

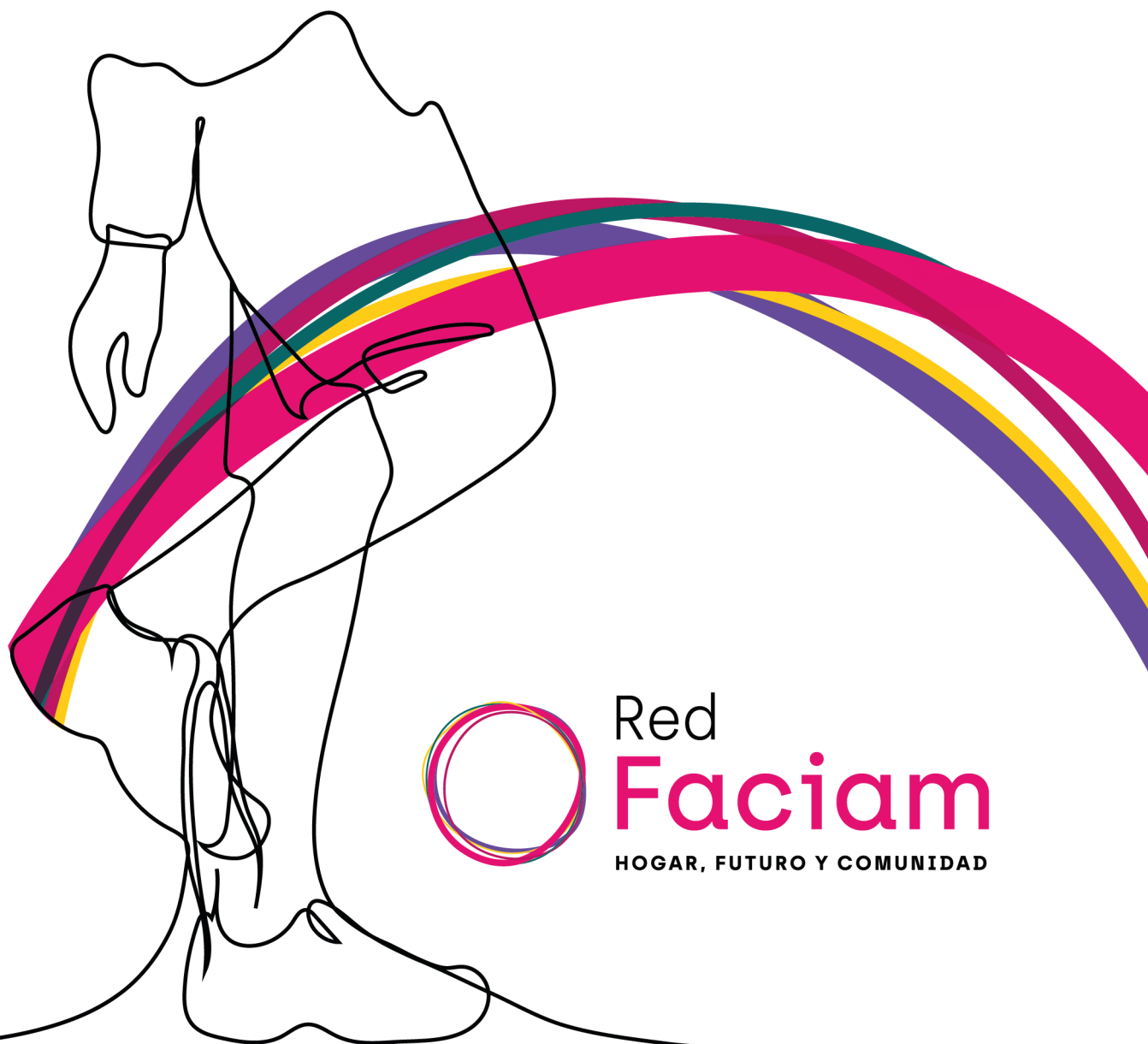
RELATIONAL BONDS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN HOMELESSNESS:

Keys to intervention

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Research report:

Relational bonds and social support in homelessness: Keys to intervention

June, 2024

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Funded by:

