

## SURVEYING HOMELESSNESS IN ROME, THE WAY TO THE FIRST NOTTE DELLA SOLIDARIETÀ<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** In 2023 the National Statistical Institute of Italy signed a collaboration agreement with the Department of Social Policies and Health of Roma Capitale in order to provide methodological support for the implementation of a survey of the homeless people in the city of Rome.

The survey is based on the Point in Time approach. It is a street-by-street count on a specific day and within a defined time frame. The *Notte della solidarietà* survey, carried out on the evening of 20 April 2024, counted people sleeping in the overnight shelters and on the streets, and by means of a short questionnaire it captured some of their basic characteristics.

Given the complexity from the organisational and methodological point of view, a pilot survey was carried out in 2023 in the Esquilino neighbourhood alone. Esquilino is considered to have a high concentration of homeless people due to the presence of the Termini railway station. Various aspects of the survey were tested: the content and type of questionnaire, the size and structure of the areas to be surveyed, and the volunteers' training. The aim of this paper is to illustrate how the experience of the pilot survey and its results led to design the methodological framework and organisational structure of the first *Notte della solidarietà* in the city of Rome.

### 1. Introduction

Homelessness is an increasing phenomenon that characterises urban city centres with different forms and emerging needs. Most researchers agree the main causes result from a complex interaction of individual factors, life events and structural (social and economic) factors (Herman, et al. (1997); Koegel, et al. (1995); Susser, et al. (1993).

Extreme poverty and social exclusion are among the concerns of the social services at municipal and national level in all the industrialised countries. Both at a national and European level the lack of comprehensive data does not allow for adequate monitoring and policies to tackle homelessness. Despite the volume of research into homelessness in the EU, the numbers of homelessness as well as deeper information on their characteristics are still unanswered questions.

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Difficulties in measuring homelessness lay in how to capture it but also in the lack of a definition on who is homeless, and which living conditions may lead to consider a person as a homeless. In Italy homeless people are not included in the statistics on poverty, and since a relevant portion of them have not civil registration they escape the Population and Housing Census surveys, falling in the area of the hard-to-reach populations.

In order to create a common framework, the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing exclusion (ETHOS) was developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) in 2011. This classification, though not created for statistical purposes, based on a grid of indicators related to severe housing exclusion classifies homeless and severely marginalized people into 4 conceptual categories of severe housing exclusion.

Specific methods have been implemented to collect data on this population that is differently featured in different cities and countries. This is also why in Rome a pilot survey was the premise of a city survey on homelessness carried out in 2024. Also in other cities, namely Paris and New York the PIT counting has always been a progressive process that step by step included new areas of the city. Acquiring data and interviewing homeless people not only requires a knowledge of the target population, also the land morphology, the streets' map, the organization of shelters, the habits and concentration of the homeless population in the city are to be known in advance. The pilot survey enabled Istat researchers to detect the main methodological aspects to be matched with organizational issues in order to achieve better results in such a complex city as Rome is.

The aim of this paper is to provide an organised information on how the pilot survey in Rome led to the city survey and how the Istat team dealt with the critical issues of this kind of survey that involves a huge number of non-professional surveyors. This paper is structured as follows: paragraph 2 reports some of the experience of other cities where the PIT survey has been carried out; paragraph 3 describes the previous Istat experiences in studying homelessness; then a detailed account of how the survey areas, teams and tools were organised for the pilot survey is given (paragraph 4) together with some of the pilot's results, a focus on the debriefing process follows in paragraph 5. Finally, a short description of the city survey conducted in 2024 and some concluding remarks are reported.

## **2. PIT Count: France, U.S.A., Canada**

In France, the Point-in-Time (PIT) survey on homeless named the *Nuit de la Solidarité* (Night of Solidarity), has been carried out for the first time in Paris in 2018. For the 7th edition, more than 2,000 volunteers and around fifty associations were deployed in the capital on the night of 25-26 January 2024 to better understand the profiles of the homeless and meet their needs. The survey was extended to 27

municipalities in the outskirts, where a further 618 people were counted. In 2023, the initiative brought together more than 2000 volunteers in Paris and 1400 in the 27 participating outlying towns, and involved 150 associations. The *Nuit de la Solidarité*, inspired by projects that have been running in other large cities, has spread to other areas of France.

