



INSigHT
Building Capacity to
Deal with
Human Trafficking and
Transit Routes in
Nigeria, Italy, Sweden

Begging in the north-eastern Italian Veneto Region

This Report constitutes an Addendum to INSigHT report

The practice of begging, between freedom of choice, exploitation, trafficking and connections with organised crime. Focus on Nigerian people

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And was constructed on the materials collected and the exploratory research conducted during the
Workshop 'Mapping Urban Space and informal economies of begging'

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Acknowledgement. The exploratory research was conducted by the following groups:

Group 1: Cettolin and Vardanega

Group 2: Chen, Mannu and Pagliarin

Group 3: Di Stefano, Pintus and Garcia Fontana

Group 4: Sartori and Mohyadin

Group 5: Ortini

Group 6: Fabris and Salzano

We thank the students for the insightful work.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 About the Workshop

This report is part of the INSigHT Action (Building capacity to deal with human trafficking and transit routes in Nigeria, Italy, Sweden) as are all the activities carried out during the workshop that this report describes.

While the workshop was organised as an opportunity for students to benefit from the INSigHT Action research, it was also aimed to advance the research further and update the research findings collected in 2020. Thus this report constitutes an advancement of the research report published in March 2021, 'The practice of begging, between freedom of choice, exploitation, trafficking and connections with organised crime. Focus on Nigerian people' by Michela Semprebon, Serena Scarabello, Gianfranco Bonesso¹.

In particular, the workshop with students aimed at re-monitoring the field in Venezia but also other territories in the Veneto Region and in the nearby Friulia -Venezia Region where students live, which are all urban contexts known to be characterised by the phenomenon of begging and being at the crossroads of migrant flows.

The Workshop included lectures and discussions with students aimed at providing students with an academic overview on informal urban economies, in particular concerning begging and its interconnections with urban policies on public space management and urban safety.

It also aimed at providing basic methodological instruments on how to conduct social research through ethnographic observation and the mapping of public spaces as well as on conducting interviews with local actors such as shopkeepers and residents.

The programme was structured as follows:

- Introduction to the phenomenon and to ethnographic observation; field observations in small groups accompanied and supervised by Michela Semprebon and Gianfranco Bonesso (12 November 2021);
- Field observations in small groups, group discussions and overview on ethnographic observation as a research technique (19 November 2021);
- Introduction to qualitative interviews, elaboration in small groups of a semi-structured interview grid (26 November 2021);
- Students' presentation of their works and discussion (3 December 2021).

Students were supervised in the process of learning - experiencing - reflecting – and writing on how to:

- conduct an ethnographic observation (elements to be observed);
- select urban contexts to conduct the research;
- approach city users and beggars;
- prepare an interview grid and conduct semi-structured interviews;
- illustrate and discuss their work.

It is worth underlining that interviews emerged to have been an opportunity not only for students to explore the phenomenon of begging but also for interviewees to reflect on the phenomenon and become more attentive to the transformations of their cities, as well as to pay attention to their attitudes to begging and social exclusion. At the same time, what students conclude concerning the ethnographic observation in particular is that this experience in the field permitted them to see the city with new lenses even if they already had in their minds a sort of what they call 'sleepy urban knowledge' in relation to the phenomenon.

¹ Cattedra UNESCO SSIIM, Università Iuav di Venezia, March 2021 978-88-31241-39-7

2. STUDENTS IN ACTION

2.1 Ethnographic observations

Students were supervised by Michela Sempredon and Gianfranco Bonesso in the process of selecting and mapping urban areas. As mentioned above, as part of the workshop, the two professors accompanied the students in small groups to carry out a short ethnographic observation in Venezia in order to draw their attention to aspects to be observed and to provide with in on-field supervision.

Therefore, in order to conduct their research, even if concentrated in a limited time frame - December 2021/January 2022 - students had the opportunity to integrate their knowledge in urban studies with an understanding of some of the research techniques that can be used to map urban space, including ethnographic observation, mapping of social interactions, interviews, local press reviews and analysis.

Moreover, this was an opportunity to promote students' growing awareness on the phenomenon of begging and self-reflexivity on how to observe and analyse it.

To conduct their observation, students were encouraged to focus on the following main aspects:

- **situatedness conditions:** *places and spaces where beggars position themselves; time frame; weather;*
- **subjective conditions:** *clothes; behaviours; postures (i.e., if they hold particular objects, such as a hat, glass for gathering alms); gender; geographical origin (if identified); age; specific physical characteristics (i.e., tattoos, scars, etc.);*
- **interactions:** *with passers-by; law enforcement officers; shopkeepers; residents, etc.,*

Not only did each working group paid careful attention to the aforementioned elements, they integrated their data with information concerning physical and architectural transformations of the observed urban spaces.

Next, we will provide an overview of the work carried out by students. A total of thirteen students participated in the workshop. They worked in six groups: the all included two to three participants, except one – that included one student only.