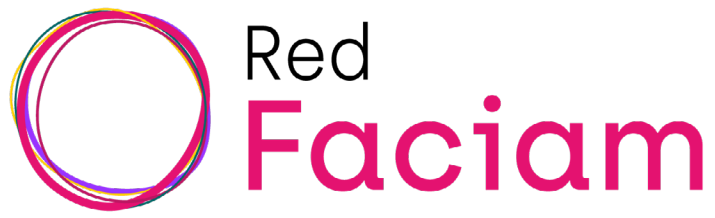


Translated by:

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Layout:

Pica Para Arriba, diseño gráfico social



· Executive summary ·

This research, carried out by FACIAM in collaboration with the UNED (National University of Distance Education) and the Pontifical University of Comillas, comes from the conviction that the social relationships that people experiencing homelessness have, are fundamental for understanding and overcoming the moment they are going through and, therefore, also for an effective social intervention in terms of social inclusion. The objective that has guided this process has been to understand the relationships that homeless people have and to measure what they bring to them in order to identify vulnerabilities to combat and tools for resilience that can be strengthened through social support.

This measurement considers what relationships bring to people in two senses. On the one hand, the social capital, which refers to the material resources, information and contacts to which they have access through the relationships with others and which can help them in their processes of social mobility and in overcoming their situation. On the other hand, the relational goods, which integrate affections, beliefs and feelings of belonging on which people rely to drive themselves and move forward. We speak of relational aggregate to refer to the social capital and relational goods that people obtain from their social relations.

The research involved the participation of various homeless people assisted by FACIAM's network of organisations in all the territories where FACIAM is present. To this end, a mixed methodology has been implemented, combining a survey with interviews and discussion groups, taking as cross-cutting variables the situation of socio-residential exclusion of people (ETHOS categories), gender, place of origin and age.

The following pages present the main results of the study and proposals for social intervention that have emerged from the analysis. Without a doubt, the potential of the relational aggregate as a resource to reinforce the processes of recovery and inclusion of homeless people is enormous, as well as for advancing community-oriented and effective policies and models of intervention for prevention. We invite you to join us in these reflections



• 01 •

Social relations,
although deteriorated,
are not non-existent for
people experiencing
homelessness.

Moreover, they are
fundamental to their
social inclusion
processes.

- » The **relational dimension** is, as this study shows, a space of vulnerability for those experiencing homelessness that has a direct impact on their social exclusion. Experiences of loneliness, lack of social support, loss of important people and distance due to migratory processes, for example, interfere with their ability to access resources to improve their situation and to secure affections, convictions and belongings that allow them to move forward.

- » But despite extreme adversity, homelessness does not eliminate the relational dimension of people. Relationships with those working in social organisations and social services, with family and friends are essential because they provide resources, affection and support. These relationships, which are fundamental for motivation and personal change, maintain access to social capital and relational goods. They play a crucial role in the identities and beliefs of homeless people.

Are we addressing the importance that social relations have, in both senses, for social inclusion and social mobility?

The challenge of social intervention is to integrate actions to improve people's social capital and relational goods by boosting their sources, it is to say, meaningful relationships and links with other people. This implies, for example, reinforcing the community focus of projects; innovating in methodologies that extend people's connections and people's protection networks beyond the boundaries of organisations; and incorporating techniques and tools to diagnose relational realities and incorporate them into personalised accompaniment. The continuous strengthening of the relational skills of the teams is an additional point.



• 02 •

Homeless people claim, in the first place, to cover basic needs which they value particularly highly. However, when defining what is most important to them, they talk about relational goods.

- » The study reveals that for people experiencing homelessness it is crucial to articulate different relational dimensions, as access to social capital, although vital, is not sufficient for a successful social inclusion. Affection, values and a sense of belonging, for example, are resources that, by enhancing material support, facilitate processes of personal and collective transformation.

- » However, social intervention tends to focus on providing for basic needs, minimising the importance of moral, affective and spiritual bonds, which can limit the comprehensive and sustained impact over time. This is reflected in the fact that professional and volunteer staff in social programmes and projects bring more social capital than relational goods to homeless people, according to the study.

How can we move towards a comprehensive, person-centred approach to support?

The challenge of social intervention is to go beyond emergency programmes based exclusively on the solution of basic needs and, without ignoring the relevance of these benefits, to address the relational dimension of people. In social intervention, it is taken for granted to favour access to social capital. Perhaps, then, the task is to incorporate work on relational goods as an essential part of everyday practice because social inclusion also requires fostering senses, values and affection through relationships with others.



