

SURVEYING HOMELESSNESS IN ITALY: FRAMEWORK AND IN-DEPTH QUESTIONNAIRE OF THE NEW ISTAT NATIONAL SURVEY

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Abstract. Homelessness is an extreme form of social exclusion and a dynamic process difficult to measure. These are some of the methodological challenges addressed within the recent Istat national project on homelessness (2024-2026). In order to get information on the ‘visible’ homeless population at a certain time in a specific area, a Point in Time count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness is going to be conducted in 14 Italian Centers of the Metropolitan areas. In addition, a sample CAWI survey is planned shortly following the count on the same target population to collect more information on the profiles and condition of homeless people. Non-professional interviewers specifically trained, many of them volunteering on services for the homeless together with other citizens, will be in charge of data collection.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the main conceptual and operational issues related to the development of the in-depth questionnaire considering various aspects. Among them the definition and eligibility of the target population, balancing information on the main profiles and investigating reasons and dynamics of homelessness, use of services, denied rights and crucial needs.

1. Introduction

Combating poverty and social exclusion is one of the specific social policy goals of the EU and its Member States. The first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy was announced in the 2024-2029 Political Guidelines with the aim ‘to help people to get access to the essential protection and services they need, along with addressing the root causes of poverty’ (2024)¹. According to the EU Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights by 2030 the EU should reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million. The AROPE rate² is the main indicator to monitor this target.

¹ On 18 July 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who was elected for a second mandate, presented to the European Parliament her Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029.

² At risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) corresponds to the sum of persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity - (quasi-)jobless households. People are included only once even if they are in more than one of the situations mentioned above.

While progress in this regard is being achieved by a few European countries, incidence of poverty remains high and access to adequate and affordable housing is not a fundamental right for all people: in 2023 people at risk of poverty or social exclusion were more affected, with 8.5% of people aged 16 or older in the EU experiencing housing difficulties in the past, compared with 3.9% among those not at risk. But homelessness is not simply a result of a lack of affordable housing. The most common cause was reasons linked to family or relationships (30.0%). 26.5% of people in the EU reported that they had overcome housing difficulties by finding a job (Eurostat, 2024).

However, since a relevant portion of the roof/homeless have no civil registration, they usually escape the Population and Housing Census surveys as well as Household Surveys. For this, and other reasons, people experiencing homelessness are rarely included in the official statistics on poverty, falling in the area of the hard-to-reach populations. Definitional and methodological issues hinder the collection of comparable and reliable data. People experiencing homelessness is a dynamic population with different forms and ‘paths through homelessness’ (transitional or short-term, episodic and chronic). They may be more or less ‘invisible’ and difficult to reach (e.g., undocumented migrants, EU migrants with no claim to social benefits, people with prolonged stay in institutions, or people dwelling with friends or families). Though it can be a reality in small municipalities, homelessness is especially an urban phenomenon across Europe.

Data varies not only depending on the definition of homeless but also whether what is measured is the stock, the flow, the prevalence, or the incidence of homelessness. Point-in-time (PIT) street or service-based counts and/or point in time surveys, presenting a ‘snapshot’ of homelessness at a single time and place, is one of the methods most often used to measure urban homelessness. Other methods are longitudinal studies or use of administrative data of social-service institutions based on information on service users (Braga *et al.*, 2024; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014; EC and Develtere, 2022; Geyer *et al.*, 2021; OECD, 2024; Schnell and Musil, 2024).

The lack of a comprehensive and harmonised measurement framework, both at EU and national level, does not allow for adequate monitoring of homelessness. Tackling extreme poverty remains mainly the responsibility of EU countries' governments acting in complex national social settings.

2. Homelessness national strategy and data

The effects of the pandemic by Covid 19, which deeply affected people experiencing homelessness, gave a boost to policies aimed at combating extreme poverty in Italy. The possibility of investing to eradicate homelessness was also based on the funds provided by the PNRR and the Poverty fund. The Ministry of Labour drafted the “Piano nazionale contro la povertà 2021-2027” aiming at

providing more stable solutions for people experiencing homelessness. Among the main issues included in the Plan: emergency response, access to registered residence with related support services, allocation of funding for Housing Led and Housing First, postal address and Centers to combat poverty.