Map 1. Group 6, Venezia

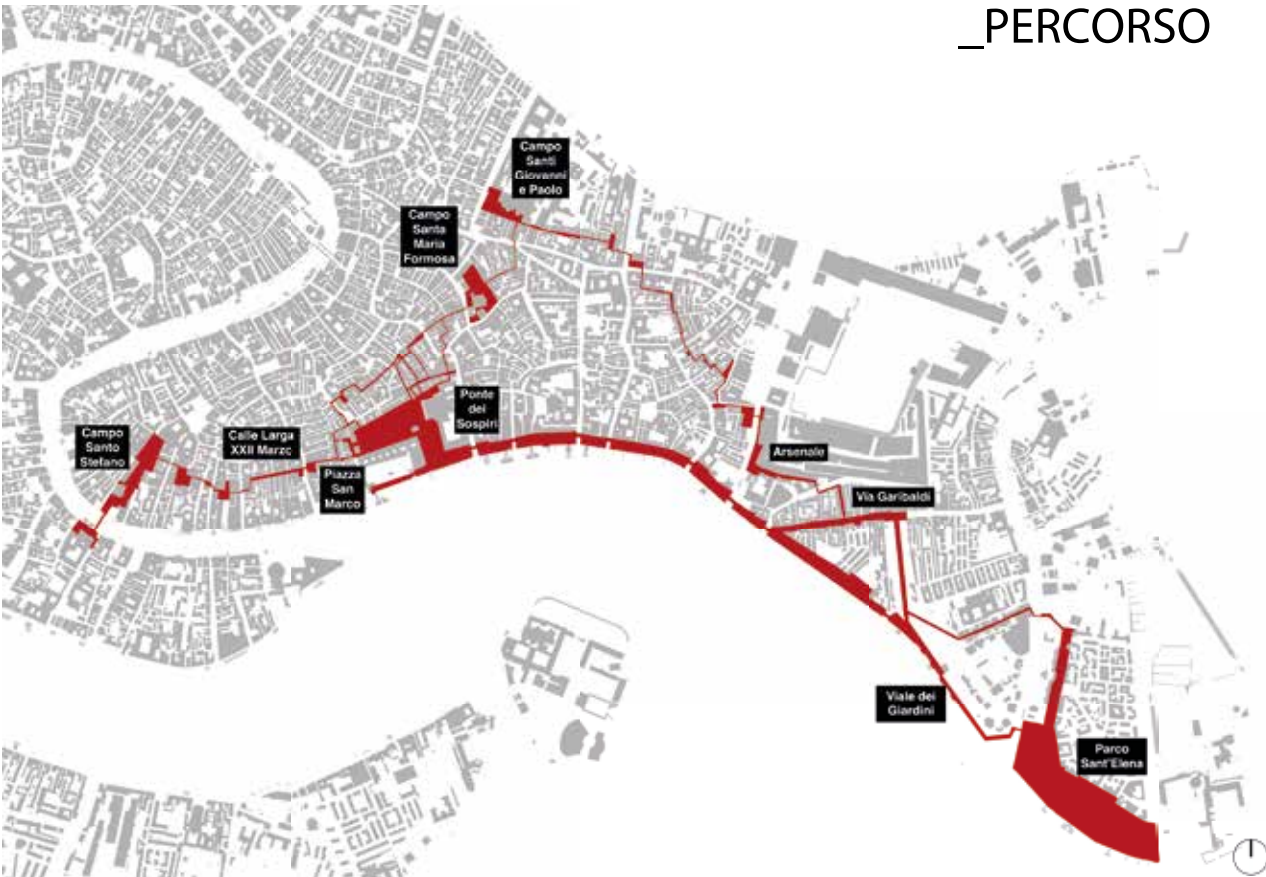


_AREA DI INDAGINE

Sestiere_San_Marco
Sestiere_Castello



_PERCORSO



2.2. Geographical Areas

Map 3. Italy and Cities of Observation of the workshop

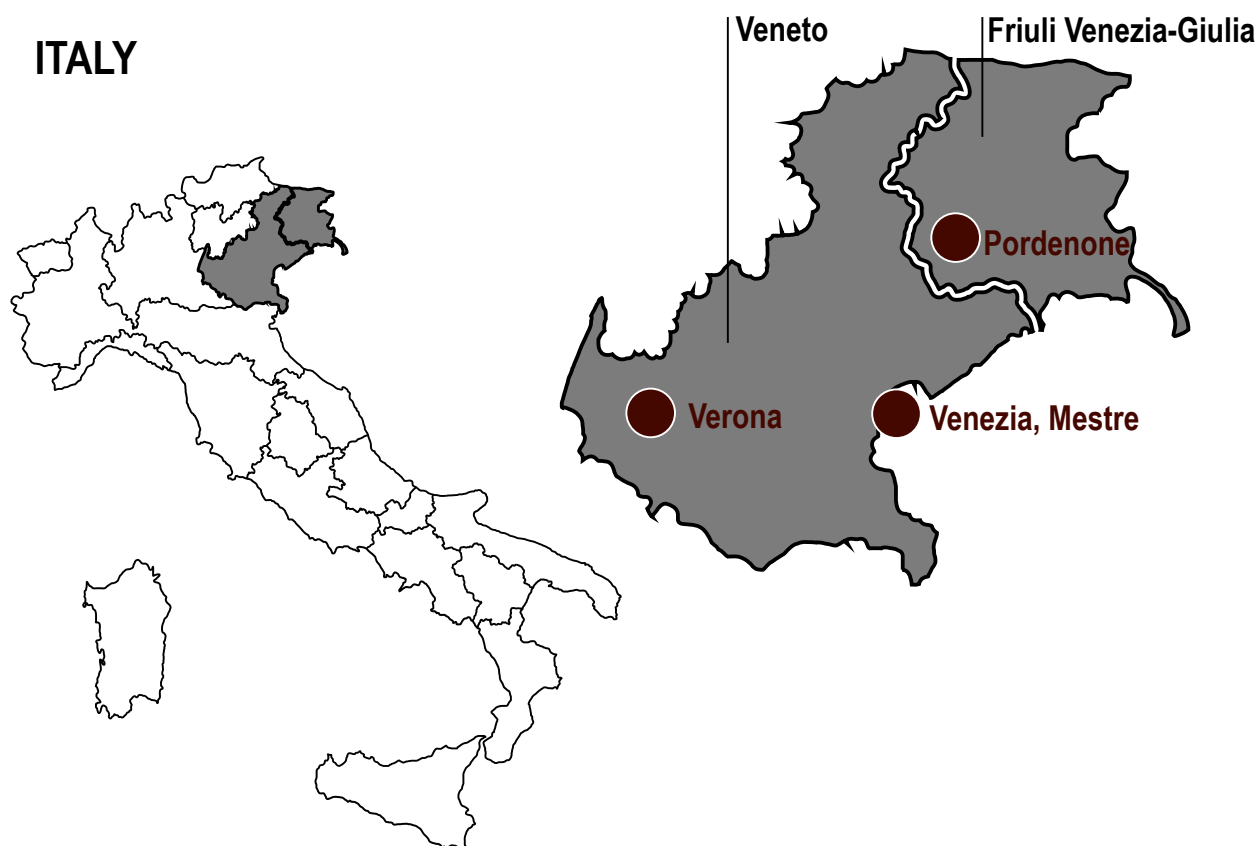
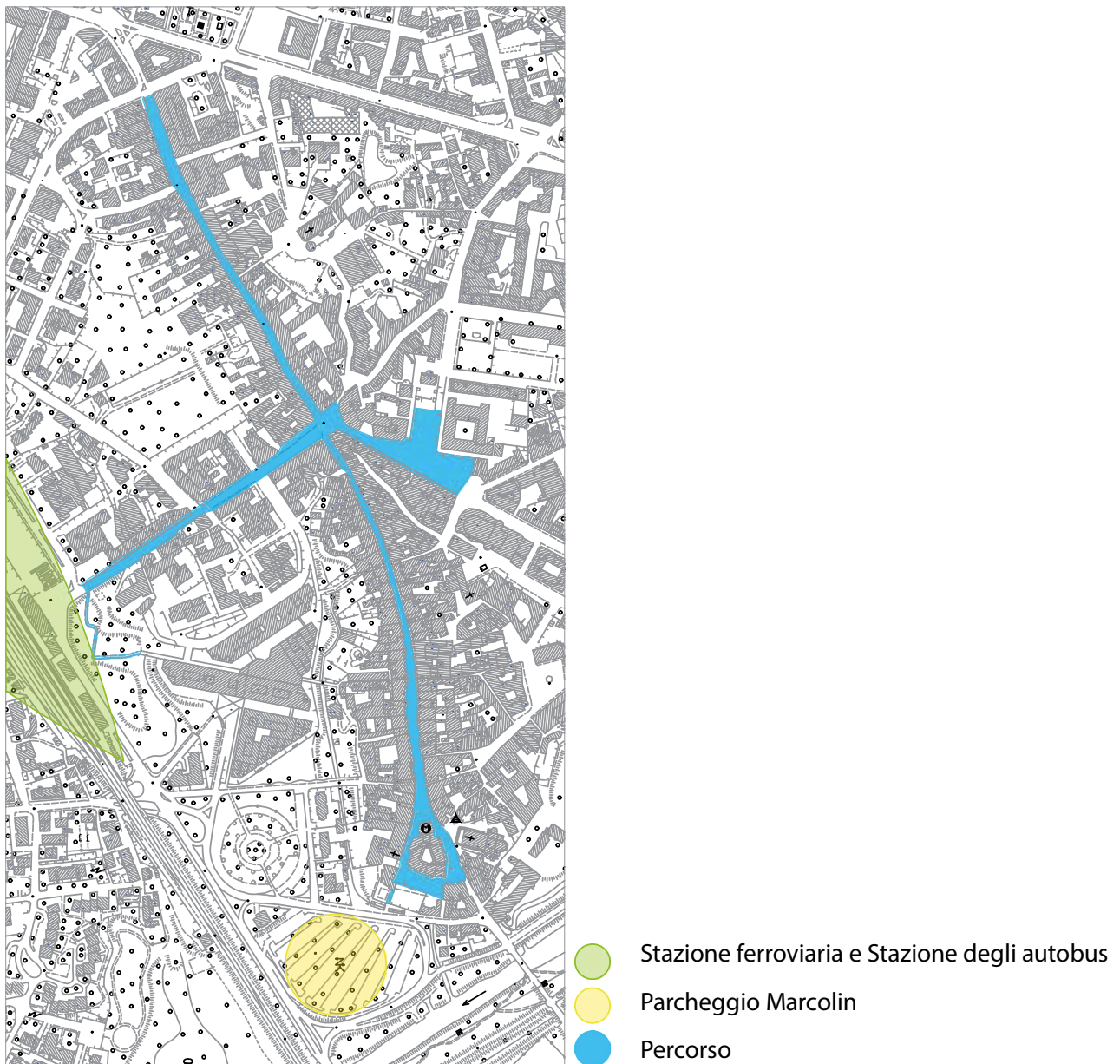


