

## Surveys of homeless persons - the case of Italy

Nicoletta Pannuzi, Isabella Siciliani, Alessandra Masi  
Italian National Statistical Institute

Stefano Galliani  
Fio.PSD

### The Italian project of data collection on homelessness

In 2008, the Welfare Ministry (Salute, Lavoro e Politiche Sociali), the Italian National Statistical Institute, the Italian Federation of bodies for homeless persons (Fio.PSD) and the Italian Caritas made a formal agreement in order to realise a research project on the condition of people living in extreme poverty and to draw a depth picture of the following aspects:

- the homelessness phenomenon in the Italian territory;
- the status and profiles of the homeless people living in Italy and their main dynamics of the territory use;
- the system of formal and informal services, both public and private, in the country with specific reference to the homeless persons' needs.

The expected data should give robust and reliable estimation of the services and homeless persons who, by any way, contact the formal/informal support system; some deficiencies can arise referring to the estimation of homeless persons not having, at all or at least during the survey time, any kind of contact with service providers. The results dissemination and the main publications will be ready by December 2010.

This study represents the first experience about homelessness involving an official national statistical body (ISTAT) and commissioned by a national level public authority. Therefore the study findings should allow to have a whole knowledge of the homelessness phenomenon at national level. At the moment this is a one-off initiative and no replications or regular updating are expected in the short term.

The study should have implications both on the public policies and on the homelessness perception by the population. The collection of homelessness data can provide the necessary information to national and local governments decision makers for developing social policies in order to improve the provision of services to prevent and alleviate homelessness. In order to design political strategies to reduce homelessness, not only the estimation of the number of homeless persons will be useful, but also the information about their profiles can allow the evaluation of the kind of public interventions to be implemented.

Until now, the information lack of the Italian statistical production and analysis of the homelessness phenomenon determined a difficulty on identifying the real and univocal aim of the intervention policies (managing or ending homelessness?). The picture provided by the present

research will be useful also to define the policy purposes which, from their side, could require new statistical indicators to conduct a deeper and more targeted homeless analysis.

A standardised way of collecting data is desirable in order to guarantee across-time comparisons to monitor the effectiveness of the public policies in reducing homelessness.

### Definition problems

In the international literature, different definitions of a homeless person can be found, deriving from several operational and scientific contests (the condition is defined by terms as homeless, roofless, clochard, etc., with meanings and implications not always overlapping).

To summarise, the homeless person definition structurally includes four recurrent elements (multidimensionality, progressivity of the marginalisation path, exclusion from the welfare provided services, difficulty on maintaining meaningful relationships), which leads to identify the person with a

**subject in a state of material and immaterial poverty, with a complex, dynamic and multidimensional state of deprivation.**

If the purpose is obtaining a statistical measure of the phenomenon, it is necessary identifying definitions and criteria able to delineate in a clear and univocal way the subgroups of people who, from time to time, can be considered as homeless.

The definition choice may go from a definition strictly referring to the lack of a house, so that the housing deprivation becomes the main factor for the homelessness condition, to a definition focused on the lack of social relations, so that the lecture key of the phenomenon refers to the concepts of deprivation and social exclusion.

Choosing this definition means:

- an attempt to overcome the traditional definition on homelessness based on health categories (mental illness, people with addiction) and/or lack of monetary resources;
- try to understand the role of the geographical community where the person lives.

A starting point can be identifying

**the person who suffers a condition of depth housing hardship, referring to the impossibility/incapacity of independently finding or maintaining a house in strict meaning**

**It includes:**

- persons living in public spaces (streets, barracks, abandoned cars, caravans, warehouses);
- persons living in a night shelter and/or obliged to spend several hours during the day in a public space;
- persons living in hostels for homeless without any temporary house or accommodation;
- persons living in accommodation provided by the social support system (for singles, couples or groups of homeless).

**It excludes:**

- persons living in overcrowding;
- persons receiving hospitality from friends or relatives;
- persons living in illegally occupied accommodation or in structured camps in the cities.

According to the ETHOS typology on homelessness and housing exclusion, the definition here adopted includes the following conceptual categories: 'Roofless', 'Houseless' (with the exception of the 6th operational category. i.e. People due to be released from institutions) and some categories of people having 'inadequate' housing conditions (living in makeshift shelter, shack, shanty, semi-permanent structure hut or cabin).