• 03 •

For people
experiencing
homelessness, respect
and confidence
are the keys to
good interpersonal
relationships.

- » **Respect and confidence** are essential in social relations and social intervention. On the one hand, respect is defined by people in three dimensions: towards oneself, towards other people and towards their opinions. On the other hand, confidence, on its part, is crucial in contexts of social exclusion and in dealing with insecurity and uncertainty. Therefore, these dimensions are vital for building productive relationships in social intervention.

- » **To foster relational goods that can be transformed into tangible resources**, it is essential to recognise people's protagonism from the beginning. However, the study shows few references to their participation in the management of the centres and projects, which is more a discourse of the professionals than an established practice in the entities.

Do we recognise the people with whom we work as autonomous agents with the capacity to have an impact?

The challenge of social intervention is to make real a deinstitutionalising approach in which care is the basis for achieving personal emancipation and not the unnecessary prolongation of a situation that should be momentary. This implies boosting people's capacities to make personal and collective decisions, ensuring that their experiences are inputs to respond to their needs. Thus, in addition to contributing to the political subjectivation and social identity of people, the impact of the projects is improved.



• 04 •

Gender, age, place
of origin and
socio-residential
exclusion
situation affect the
quality of homeless
people's relationships,
as well as health
and experiences
of violence lived
through.

- » Relational vulnerability is especially critical for people who live in ETHOS 1 or 2, who are over 64 years old, who have Spanish nationality, who have a disability or who are in a very bad state of health and mood, who have the lowest scores in both social capital and relational goods. Meanwhile, young people have higher scores in rootedness, but low scores in social capital, and more than half of foreign people have low levels in both dimensions.

- » Those who have suffered violence, especially women, have higher levels of social capital than of relational goods, perhaps because of the supportive relationships that this type of difficulty generates. Violence affects 1 in 2 homeless persons and 3 out of 4 homeless women have suffered some kind of violence.

Are we providing adequate responses to people's diverse needs and demands in relational terms?

The challenge for social intervention is to strengthen people's social relationships through pluralistic services based on an intersectional approach and on the principle of comprehensiveness. People are diverse and require relational support in different dimensions at the same time. Focusing on people therefore means recognising particularities, intersections and their complexity, without constructing a divided person.



• 05 •

Professionals and
volunteers from
social organisations
and projects play a
leading role in the
relational dimension
of homelessness.

- » More than half of homeless people's social capital comes from professionals and volunteers in the social projects they participate in, who mainly provide material assistance and information, but less influence in terms of contacts and networks. They also offer affection, values and forms of social identification. In these aspects the teams of FACIAM organisations make a significantly higher contribution compared to other ones.

- » This support is crucial for those in extremely vulnerable circumstances, such as women and people in ETHOS 1 and 2 situations, older people, people without primary education, widows, of Spanish nationality, people with disabilities and people in poor mental or health condition. In this framework, people recognise the importance of the support received in terms of social capital, but it is the positive attitudes of professionals and volunteers and the treatment received that they value the most, their intangible, qualitative contribution.

Do we, as people, want to be tools for change?

The challenge for social intervention is to design accompaniment based on people's strengths and not on their lacks, using existing meaningful relationships as tools for recovery. This includes us. Therefore, it is a matter of putting our knowledge at the service of change, but also who we are as individuals, learning from our experiences so that we do not move from relationships of support to relationships of dependence.



• 06 •

Family members
have the most
important weight
in the relational
goods of homeless
people. However,
these experiences
sometimes appear as
an idealised memory
of what they were.

- » In the set of relationships of people experiencing homelessness, the mother and father are particularly significant figures, followed by the couple and children. Although they do not have great weight in access to social capital (more than half of the people do not receive financial or material support from them), they are essential in the area of relational goods, especially mothers, fathers and grandmothers.
- » Homeless people especially receive companionship, affection, values, advice and a sense of belonging to a group from these figures. However, these relationships are often remembered in an idealised way because the closeness to them has been lost, which also implies the loss of the affection, convictions and meaning they provided.

How can we accompany people in their memory processes, contributing to a reconciliation with the past that makes them strong in the present?