Table 1. Participant Observations – time frame and urban areas

Students/groups	City	Nr of days of observation	Main time frames of observations	Dates
Group 1	Pordenone	Seven days	11.00 - 13.00	15.11.2021 - 17.12.2021
Group 2	Mestre, Venezia	Seven days	9.00 - 12.00 11.00 - 14.00 15.00 - 18.00 18.00 - 22.00	24.11.2021 - 5.12.2021
Group 3	Venezia, Castello, San Marco	Seven days	11.00 - 13.00	8.12.2021 - 15.12.2021
Group 4	Padova	Seven days	12.00 - 13.00 17.00 - 18.00	13.12.2021 - 19.12.2021
Group 5	Verona	Seven days	10.00 - 11.30 19.30 - 21.00	22.11.2021 - 28.11.2021
Group 6	V e n e z i a , Dorsoduro	Seven days	10.00 - 16.30	12.11.2021 - 18.11.2021

Group 1 conducted their observations in Pordenone. After having analysed the access to the city centre through public transportation they have selected the perimeter delimited by the rail train station and bus station [west] and by Marcolin car parking [south]. The below map shows the depicted Pordenone area of their study

Map 4. Group 1, Pordenone



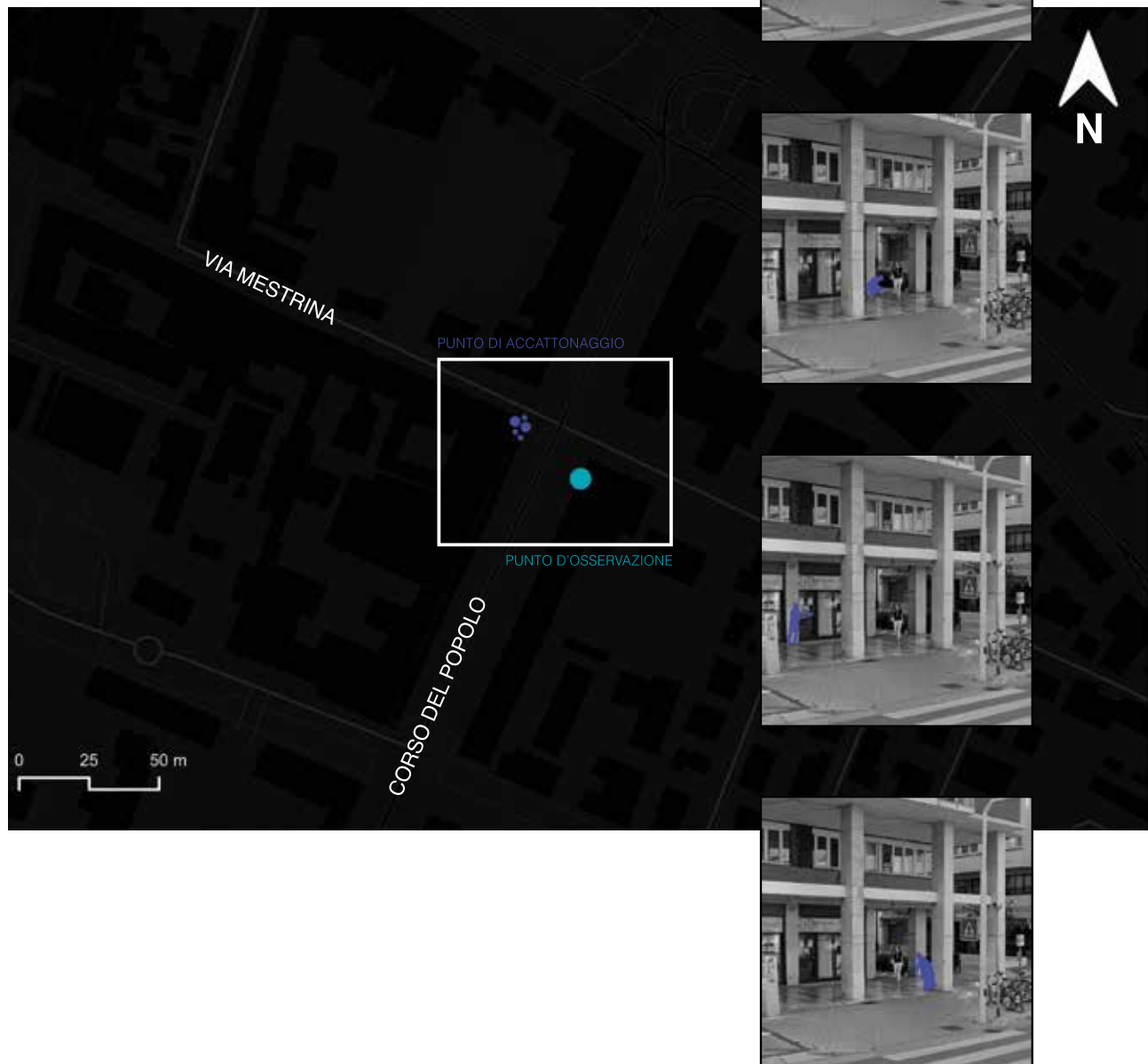
From the work of group 1, as well as by comparing the work of six working groups, it emerges that beggars in Pordenone are very low in numbers in comparison to other cities and that people involved in this activity, during seven days of observations, seem to be the same. Indeed, they describe having noticed at the entrance of PAM Supermarket in Garibaldi roadway the constant presence of an African man, whose age they estimated to be among 30-40 years-old. His behaviour is similar to that of other beggars of same nationality, in their view: he doesn't ask verbally for alms and holds a hat in his hand where people put the money.