Once the group of the homeless people with depth housing hardship has been identified, it is possible to proceed by **surveying the living paths to recover the categorical dimensions which allow to complete the phenomenon picture taking into account the other distress dimensions.**

### The operational steps

The researcher project objectives require three operational steps:

1. **a census of the services** which the homeless people can contact in the territorial areas of interest;
2. **a survey on the services** counted at point 1 (or a selection of them);
3. **a sample survey on homeless persons** to be conducted at the services (or starting from them) included in the survey at point 2.

The survey on the services addressed to the homeless people is being conducted on a sample of Italian municipalities, selected on the base of their demographic size. Actually there are 158 municipalities, including all the municipalities with over 70 thousands inhabitants, the provincial capitals with more than 30 thousands inhabitants, and the municipalities bordering on the municipality with more than 250 thousands inhabitants ("*prima corona*" municipalities).

In those 158 municipalities, the census collects information on all the services which provide homeless people supports (supports for primary needs, night and day shelter, social secretariat, social support measures) with the purpose of building a database which, for each detected

service, contains all the necessary information (service typology, service details<sup>1</sup>, supplier organisation denomination, address, phone, fax, mail, denomination of the possible public or private organisation on behalf of the service is provided, organisation representative, address, municipality, province, region, phone, fax, mail, organisation type). Those information is being obtained by a CATI survey, through interviewers selected by Fio.PSD and trained by Istat.

Starting from the information contained in the pre-existing Istat, Caritas and Fio.PSD databases, the survey will complete the information by adding and interviewing new organisations reported by the already interviewed organisations.

Once the database will contain all the services available in the selected municipalities, the services and, hence, the organisations and bodies, will be surveyed by a CAPI interview. A depth reference frame on the situation of the active services and organisations on the territory for homeless people will be drawn and it will be possible to identify the services at which (or from which) the direct survey on homeless people can be conducted.

The main information to be collected by the CAPI survey about the service provider mainly regards:

- the basic organisational and service details (contact details and location);
- the type of organisation (whether municipal or other public bodies, private, NGO, etc.);
- the geographical area served;
- the target and client groups (by age, gender, citizenship, household type, presence of any physical or mental restrictions);
- the service access criteria;
- the provision of any support to exit from the homelessness;
- the collection of data by the organisation or the service;
- the funding sources and the share of resources for homeless people;
- the staff information (number of paid staff and volunteers and their professional qualification);
- the cooperation among the services and interactions with other organisations, especially with social and health units;
- the participation of the organisation in workshops, seminars or other kind of discussions about the homeless problems;
- the client participation in the organisational activities.

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<sup>1</sup> The detailed information varies according to the service: number of bed spaces, average number of meals provided per day, average number of clients per day.

## Strategies, planning, evaluation

**Who is developing the strategies for assisting the homeless in your country? (development on national, regional or local/city level?) Who provides the financial resources to implement them?**

Because of a recent change in the National Constitution, about social provision and social services it is a matter for the local authorities to define and implement the goals and activities. But on homelessness there are still no real strategies both on national or local level.

In Italy there are cities and regions where there is a mixed system (public / non- profit social providers) mainly “to curb” the phenomenon. As above the ultimate responsibility for assistance to homeless people lies with the local authorities; but the developing of some good practices is mainly based on non-profit social interventions. In any case, there is a lack of real elements to evaluate these interventions because, only in few cases, the purpose of the intervention and the indicators for the evaluation of effectiveness are defined.

Financial resources for action are usually related to experimental projects, regional or local specific, where the local authorities subsidize for local services providers (with agreement or call for project) and / or on charity basis.

**The European Parliament has adopted a declaration calling for an end to street homelessness by 2015. What consequences does this have?**

The described research is a kind of first concrete consequence of this declaration in Italy at national level. This is not because of a direct link (the research agreement was signed before the European Parliament adopted the declaration on “ending homelessness) but the “atmosphere” in Italy to set up this project was under the same influence to produce that declaration in the European Parliament.

This declaration was cited in the National Parliament during a debate on poverty and social inclusion in the 2009: the concrete outcome has been:

- an yearly evaluation in the National Parliament about the implementation of national strategy on poverty and social inclusion;
- an annual national Round Table on Poverty and social inclusion every October.