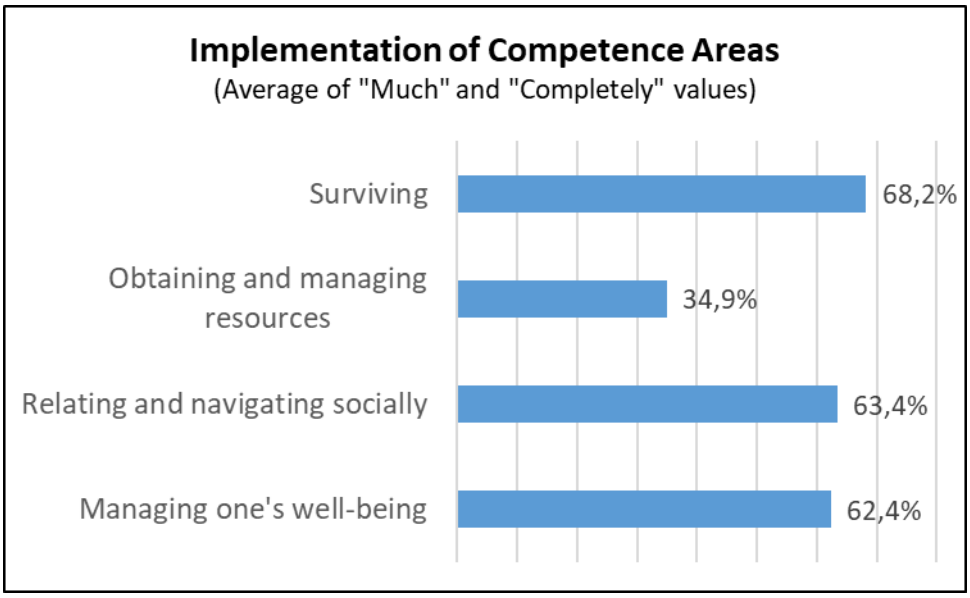


FIGURE 6: AVERAGE PERCENTAGES OF THOSE WHO ATTRIBUTED POSITIVE SELF-ASSESSMENTS TO TASKS FALLING WITHIN EACH OF THE STREET COMPETENCE AREAS

4.3. Examples of Effective Action

With reference to the task performed with the greatest competence, respondents were asked to provide an example. The responses were studied using thematic analysis and the results aggregated in relation to the four areas of competence.

1. *Surviving:* Marked abilities in managing health and hygiene in unconventional environments. These include independent food procurement and preparation, adoption of hygiene and health precautions, and use of support facilities for personal care. Intuitive assessment of others' intentions emerges as an essential skill for safety.
2. *Obtaining and managing resources:* Sophisticated ability in acquiring and optimising material and immaterial resources. Individuals master the "mapping" of free resources and employ various methods to generate income, from selling goods to strategic begging, sometimes including illicit practices based on organisation and risk assessment. Efficiency in smartphone use for managing appointments, job searching, and communication, including income generation, highlights notable digital literacy.
3. *Relating and navigating socially:* Effective behaviours in emotional conflict management, strategic use of persuasive communication to obtain support, and adoption of a respectful approach in interactions. A central aspect is the demonstration of mutual aid, concretised in material (food, clothing, medicine) and moral support towards peers with proactivity and creativity.
4. *Managing one's well-being:* Practice of daily hygiene and personal appearance care for maintaining dignity. Managing one's emotions and feelings proves to be a complex competence exercised in adverse social situations. Maintaining personal control is associated with the ability to reflect on and analyse circumstances. Acceptance of one's condition and taking responsibility for past choices denote self-awareness and resilience.