In the United States, the PIT Count is an annual survey of homeless people carried out by local agencies called Continuums of Care (CoCs) on behalf of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The Point-in-Time Count is a one-day count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals and families across the United States carried out by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The PIT consists of a count and a survey of homeless people, to get a sense of scale and to estimate the number of people in different sub-categories, such as homeless veterans or homeless youth.

In Canada data on homelessness are collected by communities and regions in core locations, thorough the point-in-time counts. Everyone Counts 2020-2022, the Third Nationally Coordinated Point-in-Time Counts (PIT) of homelessness in Canada took place between March 2020 and December 2022. The Point-in-Time Counts are a community-level measure of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. It also provides a national picture of homelessness.

### 3. Istat experiences on surveying the homeless

The 2020 World Population and Housing Census Programme identified population and housing censuses as one of the primary sources of data for formulating, implementing and monitoring policies and programmes aimed at inclusive socioeconomic development and environmental sustainability. It, also, recognizes population and housing censuses as an important data source for the measurement of progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with special attention to the situation of people by some personal characteristics (sex, age, race, ethnicity etc.) including people experiencing homelessness. However, some hard-to-reach demographic targets are exposed to a high risk of being undercounted in the Population and Housing Census. In order to identify these hard-to-reach populations, the Italian Permanent Census has relied on municipal registry data. Since 2021, an ad-hoc survey has been conducted, involving all Italian municipalities, it focuses on the three specific population segments, including those consisting of homeless people. The field of observation for the ad hoc survey in the registries on homeless people is limited to the component registered in the Population Register. It consists of homeless persons without a fixed abode who have taken up their domicile in the Municipality (Article 2, paragraph 3 of law 24 December 1954, no. 1228) and homeless persons without a fixed abode who are

registered at a virtual address or at a real address belonging to an association or used by the municipality for the registration of homeless persons.

The field of observation, limited to the registered component of the population, does not ensure an exhaustive enumeration of the subgroups in question for the purpose of counting and defining the total homeless population.

The aggregate of homeless people registered in the Population Registry falls within the field of observation of the EU Regulation on primary and secondary homelessness. However, this register data also includes people registered as homeless for other reasons (e.g. due to work, circus performers, itinerant traders, or other reasons). Furthermore, homeless people who are not registered in the Population Registry remain outside the observation field of homeless people (for example, non-EU foreign homeless individuals without a valid residence permit or whose residence permit has not been renewed). (Ioannoni et Paluzzi, 2023)

Another important official data source on homeless is the national survey on soup kitchens and overnight shelters' services. The survey estimated the number of people who sleep in the street (or in overnight shelters) using an indirect sampling. The survey tried to estimate the homeless population, or rather a relevant part of it, in the places where the people go and receive the services they need.

The first targeted research that led to the official estimate of the number of homeless people at the national level was carried out by Istat in 2011 (Istat, 2014), by an agreement with the Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, the Federazione Italiana degli Organismi per le Persone Senza Dimora (fio.PSD, the Italian Federation of Agencies for the Homeless) and the Italian Caritas (the charity agency of the Catholic Church). The survey on soup kitchens and overnight shelters tried to detect the homeless population, or rather a substantial part of it, in the places where the people go and receive the services they need; specifically, the centres where soup kitchens and night shelter services are provided have been considered (De Vitiis et al., 2014a and 2014b; Istat, 2014). The national survey carried out in soup kitchens and night shelters used a methodology based on indirect sampling. This theory is based on the idea of using statistical units - in this case, the services (meals and beds) provided in the soup kitchens and night shelters - as a basis for sampling, which are linked to the target population (the homeless people who use these services).

#### **4. The PIT Pilot Survey in the Esquilino neighborhood**

##### *4.1 Areas and Teams*

In the perspective of the city survey in 2024 a pilot was conducted on March 2023 following an agreement signed by Istat with Roma Capitale. The Point in Time method was chosen to be the most effective for studying this kind of hard-to-reach

population considering other experiences. The survey was organised dividing the Esquilino neighbourhood into 24 areas of about 2/3 km walking distance. The survey included also an emergency overnight shelter located in front of the Termini central station hosting about 40 people. The whole neighbourhood was organised with one team for one area. Each team was composed by 3/5 volunteers trained to act as surveyors.