The challenge of social intervention is to incorporate and not ignore in emotional accompaniment the re-signification of relevant life events and relationships, transforming them into useful resources to face new events and create or rebuild relationships in a positive way. Any change that may have a significant impact on people's emotional story (such as moving from one assistance resource to another) should be approached with special care so that it is not felt as abandonment but as a transition. Also the use of (self-) care techniques and tools, autobiographical storytelling and life prospection is important.



• 07 •

Groups are central to the relational aggregate of homeless people. However, the group dimension is not very present in their narratives about social intervention.

- » This study reveals that groups are central to positive relational support for people experiencing homelessness, highlighting meaningful relationships with others in the same situation. Although negative experiences are common, especially with peer groups, these groups provide security, confidence and a shared identity, despite betrayal and selfishness.

- » Relationships with people who do not share the same situation are also crucial for people experiencing homelessness. It should not be forgotten that the social capital available to a person (its quantity and quality) depends on the groups to which he or she belongs and the groups to which its members belong. Groups that provide other relational goods are also important.

Are we taking sufficient advantage of group work with people as a catalyst for social inclusion processes?

The challenge of social intervention is to promote group relationships that add to the processes of inclusion, working both on the links between peers, with a therapeutic approach based on care, and on connections with other groups in differentiated spaces that are bearers of greater potential social capital. One figure that can facilitate and mediate these processes is the peer worker.



. 08 .

The contribution of
the social capital
and the relational
goods that homeless
people receive from
community actors is
not very significant.

- » In a normalised situation, relationships created in the working environment are a source of resources, information and contacts (social capital), while links with neighbours contribute to identity, self-esteem and social belonging (relational goods). Given the difficulties that homeless people have in participating in these areas, the neighbourhood and work colleagues, when they exist, play a more than a secondary role in their relational aggregate.

- » Together with this **weakening of community ties** (potential or de facto), there is a hostile environment towards homeless people that constantly exposes them to harm, violence and discrimination.

How can we be deinstitutionalising social entities?

The challenge of social intervention is to open the doors of the entities, to work with the environment, to act in the neighbourhoods, to mobilise and raise awareness among citizens, to be positioned as pivotal agents with the communities. This, which should be a focal point of public debate, is a challenge shared with the public administration and society. Community-based programmes are the horizon we must reach, but carefully in order not to leave people unprotected. We need a transitional process in which social institutions play an important role and policies are generated to strengthen the third sector



. 09 .

The losses
experienced by people
who are homeless
have opened wounds
that are constantly
being fed. They are
losses of bonds
and of what each
relationship brings.

- » It is not just that many homeless people have had significant losses in their lives. It is especially that for them, these losses are directly related to their current situation and are, at the same time, a source of motivation and resilience when they are compensated.

- » These are losses associated with the death of significant people: a mother, a father, a child, a couple. But it is also about other types of loss. Relational ruptures, which involve a distancing from persons who are important in the life story and who leave a void; or losses due to spatial distance, which are particularly vivid because the 'wound' is constantly nourished by the fact that the relationships are there, but they cannot lean on them; or collective ruptures that have to do with the horror of war and structural violence, with all the deaths, not always close or known, that have been left behind.

Are we aware of the role we play in the possible perpetuation of people's losses and pain?

The challenge of social intervention is to move towards models for reviewing trauma and dealing with mourning, in all its dimensions and complexity, avoiding reproducing them with approaches that reinforce hierarchies, power relations and the institutionalisation of people. This means addressing unconscious trauma through accompaniment and care, developing specific methodologies and processes for this purpose. Incorporating the postulates of Trauma Informed Services and encouraging the formation of specialised teams are actions to advance along this path.



• 10 •

The beliefs and
spiritual practices of
people experiencing
homelessness have
an important place
in their relational
aggregate.

- » People experiencing homelessness have a **higher level of religious beliefs and practices than the general population**. These beliefs also play an important role in how they cope with life and their situation, while religious affiliation provides access to both social capital and relational goods.
- » For example, the religious centre is more important in these two relationship domains than work or neighbourhood, and those who are religious practitioners have higher levels of both than those who are not.

How can the spiritual dimension of people, given its value for resilience, be integrated into inclusion processes?

The challenge for social intervention is to promote a person-centred model capable of understanding all the dimensions that make up the person in order to provide comprehensive responses to their needs and to take advantage of the strengths that each one of them offers. This includes religiosity and spirituality. Providing spaces that facilitate spiritual practices, from an intercultural approach that recognises and respects diversity, is a possible action in this regard.



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