4.4. LifeComp Framework Competences

The European LifeComp framework (Sala et al., 2020) outlines nine intertwined competences that constitute the personal, social and learning to learn key competence. These competences are divided into three areas: self-regulation, flexibility and well-being (personal area); empathy, communication and collaboration (social area); growth mindset, critical thinking and managing one's own learning (learning to learn area). For each of the nine competences, the framework proposes three descriptors, conceived to facilitate recognition and educational planning. In the present study, these descriptors were revised, simplified and adapted in language to make them more understandable for homeless people. Figure 7 shows the percentages of those who identified themselves much or completely with each of the 27 descriptors considered. The overall average of positive self-assessments is quite high, nearing 71%, suggesting that the LifeComp framework is perceived as adequate for representing the experience of homeless participants.

Revisited Descriptors of the European LifeComp Framework Competences	Much+Completely
P1.1 I can recognise the emotions I experience, my thoughts, and my values.	72,3%
P1.2 I can manage my emotions; I can control my behaviour, even in critical situations.	70,2%
P1.3 I can cultivate optimism and hope for the future and trust in my ability to succeed in life.	66,0%
P2.1 If I receive new information, I am ready to change my opinions and actions.	44,7%
P2.2 If situations change, I can adopt new ideas or new ways of acting.	61,7%
P2.3 I can face changes in my life and decide my own goals independently.	61,7%
P3.1 I am convinced that my health and well-being also depend on my behaviours.	87,2%
P3.2 I know what is good for me and what is bad for me, and I choose safe services to meet my needs.	84,4%
P3.3 My way of life benefits me and respects others.	63,0%
S1.1 I can recognise the emotions and thoughts of other people, even just by observing them.	70,2%
S1.2 I can put myself in others' shoes and see things from their perspective.	55,3%
S1.3 When I sense that a person is uncomfortable, I try to help them.	83,0%
S2.1 I know that there are many ways and styles of communication, depending on different situations.	72,3%
S2.2 I can adapt my way of communicating based on situations and people.	74,5%
S2.3 I can listen attentively and trustingly to the people I speak with.	72,3%
S3.1 I enjoy collaborating with others, even when they are different from me or have different ideas.	59,6%
S3.2 I respect others (their rights, freedom, dignity) even when there are conflicts or disagreements.	61,7%
S3.3 When there is something to be done together with others, I take on my responsibilities and tasks.	76,6%
L1.1 I am convinced that every person can improve if they put in the effort.	85,1%
L1.2 I am convinced that one can always learn in life if one has openness, curiosity, and determination.	87,2%
L1.3 I can reflect on what happens to me and what others tell me, to learn from experiences.	78,7%
L2.1 I am well aware that not all information I receive is correct and that I can sometimes misunderstand.	74,5%
L2.2 I can compare different information, ideas, and points of view to understand what is right.	72,3%
L2.3 I can solve problems through new and creative ideas.	55,3%
L3.1 I know what I would need to learn and what interests me.	69,6%
L3.2 If I want to learn something, I know how to find the right ways to do so.	76,6%
L3.3 I reflect on my way of learning, with the aim of finding better strategies.	78,7%

FIGURE 7: POSITIVE SELF-ASSESSMENTS ("MUCH" OR "COMPLETELY") OF RECOGNITION IN THE DESCRIPTORS OF PERSONAL (P), SOCIAL (S) AND LEARNING TO LEARN (L) COMPETENCES

Figure 8 illustrates the average percentages for each competence in the framework. All competences are positively self-assessed by over 50% of respondents.