While at the same time during the seven days it happened at the beginning of the observation period to notice not previously 'known' beggars in other days. Hence for students it was a process of taking familiarity and noticing day by day. What they hold in their report is that there seems to be a 'strategic' choice by beggars in relation to the following elements: the place where to act, the behaviour and physical position to maintain and the day and time chosen. In relation to this last element Cettolin and Vardanega, for instance, were impressed by a women encountered the 24th of December, a pre - festivity day before Christmas, and the fact that she chooses to position herself at a crossroad highly frequented by 'city users' and necessary to access the historical town centre from Marcolin car Parking. Her behaviour was defined as "non-harassing" approach while she was holding a plastic glass for alms.

Students of group 2 conducted their ethnography in Mestre, Venezia. This group of three students also mixed ethnography with interviews. Concerning the first mean – observations - they conducted two different typologies called ‘static observation’ and ‘on the move observation’.

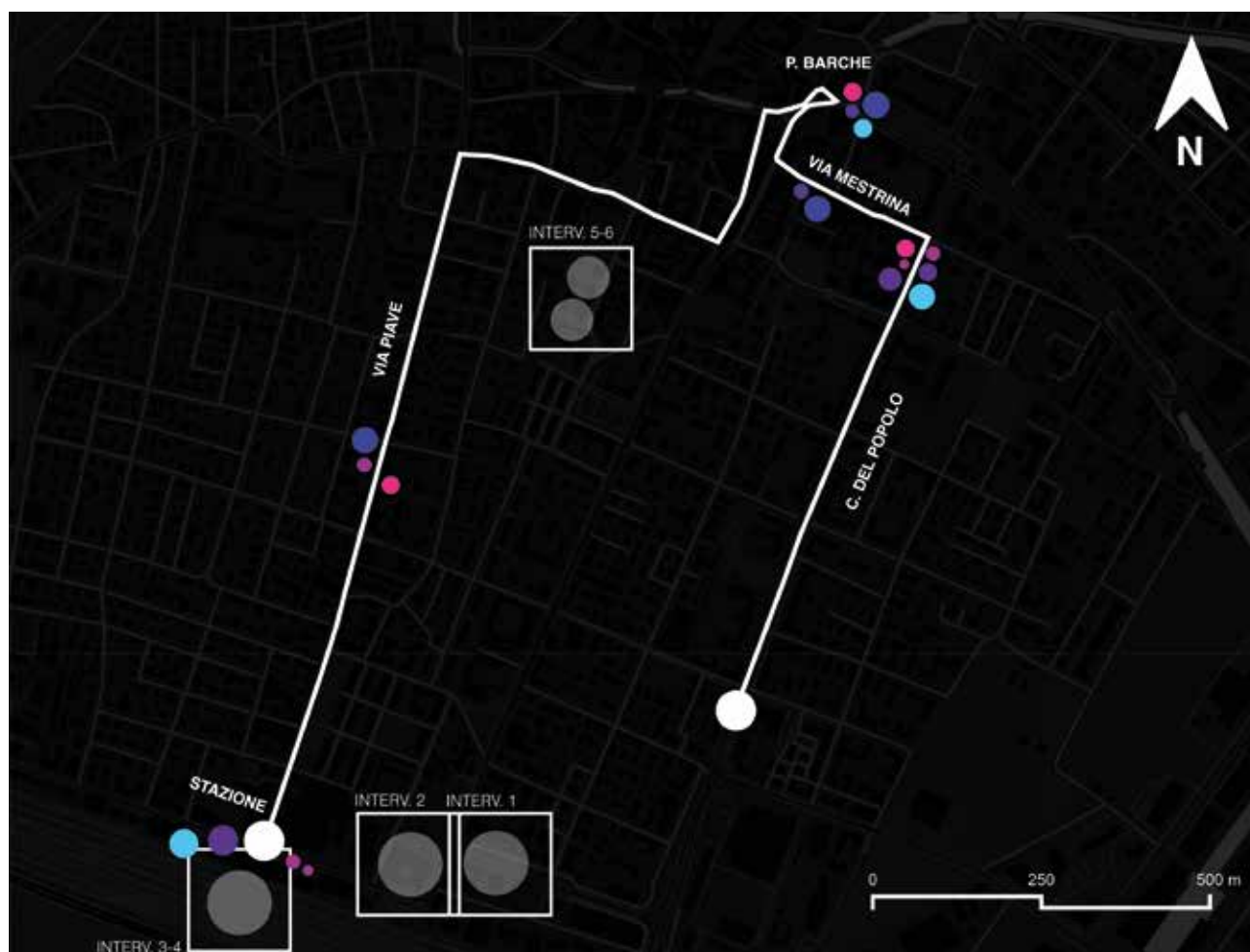
The two maps below show the streets and urban areas they explored.

Map 5a. Group 2, Mestre, Venezia - ‘static observation’



Their ‘static’ ethnographic observation involved standing still for sixty minutes to observe beggars’ behaviours as well as their interactions with passers-by, residents, law enforcement officers and shopkeepers. They conducted these static observations in different time-frames from 9.00-10.00 am to 9-10 pm in order to compare any possible differences or similarities in dynamics. They observed the presence of: one man of African origin, two men and two women probably from eastern Europe and an older (presumably) Italian woman. Concerning behaviours and objects to gather alms they noticed that the African man held a red hat, the eastern European man a glass, while the two women from Eastern Europe a walking stick and a headscarf. Moreover, while men were mostly standing-up, the two non-Italian women were on their knees. The Italian woman was not standing still and had a more aggressive behaviour with passers-by, suggesting she might be suffering from mental-health problems.

Map 5b. Group 2, Mestre, Venezia - 'on the move observation'



Regarding the 'on the move observation', the group explained they walked from the Pam Supermarket in Corso del Popolo, towards Mestrina street, Barche square, Piave street until the Mestre train station. This approach permitted students to map more beggars: six presences of African men²; three presumably Italian men and women; five eastern European or Roma men and women; four European men.

Few elements need to be mentioned as they constituted transversal and constant elements in each urban areas as pointed out by other groups too:

- people of African origin, mostly men in Mestre, are the youngest among the other recorded groups of beggars: 20-30 years-old; they hold mostly a hat in their hand to ask for alms;
- people of Italian origin, both men and women, seem to experience the most severe forms of marginality, including alcoholism; drug addiction; homelessness and very poor health conditions; moreover, they seem to be older, between 50-60 years-old;
- people of Roma origin or eastern Europe seem to be a more mixed group concerning both age and sex; differently from Africans who use a hat to gather alms they seem to use a plastic glass or just their hand.

Another element noticed also by other students, such as Ortini in Verona, is an apparent confusion by some passers-by who associate beggars with drug dealers: in Mestre students noticed a passer-by offering 20€ to a beggar, probably from Eastern Europe, and asking for drugs, but the beggar showed no understanding of the request.

On his side, Ortini in Verona recorded an interconnection between beggars and drug dealers. He described the existence of a "covert" form of begging aimed at selling drugs.