Before starting the survey, on the same evening a final session of training was held to emphasize the importance of the event and to stress the relevance of correctly filling out the questionnaire. After the session all the teams received a number of paper questionnaires, the Team Sheet and a list of what to do and what not to do, together with useful contacts in case of need or emergency.

Each team was organised assigning different tasks and roles, so that team members knew how to support their team. Roles were organised as follows: the team leader divided up the tasks, filled out the Team Sheet, collected the questionnaires at the end of the survey and addressed all critical issues; the guide showed the other team members the route to follow in the assigned area; the interviewer approached the homeless person on the road and proceeded with the observation-interview by providing answers to the interviewer; the compiler wrote in the questionnaire the information collected or observed.

The teams had to go to their assigned area walking through all its streets, checking also people sleeping in cars or tents. The perimeters which marked the area borders were divided according to the side, so that each team was aware of their task and competence.

#### *4.2 The surveyors*

The number of volunteers who registered for the event exceeded the request, and this was considered an encouraging evidence for larger surveys. About 200 volunteers, in their majority from associations committed to tackle extreme poverty together with medical students from the Tor Vergata University of Rome.

For a very challenging survey with non-professional surveyors and aimed at a hard-to-reach population, training played a crucial role. Istat designed the training and carried it out in two different sessions. The first was organised at the municipality premises and mainly addressed to the people in charge of associations to make them aware of the task and also to enable them to transfer information to their members. The associations were very much involved and interested in facilitating the phenomenon of homeless people to emerge. They directly know many situations of homeless people due to their weekly service in the street. Their skills in approaching homeless people is very helpful for the survey, however the idea they had of already knowing the topic influenced their behaviour not always focused on the aim of the survey.

That is why in the second meeting, before starting the survey, the training focused on: survey tools (questionnaire and Team Sheet), description of the activity to be carried out as surveyors (not as social operators)

Simple instructions on how filling out the questionnaire, also in the case of non-interaction with homeless people were provided.

Also instruction on what to do (i.e. Make sure to cover the entire assigned area/zone - Maintain an appropriate distance from the interlocutor), and what not to do (i.e. Do not request any documents and do not take photographs) were provided in a written paper after the training.

#### *4.3 The questionnaire*

For the pilot survey, an anonymous individual paper questionnaire was designed to be filled out by volunteer surveyors for each homeless adult person encountered in the assigned area or in the shelter. An electronic version of the questionnaire, implemented with the Survey Solutions App provided by the World Bank, was tested by the Istat researchers alone.

The questionnaire was divided into two main parts: the first part "Reserved to the surveyor" was to be completed exclusively by the surveyor before interaction with the homeless person; the second part "Information on the person collected or estimated by the surveyor" where information on the homeless person were collected also with the help and the interaction of the homeless person, after requesting the consent to answer the interview. There was also a final part for remarks by the surveyors' team.

The main information collected in the first part of the questionnaire (before the contact), were used to check the eligibility of the encountered person, to assess whether the person was homeless or not, and to collect data on the socio-economic profile of people who experience homelessness. Before starting a question was asked to know whether the person had been already interviewed that same evening, in order to avoid double count.

Surveyors were also required to indicate area, address and location/settlement of the encountered person, clothing and shelter, pets, presence of groups of people. The main part of the questionnaire collected information about gender, age, country of origin of the person, access to local social services.

In the case when the homeless person either decided or was unable to answer the question, the surveyor was required to make an assessment and provide an approximate information. The final part of the questionnaire to be completed by the surveyor covered information on whether the homeless person had valid documents or not. This information is not directly asked to the person. Finally there was a blank field where the surveyor and the whole team could write information on the health status, and more in general, the condition of the homeless person, clothing, and

information about the interview such as questions with unreliable answers, the language use and so on.

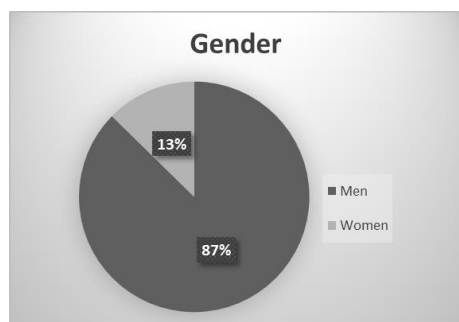
Another survey tool is the Team Sheet to be filled in at the end of the survey by the supervisor of each team in order to provide information about the time (start and end of the field work), the number of members, information on how the team worked, suggestions and critical aspects that emerged during the field work.