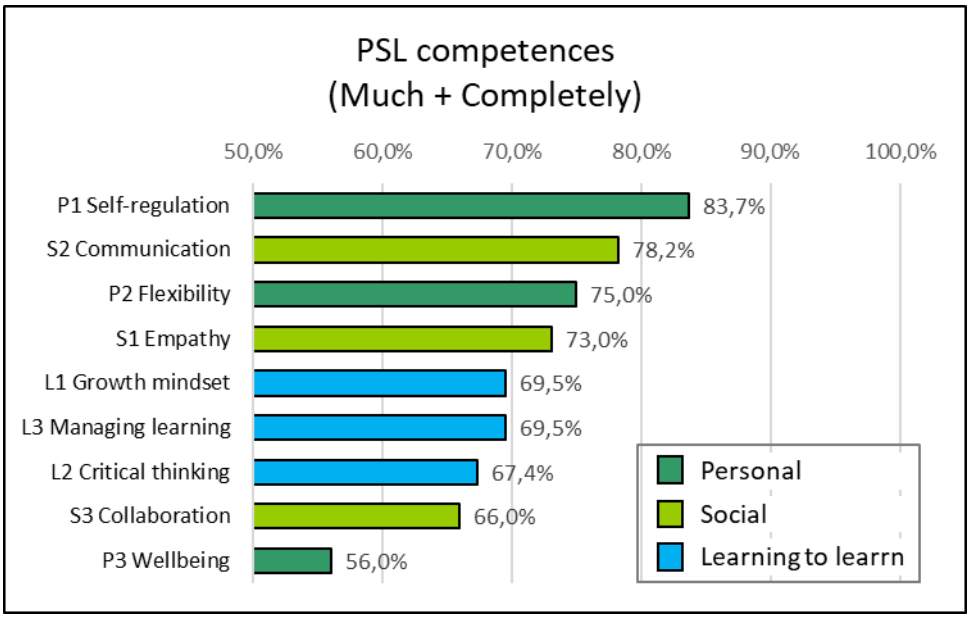


FIGURE 8: POSITIVE SELF-ASSESSMENTS (MUCH OR COMPLETELY) OF THE EXERCISE OF PERSONAL (P), SOCIAL (S) AND LEARNING TO LEARN (L) COMPETENCES.

A prevalence of personal and social competences is observed. In particular, 83.7% of the sample exhibits a high level in the self-regulation competence, which involves awareness and management of one's emotions, thoughts and behaviours. Given that homeless people are often subject to stigmatisation (Lee *et al*., 2010; Nooe & Patterson, 2010), which manifests in various forms such as labelling, stereotyping, social exclusion, marginalisation, invisibility, dehumanisation and criminalisation, they seem to develop self-control abilities. This allows them, on the one hand, to avoid emotional reactions that could generate further difficulties and, on the other hand, to maintain sufficient psychological well-being. The self-regulation competence is directly correlatable to the task of controlling one's emotions and feelings (67.3%) and can contribute to ensuring a sense of control over one's life (60.4%) and acceptance of one's condition (51.0%).

The second most developed competence in the LifeComp framework is communication, considered very significant by 78.2% of the sample. It refers to the use of appropriate communication strategies, specific codes and tools based on context and content. The ability to communicate appears to be a fundamental resource for street life, allowing for the maintenance of meaningful, often instrumental or non-conflictual, relationships with various people, including peers (Lee *et al*., 2010), public officials and social workers (Diodato *et al*., 2007), residents and shopkeepers (De Luigi, 2005), and, more rarely, family and friends. This competence is evident in tasks where interviewees perceive themselves as capable, such as maintaining good relationships with people who do not live on the street (77.8%), helping other homeless people (66.7%) or having good relationships with them (61.2%). In these tasks, the competence of empathy is also involved, referring to understanding the emotions, experiences and values of another person and adopting appropriate responses. Relevant for 73.0% of the sample, empathy is presumed to also be exercised to perform tasks such as quickly understanding others' intentions (73.5%) or understanding others' emotions (61.2%).

Flexibility, mastered by 75% of the sample, appears as a transversal resource functional to street tasks. Referring to the ability to manage transitions and uncertainty and to face challenges, flexibility is essential in street life, characterised by constant instability and uncertainty (e.g., precariousness of lodging, unpredictable encounters, changes in services or weather conditions). This requires

continuous adaptation of behaviour, revision of action strategies and changes in ideas to solve problems, influencing the execution of every task required by the street.

5.5. Self-assessment of Strengths, Values, Desires

Beliefs and convictions regarding one's strengths, along with values and desires, represent fundamental levers in the actions of homeless people. These resources are mobilised in the exercise of competences, acting as a driving force for adaptation and survival. The thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed recurring patterns.