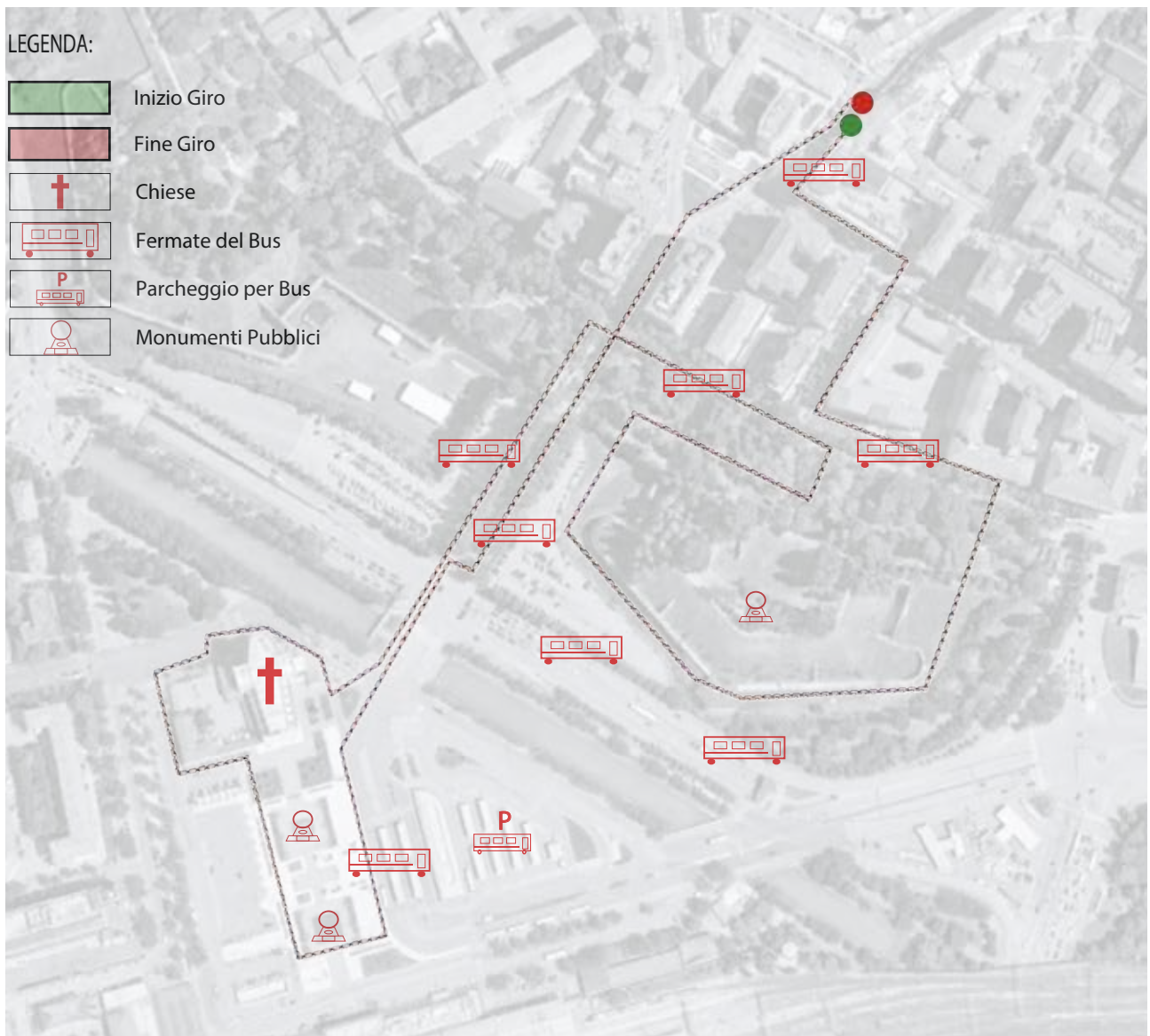
²This mean that the same person might have been encountered in two or more days

Map 6. Group 5, Verona - observation area



Ortini (Group 5) delimited as an observation area the perimeter among: S. Bernardo Bastioni [bastions], streets closed to this area, S. Luca Church, located in front of Verona Porta Nuova train station.

Map 7. Group 5, Verona



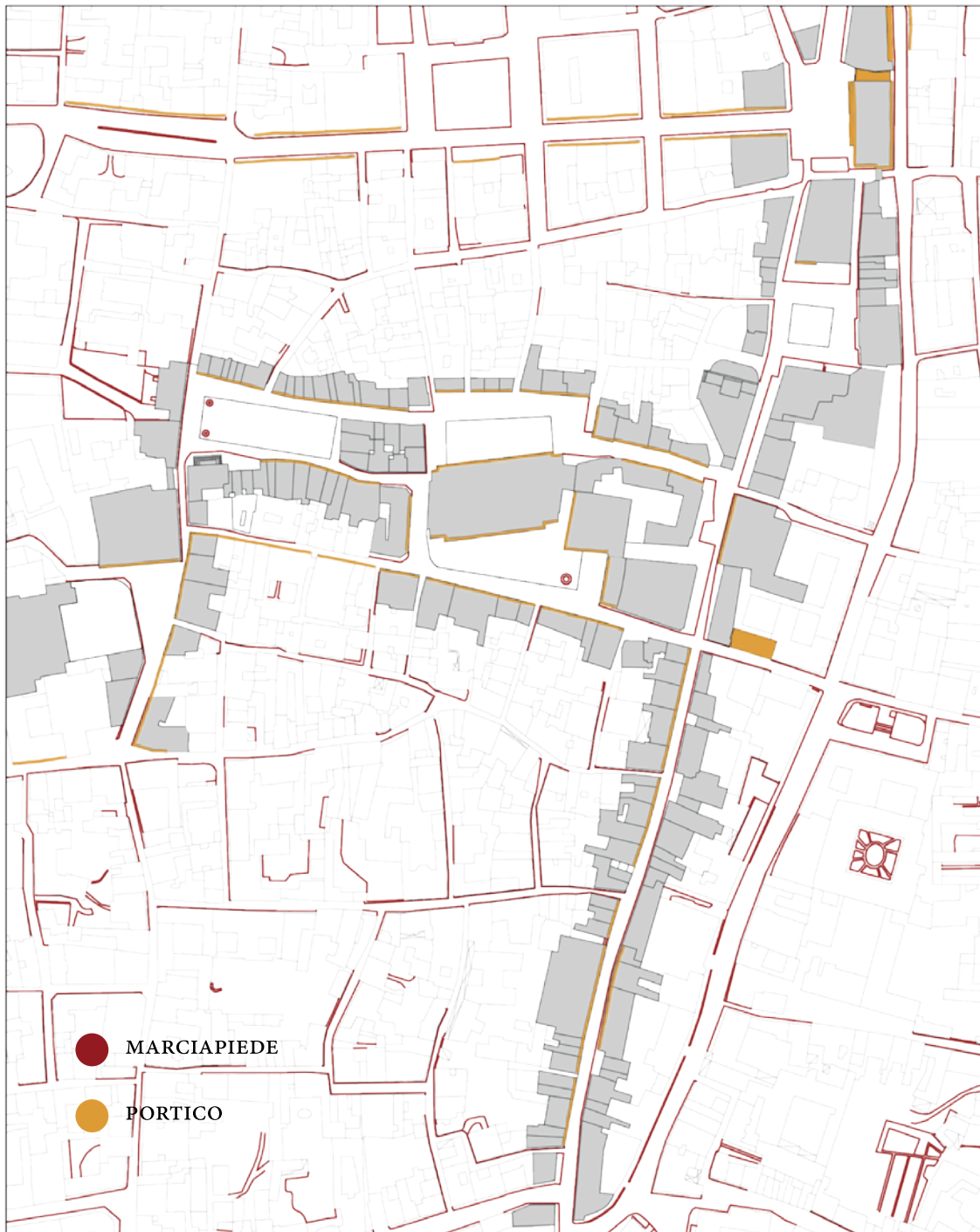
This urban area, even if very close to the town centre, seems to be crossed and used mainly by students, commuters, visitors and several Roma and people of migrant background, mainly Africans, Romanians and Indians. An additional element concerning this urban perimeter concerns the local urban regeneration policies implemented before the spreading of Covid-19 to counter phenomena like drug dealing, micro-aggressions and to address residents' perception of unsafety. He argues that while these urban interventions seem to have had an impact in the two years before the Covid pandemic, with an apparent decrease of these phenomena, the situation has worsened again more recently. Differently from other students he experienced, during his ethnographic observation, he was stopped by a law enforcement agent, asked for his document and searched (for drugs) – possibly because he was seen talking to a beggar. After the student explained why he was talking to the beggar, the officer explained that the area was used by 'covert beggars' who could be drug dealers too. He further explained that beggars as well as people not involved in illegal activities often suffer violent verbal and physical aggressions, by young people but not only. Ortini noticed the following presences during his observation that took place in different time frames in order to cover the 24 hours (10.00-11.30; 20.00 – 21.00; 19.30 – 20.30): Roma people - two women - encountered three times; Romanians probably, three men; Italian - one man encountered six times; a Nigerian man encountered two times.