#### 4.4 Results by Gender and Country of Origin

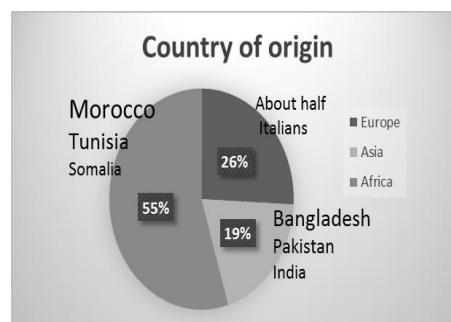
The results of the PIT count was a total number of 168 homeless people including 133 sleeping in the street and 35 hosted in the emergency shelter.

The average age just over 40 (42.1), therefore we can say that people in the street are not too old and men in their majority (87%) (Fig.1). The largest group was composed by foreign people mainly coming from no-EU countries (Fig.2), and especially from Africa.

**Figure 1** – Percentage of homeless people by gender PIT 2023.



**Figure 2** – Percentage of homeless people by country of origin PIT 2023.



## 5. From the pilot to the city survey design

In order to evaluate the pilot survey and draw useful information for the design of the final survey, a de-briefing process was designed.

An initial assessment of the pilot survey was carried out by the Istat team with a dedicated meeting immediately after the field work. For a more systematic assessment, the results of the questionnaire and remarks from the questionnaires and the team sheets were previously analysed. A de-briefing day with volunteer surveyors was also organized on 19 April 2023. A template was designed for a final assessment. The main considered aspects include: a) the questionnaire (questions to

be added and removed, questions to be modified or whose purpose should be better clarified, additional response “modes”); b) organizational aspects and teamwork; c) the approach of surveyors with homeless people: different approaches by different teams in interacting and interviewing; the role of the supervisor, poor and scarce use of the questionnaire blank field (Table 1).

As for the questionnaire, the structure worked well, both for the survey on the street and in the shelter; in many cases the respondents showed willingness to tell their story. This kind of reaction was somehow unexpected and led, for the final survey, to consider a new and longer version of the questionnaire both for the street and for the shelters. In this way the interview could capture more information, on the homeless’ working and health condition, on the services used and other interesting features.

A traditional methodological challenge involved the definition of poverty and homelessness (De Rosa, 2006) and the initial assessment of eligibility by the team of the person encountered “as homeless” because the instruction given were not always enough, besides the fact that this is indeed a difficult task. When a person is already prepared to sleep in the street, it is easier to understand that they are homeless, but when the person is walking or moving around, how can you know whether they are homeless or not? For this reason the need of including direct questions on eligibility in the questionnaire emerged. The assessment of indirect eligibility on the basis of observation and evaluation by surveyors alone showed its limits.

The analysis emphasised that final remarks are very important, even if not drafted by all teams/surveyors. For the final survey, the decision was made to expand the section of the questionnaire related to the remarks by surveyors and to structure them with some specific questions. Surveyors were encouraged to fill out this field receiving guidelines on the key issues.

The de-briefing highlighted that experimentation of the electronic questionnaire could work well: it is easy to use and friendly in the interaction with the respondent. So for the final survey, electronic questionnaire (app) was chosen as the survey technique for all, by providing a training module dedicated to this aspect and preparing a tutorial on its use. Several surveyors pointed out as critical aspect that maps were not always clear, so for the design of the final survey, more detailed maps, with further instructions, were developed, marking the all path to be walked for each team.

Training and team organization worked well: the presence of volunteers was very helpful in approaching the homeless while the presence of university students ensured good data collection. The mobilisation of students and local organisations for the pilot survey provided a positive answer on the feasibility of conducting this type of survey over a larger area of the city and the possibility of involving more



citizens as volunteer surveyors. At the same time, we observed very different ways of working among teams. Training to transfer a more uniform approach emerged as a key issue for future surveys.