Another reference framework is provided by the “Piano Nazionale degli interventi e dei servizi sociali 2021-2023”. On the specific issue of extreme marginalization, the “Linee di Indirizzo per il contrasto alla grave emarginazione adulta in Italia” by the Ministry of Labour and Welfare published in 2023 provided a deep analysis and updating on this phenomenon after the previous Guidelines published in 2015. They also offer some suggestions on how to develop services addressed to people experiencing homelessness. The effort in providing guidelines and responses to extreme poverty and homelessness requires a deeper knowledge of dimension and features that characterise this group of people.

Indirect sampling and a Point in Time approach with a street count are to date the two main approaches used by the Italian National Statistical Institute to carry out surveys on people in extreme poverty. The Istat national surveys on soup kitchens and overnight shelters’ services (2011 and 2014) provided a first picture of homelessness. The survey estimated the number of people who sleep in the street (or in overnight shelters) using the indirect sampling detecting the homeless population, or rather a relevant part of it, in the places where the people go and receive the services they need (centers where soup kitchens and overnight shelters’ services are provided). However, a large group of people experiencing homelessness do not reach-out services, and they keep therefore outside the observation field. The first Point in Time experience was carried out by Istat more recently with Roma Capitale in 2023-2024. The aim was to count the number of homeless people on the streets and in overnight shelters, and to provide a picture of their profiles (De Rosa *et al.*, 2025a, 2025b). Another (partial) source of data is the Istat Permanent Population Census, as the result of the revision of population registers carried out by the municipalities. They cover people who are registered in the population register at a virtual address. Though interesting, however these data do not provide a picture of homelessness for they include also people who are housed but use a virtual address for other specific need (e.g., nomads, circus workers). At the same time data on undocumented homeless people are excluded and not counted by means of registers.

3. The new Istat National Project on homelessness (2024-2026)

In order to take into account the complexity of homelessness, for the first time Istat is going to undertake a project on this topic within the framework of the National Census (Chieppa *et al.*, 2025). The project, which is planned to go in the field by the beginning of 2026, covers 14 Centres of Metropolitan areas.

Istat led an Inter-institutional Technical Scientific Committee to manage the project. In addition to Istat representatives, the Committee includes academics, experts appointed by 14 Italian metropolitan city municipalities and Fio.PSD (Italian Federation of Organisations for Homeless People). The latter is involved in the project as external body in charge of the organization, logistics and recruitment of interviewers.

The Istat national project intends to address homelessness in Italy by undertaking a comprehensive initiative. It aims to quantify the extension of homelessness by means of a PIT count of both sheltered and unsheltered individuals in major Italian cities. Additionally, the project plans to gain deeper insights by conducting a sample survey of the same population following the initial count. In both steps information will be collected by non-professional interviewers and grassroots organizations. A short electronic questionnaire (a counting sheet) was developed for the first step and an in-depth electronic questionnaire for the second step.

City counting is important not only to know the extent of the phenomena but also to mobilise local actors and local public opinion. Beyond simply counting, it is essential to examine the profiles of individuals experiencing homelessness and delve into the underlying causes and reasons for their situations. This comprehensive approach is vital for accurately assessing the scope of the social issue and for developing more sophisticated and diverse policies to address the numerous challenges faced by the homeless population.

Municipalities and organizations involved have direct knowledge of the phenomenon. They are interested in contributing to have data on the number and characteristics of the homeless people living on their territory. The comparability of data among municipalities is also relevant for policy makers.

3.1. The target population of the new survey

The homeless condition includes a range of different situations of accommodation or lack of it, that varies from country to country and also among the Italian municipalities. To this aim FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless) drafted the Ethos classification (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) which conceptualises different conditions of housing exclusion providing also further descriptions for each category. FEANTSA also drafted the Ethos light version of the classification which is mainly thought for statistical purposes. Though very helpful these classifications, however they do not solve all the definition needs.