In relation to behaviours, he noticed similarities with the first described urban area- Mestre- regarding women of Roma origins who position themselves on their knees at the entrance of a church holding a plastic glass to collect alms. On the contrary, the Nigerian man was seen holding a hat and positioning himself in front of the bus parking area.

Map 8. Group 5, Verona - Recurrences



Map 9. Group 4, Padova



Sartori and Mohyadin, group number four, explored the city of Padova.

They noticed that beggars in Padova were active between sidewalks and arcades in the city centre in specific pedestrian areas. In these areas non-residents cannot drive, nor can people cycle.

Sartori and Mohyadin categorised the people they encountered in three main sub-groups: beggars; street artists and itinerant street vendors. They observed mainly people of presumably Italian, and African origins, but also people from Eastern Europe and Asia.

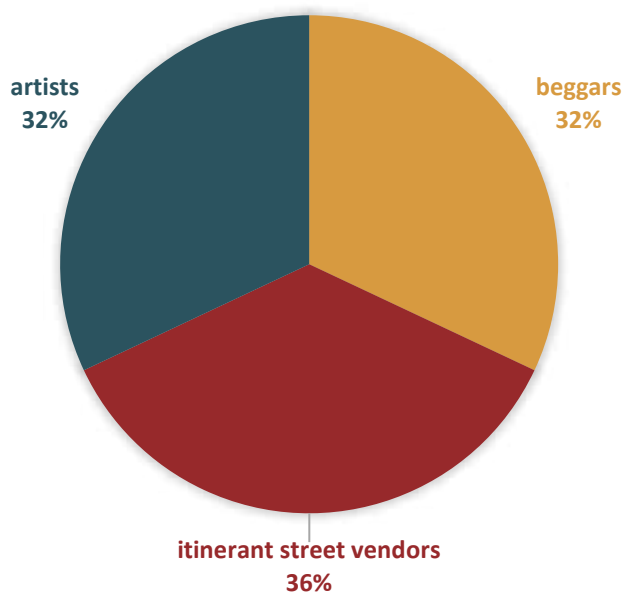
They recorded the highest number of beggars and recurrences in comparison to other five working groups, amounting to a total of 59 beggars certainly with several recurrences of the same people in different days. Among the 59 recurrences, men have the majority. The women they registered during begging activities were: three of African origin involved both in begging and itinerant selling activities; and two Roma women.

Another specificity of Padova, differing from other urban areas that were mapped concerns the number of street artists of different origin. The majority are of Italian origins, but men of Eastern European and African origin were also noticed.

Map 10. Group 4, Padova

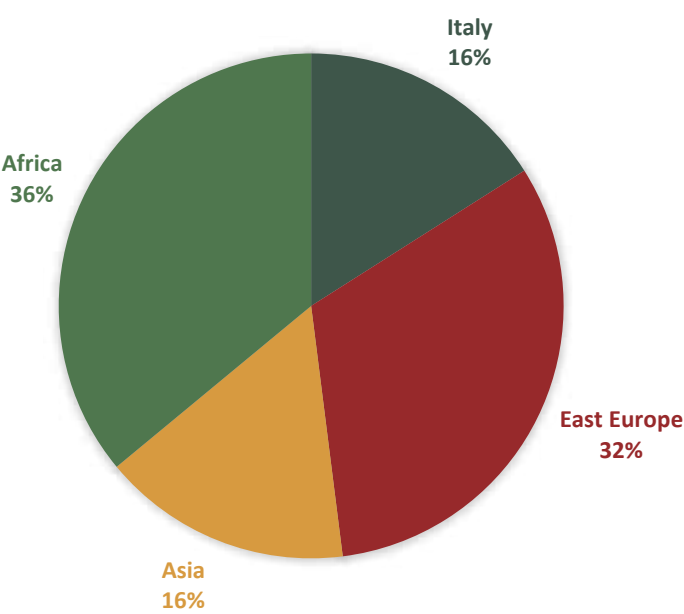


Source: Sartori and Mohyadin. Each form represents the range of urban space where one person at time was active. Where forms overlap- areas of activities of one or more persons overlap.



The map below shows these overlapping areas of activities.

Map 11. Group 4, Padova



The last two working groups conducted their study in Venezia city centre. The first was composed by Di Stefano, Pintus and Fontana and the related area regarded as Sestiere S. Marco. They conducted their seven days ethnography in the same time frame 11.00 – 13.00.

They recorded 26 people, presumably Nigerians and Italians, but also from eastern European countries. Similarly, to other groups, they noticed that people of African origin utilise mainly a hat while people from eastern Europe utilise plastic glass. Confirming the observations of the mentioned INSigHT report, pietistic attitudes seem more common among Roma and people from eastern Europe.

Concerning interactions, the group observed that while people of African origin reduce their verbal interaction to a minimum, by saying 'good morning', people from eastern Europe and Roma people are more prone to asking explicitly for alms. In relation to Italian people, as noticed in other cities too, individuals are older and begging seems related to severe marginality.

Map 12. Group 3, Venezia – Last observation day



Based on their observation, the group suggests that the phenomenon of begging, in the city centre of Venezia, is highly conditioned by the fact that the area is quite away from the train station hence characterised by less transit by people. The group suggests also a deterrent effect of the closeness to the Giardini Biennale and S. Marco Square, where law enforcement officers are often present. Overall, the group traced three main profiles of beggars: young men of African origin well organised in their shifts; people, mostly females, in their 40s – 60s of Romanian or Roma origins, that adopt pietistic attitudes and position themselves at the entrance of churches in precise time-frames – that point to the organised character of begging; a third group composed mainly by Italians, particularly homeless men, probably with problems of alcohol abuse.