The training of non-professional surveyors is a crucial and critical issue. This finding is in line with the experience of other countries that have also adopted a point-in-time approach to investigate homelessness (Develtere, 2022). This led to consider for the final survey a more targeted training on the questionnaire for a more professional approach, and an increased care in the team composition by providing for each team at least one student, always keeping a gender balance.

**Table 1** – *Main issues from the Pilot Survey PIT 2023 (Esquilino Area) and input for the design of the final Survey Design PIT 2024 (Rome).*

	<i>Pilot Survey PIT 2023</i>	<i>City Survey PIT 2024</i>
<b>Eligibility</b>	Initial eligibility by the team was not enough	Questions on eligibility also directly asked
<b>Questionnaire</b>	The questionnaire worked well. Willingness in many cases to provide more information	One single longer questionnaire the same version for the survey on the street and in the overnight shelters
<b>Observations by surveyors</b>	Final remarks are very important, but they were not included by all teams/surveyors	Encouraging remarks providing guidelines on key issues
<b>Electronic questionnaire</b>	Easy to use and friendly in the interaction with the respondent	Electronic questionnaire (app) as the survey technique, paper questionnaire in case of need only
<b>Maps</b>	Not always clear	More detailed maps, with further instructions
<b>Training and Teams</b>	Civil society interest and mobilization. The presence of volunteers was very helpful in approaching the homeless person but with very different ways among teams. Two short training sessions are not enough.	More targeted training on the questionnaire for a more professional approach and more attention in the team composition with at least one student and gender balance

## 6. Notte della solidarietà, Rome 2024

The pilot survey 2023 put the basis and the experience for the first *Notte della solidarietà* in the city of Rome, which took place on 20 April 2024. The

cartographers of Roma Capitale designed the 338 areas to be surveyed in the city centre, and particularly within the railway ring plus some other interesting areas for the purpose. All the areas were grouped in 20 clusters which offered also a meeting point each. As for the Pilot survey each team was assigned one area to be surveyed.

The cluster coordinator was the reference person for all the team leaders of their cluster. An online platform was created for the registration of volunteers and team leaders. More than 1700 volunteer surveyors registered themselves to participate in the night survey. The volunteers had different affiliations, they belong to more than 100 associations and entities, and 6 Universities (800 university students) in addition to citizens who autonomously decided to participate. The teams were in charge of conducting the survey on the street, while a contemporary survey was conducted in 48 night shelters for a total number of 1300 estimated guests. The survey in the night shelters was carried out by the people in charge of running these facilities.

For the PIT 2024 a web questionnaire was prepared on the Survey Solutions platform provided by the World Bank. It is an easy to use and friendly tool suitable for a street survey also because it can be easily installed on the smartphone. All team leaders were in charge of using the app and save all the data. Some few paper questionnaires were provided for emergency cases only.

The training was organised by Istat starting with the Cluster coordinators and then with the team leaders. For the purpose two video tutorials were prepared: one on the questionnaire app, and one on the way to approach homeless people in the street and in the night shelters to properly conduct the interview.

During the evening and night of 20 April a control room was settled at the Campidoglio, where the proper entrance of data was monitored, several telephone lines were organised to give direct support to surveyors, as well as to people in the night shelters, in order to ensure a total coverage. The results of the survey were presented by a press conference and a press release on 24 June 2024 at the Campidoglio.

## **7. Conclusion**

Surveying homelessness is still a challenge in all the big cities; the PIT Approach, though limited, is considered the most effective method by now.

It should be noticed that the PIT survey has to be adapted in each city according to the specific features of the territory and of the homeless people's concentration and behaviour. In some cities homeless people are mainly in transit while travelling to other countries or cities, and are not stable in the area, while in other cases they are people who underwent difficult paths and have been living in the street for a long time. That is why pilot surveys are very helpful especially in this kind of surveys conducted with non-professional surveyors and targeting a phenomenon which is always changing and developing.

In the last years a deep reflection has been carried out on homelessness at European level, this led also to think about new services and solutions to solve or to deal with homelessness. Having comprehensive data on the phenomena is crucial to find solutions. Istat is preparing the PIT survey on homelessness in the 14 Italian metropolitan city municipalities for 2025. The experience of Rome 2024 keeps for Istat as a reference point for all the coming surveys of the same kind.

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