For the national survey Istat broadly identified the target population in Ethos light 1 (“People Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters”) and Ethos light 2 (“People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation”) with some specific

choices. The first group includes unsheltered people who live in tents or cars, but excludes people living in caravans, mobile houses or shanties. As for the second group that includes sheltered homeless people, a definition of shelters was required because homeless people are hosted in a variety of accommodation services, which provide different services not only among different municipalities, but also within the same one. To this purpose Istat included in the target exclusively the low-threshold emergency and temporary overnight accommodation facilities. The low-threshold is intended as no specific requirements for access, but the condition of being roofless and an informal relationship between guests and staff; in addition access does not require participation in a therapeutic or rehabilitation programme, only compliance with the rules of cohabitation. Shelters or refuges for women who are victims of violence, as well as specific accommodation programmes for migrants are excluded from the target. On the other hand, both private and public-financed shelters for homeless are included whatever time span they cover (h9-h24).

4. Investigating homelessness: conceptual framework and in-depth questionnaire

4.1. Development and pre-testing of the questionnaire

The main aim of the in-depth survey, to be conducted among sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness, is to provide a portrait of people who are homeless in the main cities in Italy and investigating what drives people into homelessness and the problems they encounter in their daily lives. To this end, an electronic structured questionnaire has been designed with predominantly closed questions and some differentiated questions for the two main target populations (sheltered and unsheltered people). A paper version has also been prepared to deal with emergency situations.

Specifically trained non-professional interviewers will conduct data collection among a highly vulnerable target population. These and other aspects have been taken into account in designing the questionnaire and ad hoc solutions have been adopted.

Firstly, the questionnaire cannot be very long, with wording that is simple and friendly. Homeless people are a heterogeneous population (also in terms of country of origin and spoken language) not always visible; some individuals may experience mental health problems, alcoholism or other addictions.. Therefore, some difficulties may arise in defining the eligibility and involving homeless people in the research. At the same time greater attention has been paid to how to introduce the survey in suitable manner for such hard-to-reach population, and deal with privacy issues and sensitive questions. Finally, technical aspects are related to the platform used (Lime

Survey) and the survey device that will be used (interviewers' personal cellular phones or tablet). All the above mentioned aspects have an impact on the quality of data.

A first draft of the questionnaire was discussed with experts (De Benedetti Foundation, Fio.PSD and researcher of the EU project "European Homelessness Count" led by the University of Leuven and, for Italy, by the University of Catania). Harmonization, at a European level, and attention to national specificities are key points.

Pre-testing interviews with eight homeless people living in Rome in public space or external space and people living in the overnight shelters (with different profiles by age, sex, citizenship...) were conducted. The main aspects considered were how to approach such a hard-to-reach population (e.g. question wording, language, technique, how respondents understand terms and reference period, test modalities and detect sensitive questions).

Pre-testing revealed the willingness of homeless people to tell their story but at the same time the sensitivity of certain themes and traumatic events. It also highlighted differences between Italians and foreigners and the difficulty for some people to sustain a long interview, so a more concise version of the questionnaire was drafted for specific situations.

Another aspect that emerged was that the interviewed persons do not always follow a logical order in their responses and do not consistently adhere to the questionnaire's structure; they sometimes report confused or unreliable answers. For this reason, mayor attention was paid to including both the direct collection of information from the homeless person and assessments and observations made by the interviewer, which concern, on one hand, the situation and the homeless, and on the other hand, the interview and the quality of the information gathered during the interview. For certain characteristics, both perception-based and interviewer assessment-based data are collected.

Finally, the core section of the interview aimed at reconstructing the housing and life history of the homeless person appeared very challenging. This led to redefining this part of the questionnaire and to include a section, at the end of the interview, in which interviewer and observer reconstruct the main stages of the story.

4.2. The final structure of the in-depth questionnaire

The in-depth questionnaire is structured into three parts: the first part is filled out exclusively by the interviewer with no interaction with the person encountered. It must be completed for each contact, even if the person later refuses the interview or is not in the condition to do it. A specific question distinguished the street from night shelter detection. In addition, this part detects some information useful in defining the eligibility. The second part of the questionnaire (interview) required interaction

with the person. It is aimed at defining eligibility and collecting in depth information on the person and their story. The third and final part is filled in by the interviewer alone on the basis of personal assessment regarding aspects that concern both the condition of the person met and the progression of the interview, also to assess the quality of the information collected.