Near Campo s. Margherita



Source: Street View - Google Earth Between 10/2017 and 09/2018

Fabris and Salzano conducted their research in Venezia as well in the area called Dorsoduro. They noticed during the ethnographic observation the following people: seven Italians (as explained for other cases: the same person might have been encountered on several days); eighteen African people; eight from eastern Europe.

Map 13. Group 6, Venice – the studied area



INQUADRAMENTO DELL'AREA DI INTERESSE

Map 14. Group 6, Venice, day 3, 19 November 2021



Venerdì 19 Novembre 2021 - ore 11:00

	LUOGO	GENERE	ETÀ	ORIGINE	POSIZIONE	INTERAZIONE	OGGETTI
A	Fondamenta de la Cazziola	M	30 - 40	Africana	In piedi	Con passanti, sporgendo il cappello	Cappello
B	Campo S. Margherita, Conad	M	30		In piedi	Con passanti sporgendo cappello	Cappello, cellulare
C	Campo S. Margherita, Do Draghi	M	40	Italiana	Seduto su dei gradini con il cane	Alzato lo sguardo in cerca di un contatto visivo	Ciotola cane, coperte
D	Davanti Tonolo	M	30 - 35	Africana	In piedi	Con passanti, sporgendo il cappello, insistente	Cappello
E	Basilica dei Frari	F	40	Est-europea	Seduta sui gradini della Chiesa	Salutando	Cappello
F	Prima del ponte dopo la Rivetta	M	30	Africana	In piedi	Con noi, sporgendo il cappello	Cappello

2.3. Interviews Conducted by Students

As already explained a semi-structured interview grid was co-created by students, during the workshop, with the supervisions of the two professors.

The main questions the students addressed concerned:

- interviewees' knowledge and opinion on the phenomenon of begging;
- a description of beggars as described by students: gender, age, presumable origin, attitude, other characteristics;
- a description about interactions (if any) between the interviewee and beggars;
- beggars' behaviours or interactions with other people;
- if, what and how law enforcement officers have undertaken any action to monitor/prevent begging;
- any differences or similarities observed by the interviewees before, during, and after the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020;
- any other opinion/issue raised by the interviewees about the phenomenon (if any criminal group or any illicit activity may be interconnected with begging).

The table below summarises the interviews conducted by each group and, where available, the profile of the interviewees. In total, students interviewed 20 people.

Table nr. 2. Interviews

Students – Working groups	City/Town	Nr. Interviews – informal information	Typology of participants
Group 1	Pordenone	1- City user	- male 20-30 years-old
		1 - shopkeeper	- male 40-50 years-old
Group 2	M e s t r e , Venezia	1 - shopkeeper	- n.a
		1 - shopkeeper - lpin Chinese market t	- n.a
		1 - security company-Train station (informal chat)	- n.a
		1 - train station front desk (informal chat)	- n.a
		1 - S. Vincenzo soup kitchen	- n.a
		1- Caritas	- n.a
Group 3	V e n e z i a , Castello, San Marco	1- tobacco shopkeeper	- man 60 years-old
		1- security agent	- man 50 years-old
		1-resident and employee, art sector	- woman 30-40 years-old
Group 4	Padova	1- Padova tourist info office	- woman 40 years-old
		1- University student	- girl 20 -25 years-old
		1- waiter	- boy 20 years-old
Group 5	Verona	1- city user	- woman 67 years-old
		1- Chinese restaurant	- man 48 years-old
		1- resident in the neighbourhood	- woman 93 years-old
Group 6	V e n e z i a , Dorsoduro	1- city user	- n.a
		1- city user	- n.a
		1- resident	- n.a
Total interviewees (informal chats)		20 people	

Source: elaborated by the author

Four main issues emerged from the interviews and the informal chats – where the interview was not possible - conducted by the student groups:

- visibility vs. non-visibility; tolerance vs. intolerance;
- interactions between interviewees and beggars;
- perception and/or experiences about (criminal) organisations, exploitation and control of beggars;
- law enforcement officers' attitudes and interventions with respect to beggars and observed changes due to the pandemic.

Visibility/invisibility – Tolerance/intolerance

Confirming the descriptions of the INSight report, the interviews conducted by the student groups suggest that beggars are perceived differently: for some people they are invisible, for some they are not disturbing, some are indifferent to them, some people openly oppose their activity.

While volunteers and practitioners involved in proximity services dedicated to marginal and homeless people (i.e., Caritas and S. Vincenzo) seem to have more insights on the phenomenon, due to their direct contacts with people, other interviewees referred to personal (often) isolated experiences, or to media, or local policy makers narration about the phenomenon.

'Begging does not affect a specific segment of society. It is such a complex phenomenon that it is very difficult to say if people are motivated to stop begging. It is very personal. Some people lack cultural instruments to reflect on their situation [...] Moreover there is a dimension that relates to continuity [maintenance]: not all people have the capabilities to be responsible in locating a house for instance...' [Caritas operator in Mestre]

People interviewed by Cettolin and Vardanega, in Pordenone, perceive beggars as not 'disturbing'. They seem to be accepted but they are also largely invisible. Other students' groups reported different data, particularly the group that worked close to S. Marco square, in the city centre of Venezia.

'usually those who stay in fixed location are more visible during the morning hours, while those that walk around are more visible during the afternoon and in the evening. Let me introduce an opinion: they were around all days also during the lock downs. This was so disturbing and irritating for me, we had restrictions to move, while them could go around to Venice even if they were not venetians' [Tobacco Shopper, Venice].

Two main elements need to be mentioned in relation to the research conducted in Pordenone: a) residents and city users do not seem to be irritated by beggars; b) on the other side, as reported in local newspapers, the local municipal has enacted several actions to stop and prevent begging over the last years.

In 2020, twenty (20) people/beggars were sanctioned and were prohibited to return to the city for some days (the so-called "Daspo Urbano" measure), due to their violation of a municipal regulation (n. 28 of 29.05.2017 – but also Legislative Decree 20.02.2017) that prohibits and sanctions 'harassing forms of begging' that prevent the free utilisation of sidewalks by city users. The beggars who were sanctioned are very young, in their 20s -30s and exert their activity mainly on the two-week days in which the open-air city market takes place: Thursdays and Saturdays. The local municipality undertook other initiatives, targeting citizens: a phone line for citizens to report 'harassing forms of begging' and an awareness raising campaign, with leaflets distributed in shops encouraging people not to give money to beggars in order not to "nurture" criminality networks.

In the words of a local councillor: 'the campaign aimed to encourage residents to give their money to associations that can really help people in need instead'.

Interviewees in Mestre narrated that beggar are always the same people who should rather look for a job. They also explained that they rarely have a regular legal status – which of course prevents migrant beggars from accessing any job opportunity – but this is only the result of their hypothesis as they have had no direct contact with beggars.

*'- Do you see them every day, or on what days? And at what times?
- Basically, every day, I guess, it's hard to determine the time, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon, but lately it's been getting darker and colder, so it feels like they're leaving a little earlier.
- Is it always the same people?
- I think they're all the same people.
- Have you ever talked to any of these people?
- No.'*

[interview with a Chinese restaurant entrepreneur, Mestre]

Moving to interviewees in Padova and Venezia, one interviewee in Padova expressed the view that people 'pretend not to see beggars'; another interviewee in Venezia explained that 'people are generally indifferent and do not interact'.