Strengths were aggregated into five clusters of resources that help homeless people face street life:

- *Emotional and mental resilience.* Ability to maintain a positive attitude, optimism, and control over negative emotions. Inner strength and determination are considered essential for preserving hope.
- *Personal awareness and coping strategies.* Reflectiveness, education, and strong character, combined with strategies such as temporary isolation to manage adversity.
- *Practical skills and resources.* Practical competences such as resourcefulness and the art of getting by, fundamental for daily survival.
- *Social connections and support.* Ability to build respectful relationships and to receive or offer help, mitigating loneliness.
- *Faith and spirituality.* Reliance on a higher power, a source of comfort and hope in difficulties.

The *expressed reference values* vary between socially shared orientations and more individualistic perspectives:

- *Health and well-being.* Priority for some aspect, including physical, mental well-being and inner peace.
- *Family and emotional relationships.* Considered the ideal core of life, with emphasis on love, mutual support, and meaningful bonds.
- *Personal fulfilment.* Individual growth, respect for ethical principles, and the desire to leave a positive mark on the world.
- *Satisfaction of basic needs.* Material security, a place to sleep, and the possibility of working to improve one's condition.

The responses regarding desires, both for the day and for the following week, oscillate between the solution of concrete problems and self-management:

- *Daily primary needs.* Desire for hot meals, safe shelter, and personal hygiene.
- *Work and economic stability.* Finding employment or economic resources to meet daily needs.
- *Housing and accommodation.* Search for a stable place to sleep, even temporary.
- *Resolution of bureaucratic problems.* Progress in managing legal or administrative matters.
- *Personal improvement.* Small progress towards personal goals or improvements in quality of life.
- *Inner well-being.* Aspiration to serenity, rest, and inner peace.

These results highlight how, despite adversity, homeless people possess operational and ideal levers that support action on the street and that, if adequately valued, could support pathways to improve their living conditions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

LLL, from the perspective of a sustainable learning city, highlights a universalistic ideal so that no one is excluded from educational processes. The concept of an inclusive learning city is more relevant than ever considering the poverty and social exclusion rate in Italy, which in 2024 rises to 23.1%, an increase compared to the previous year (22.8%) (Eurostat, 2024). It allows for addressing the issues of vulnerability and extreme poverty, typical of homelessness, through the formative interpretive keys of the capabilities approach and adult education.

The results of this study offer an articulated understanding of informal learning and the competences developed by homeless people in their daily lives on the street. Through a mixed-methods approach, we observed that, although survival-oriented tasks such as getting food and finding shelter are perceived as fundamental, individuals perceive themselves as capable in tasks related to personal hygiene and maintaining social connections, even with those who do not live on the street. In particular, personal and social competences, as articulated by the LifeComp framework – including self-regulation, communication, flexibility and empathy – are broadly and positively self-assessed, highlighting their crucial role in facing the complexities and adversities of street life. In contrast, tasks referring to resource acquisition, such as generating income through legitimate and illegitimate means, show a significant gap in self-perception of abilities.

Beyond specific tasks, the study reveals that aspects such as emotional and mental resilience, personal awareness and coping strategies, practical skills and resources, social connections and support, as well as faith and spirituality serve as vital internal and external resources, acting as key drivers for action and adaptation. This challenges a purely deficit-based view of the condition of homelessness, emphasising instead the intrinsic strengths and adaptive capacities cultivated in difficult environments. The research can represent a valuable contribution in various areas, including the development of effective learning strategies in difficult contexts, the design of educational and social reintegration interventions, and the definition of targeted public policies. Indeed, the research results open up prospects for political-institutional development, assuming that the inclusive concept of a learning city can contribute to the effective implementation of the regulatory framework on LLL provided by Law 92/2012, which establishes the National System for the Certification of Competences. By recognising and valuing street competences, public policies and support services can promote more effective and empowering pathways towards well-being, social inclusion and LLL for homeless people.

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