Interaction with interviewees and city users

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned relates the 'social distance' that interviewees declare to enact or have seen other people enact, sometimes motivated by the fact that they believe beggars they know are drug addicted. A similar attitude was described by students who observed begging in the cities of Pordenone and Mestre.

The interviewees in Pordenone portrayed different attitudes: while one had no specific opinion on the phenomenon nor had had any interaction with beggars, the second reported having helped a girl but having refused to give her money: 'before Christmas there was a girl asking for money. I do not give money. If you want, I can bring you to a coffee shop for breakfast or a fruit juice, but I do not give money.' [shopkeeper Pordenone].

Other interviewees, in Verona, considered giving alms as a help to support a person in a specific time frame.

'I think that begging is an extreme lifestyle that has existed in all cultures, also in Asia. There are a lot of people that become beggars after dramatic events in their life. [...] I know an Italian man that comes here in the evening and started begging after his wife died. People can beg for money to eat or for drugs. This is why I think it is better to offer a hot meal instead of money.' [Chinese restaurant entrepreneur in Verona]

A similar opinion was expressed by other interviewees, regardless of age, gender and geographical origin.

Another women interviewee, in her 67s, in Verona, declared she gives alms to people she feels sorry for but she also stressed she avoids 'bad guys', thus portraying a differentiated perception over "deservedness".

Other interviewees report of observing beggars with attention, but no prejudice. It is the case of a tourist office employee in Padova who interacts with both beggars of Nigerian origin who stay mainly at the train station and beggars from eastern Europe and Roma who stay mainly at the entrance of Duomo. Interestingly she also observed that the same Nigerian people beg in Padova but also Venezia, suggesting their activity is organised and it is beyond municipal borders. The same was not reported in the INSigHT report that rather describes that beggars normally beg in a city that is not the city in which they live (mainly due to feelings of shame) and that they therefore commute but it was not observed that the same people are in multiple locations.

An interviewee in Venezia described beggars as non-harassing. In his interpretation this is due to two main factors: the phenomenon is very limited, in comparison to bigger cities in Italy such as Roma, Milan, or Bologna; beggars are not aggressive:

Honestly, here you do not even feel there are beggars, except for rose street vendors that are harmless. Generally speaking, it is a phenomenon that does not disturb, an ordinary person would not notice it.'
[Security Guard in Venezia].

Organised phenomenon or subjective situations?

In relation to this issue, diverging opinions emerged. One of the interviewees in Pordenone seemed surprised to hear from the students that begging can be an activity organised and controlled by a criminal organisation. The same view was expressed by few interviewees in Mestre and Venezia as well.

Another interviewee provided a more complex view. He explained that beggars may have different motivations. Some may have been forced to beg by tragic events in their life, some may choose to beg, in some cases there may be small organised groups that exploit beggars.

More punctual insights were provided by volunteers and practitioners of the S. Vincenzo soup kitchen in Mestre and Venezia. The coordinator narrated about an organised group that portrayed an aggressive attitude, with the result that residents called for law enforcement intervention several times.

It must be pointed out that some interviewees had not specific view of the phenomenon and totally ignored the fact that it may be controlled and associated with forms of exploitation.

Law enforcement officers and begging in five studied urban areas

Interviewees in Mestre, Padova and Venezia narrated that law enforcement officers do not interact with beggars and they tolerate them, unless they are aggressive and people complain about them.

From other narratives it emerged that law enforcement officers are asked to intervene also due to their mandate to preserve “urban decorum”, particularly in Venezia, Padova and Verona, as they are tourist cities.

‘Here in piazza S. Marco, or close to here, there are very few people that ask for alms. This is because there are law enforcement officers ... shopkeepers are not happy to see people in front of their shops and ask them to leave. But there is a German lady that is always here, I saw her sleeping at Correr and also close to Palazzo Ducale [S. Marco Square, in the centre of Venezia]. Is disturbing, she is always screaming, has a lot of bags and wears dirty clothes. Shopkeepers are annoyed and have to ask her to leave all the time. Sometimes law enforcement officers have intervened to force her to leave’ [young woman employed in the art sector in Venezia, living in the city in the last 5 years].

Generally speaking, interviewees have not observed hostility towards beggars on the side of law enforcement officers, with the partial exception of interviewees in the centre of Venezia, in S. Marco Square.

This can be probably explained by the fact that law enforcement officers are required to be particularly attentive in the city centre of Venezia, that is often crowded with tourists. An informal chat with a local resident further suggested that law enforcement officers tend to intervene only if called by residents or passers-by.

When asked about the potential impact of Covid-19 on begging, some interviewees reported that in their view there was no significant impact; others pointed down the lockdown resulted in a reduction of the phenomenon. Other interviewees noticed the increase of beggars of Italian origin – possibly people that lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

‘I had not seen (...) [] this before the lock down. This [Italian] guy is the first after many years, at least five, while beggars connected to micro-criminality have always been here, before and after the lockdown, and people have negative perception about them.’ [resident in Venezia Dorsoduro neighbourhood]

Another interviewee reflected that before the spread of the Covid pandemic, he has observed the arrival of beggars of diverse national groups.

‘I have lived here for 35 years. At the beginning there were almost only Roma people asking for alms. Now I see more African men around the city and here in front of my shop.’ [shopkeeper in Venezia Castello neighbourhood].

Interestingly, the same shopkeeper suggested there was no impact due to Covid since the people he saw begging before the spread of the pandemic continued doing so during the lockdown – differently to what was reported in the INSigHT Report.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As pointed out in the INSigHT report, begging is a very complex social phenomenon. Similarly, to INSigHT researchers, students observed that beggars portray different attitudes with passers-by and position themselves in different places, according to their geographical origin. In particular, as far as Nigerians are concerned, it was generally noticed that they are non-harassing and generally stand in front of shops of strategic transit points and use a hat to collect alms, while also being friendly to people. . Students' work was useful not only to confirm what had been observed by researchers but also to collect the views of some residents, shopkeepers and other actors. As explained attitudes towards beggars do differ, ranging from tolerance to intolerance, although the former prevails. What has also emerged is that people have a scarce knowledge of the phenomenon and rarely interact with beggars, with few exceptions, which is why interviews were certainly an opportunity for self-reflection.

The professors eventually decided to ask students not to interact with beggars as to prevent them from finding themselves in unsafe situations (considering that the observations that had been carried out in Venezia had suggested the phenomenon is controlled and organised). This leaves questions open regarding the potential link between begging and trafficking and/or exploitation in the case of Nigerian people but also Roma. In this sense, adding to the recommendations of the INSigHT report, we suggest that more research should be carried out to further explore:

- the dimension of exploitation in begging activities;
- any connection between begging and severe social exclusion, as well as drug dealing and alcohol and drug abuse;
- successful examples of co-constructed urban safety policies involving residents and city users but also beggars;
- the potential contribution of law enforcement interventions to highlight elements of exploitation rather than to restrict begging;
- begging from a more interdisciplinarity perspective, to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon from a sociological, anthropological, urban planning point of view;
- how residents can be involved to raise their awareness on the complexity of the phenomenon of begging in all its forms and to call for increasing civic attention on their side, including reporting to the police any indicator pointing to exploitation and forms of control;
- how specific training courses can be organised for social workers and volunteers to raise awareness on begging, particularly whereby social workers and volunteers work with relevant targets.

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