Eligibility and consent are two fundamental steps from which certain paths derive. A common eligibility requirement for street detection and night shelter facilities is to be 18 and over, and this is firstly assessed by observation. In the night shelters, the only fact of being a guest in the facility is considered evidence that the person is part of the target population. For the survey on people living in public space or external space, on the basis of objective signs (such as being placed in a certain place with blankets, or being on the move carrying bulky objects, etc.), the team assessed whether to consider the person encountered as homeless of legal age and start filling out the first part of questionnaire. Three questions in the interview complete the set of information to test eligibility. They are: being/not being already interviewed in the same evening as part of the same research, where the person is going to sleep that night and if they have slept in the street in the last seven days. The interview ends for those who answer they are going to sleep in a house (their own or a friends/relatives/third parties' house), in a caravan, or camper van, or prefer not to answer, as they are not included in the target population.

With regards to informed consent, the interviewer, after briefly presenting the aim of the survey, collects the explicit consent of a person to participate in the short interview (and ask some questions to assess their eligibility). In the event of a denial, the interviewer moves to the third part of the questionnaire where some additional information is collected including the reasons for the refusal. The same information based on the interviewer' assessment has to be indicated in case of interruption of the interview.

4.3. Main themes and indicators

The in-depth questionnaire has different objectives:

- i) identifying the main profiles of homeless people and comparing the two main target populations of the study,
- ii) investigating the housing trajectories and the complex interaction of causes of homelessness. Individual factors (low education, lack of job skills, mental health issues, substance use, family violence or instability, relationship breakups), interact with life events and structural factors such as barriers to education, unfavourable housing and labour market or discrimination based on access to accommodation and goods and services, lack of support for immigrants and refugees, aging out of foster care and leaving prison;

- iii) knowing obstacles encountered in their daily life (in meeting primary needs, when accessing services,), social relations, and needs of a group of people who often face stigma and prejudice ‘because housing status is perceived as somewhat under an individual’s control, whereby the homeless are often considered to be responsible for their lack of adequate housing’ (Johnstone *et al.*, 2025).

The final version of the questionnaire, individual and anonymous, is unique for street and night shelter detection. In addition to a consistent set of common core variables some differentiated paths and questions have been provided. The different sections of the questionnaire respond to the need to capture the dimensions considered conceptually relevant for the objectives of the research. The main sections are:

a) socio-demographic information with some specific questions for migrant people. The aim is to know the emerging groups of homeless;

b) homeless condition and housing trajectories. It is aimed to detect, as a proxy, chronic (for more than one year), intermittent (in and out of homelessness repeatedly) and transitional homelessness (once or twice for a relatively short period of time after a major life change or catastrophic event), as well as the main patterns and causes of homelessness. This section also includes the dimension of harassment and violence, by means of indicators of self-reported experiences of being robbed, disturbed, or assaulted, and the relationship with law enforcement bodies. At the end of section b, the interviewer is asked to assess whether the interviewed person is in a condition to continue a detailed interview. If not, the interview continues with only a selected set of core variables covering the other dimensions of the questionnaire;

c) health condition and the use of health services. The health status is detected as well as the use of health services (distinguishing between public and private sectors) and the main obstacles to the access. Very specific situations are investigated (e.g., hospitalization, attending a doctor, or a mental health centre) as well as having the health card (STP/ENI) that guarantee a series of basic health services for foreigners;

d) services for the homeless, social services and documents. This section focuses on the use of services dedicated to homeless people, such as the distribution of food parcels, clothing, showers and/or personal hygiene services, canteens, day shelters and other social services (e.g., municipality services). Additionally it identifies the main obstacles faced in accessing these services (e.g., ‘I don't know them’, ‘There are no services nearby’, ‘I have difficulty getting there/reaching them’, ‘There are too many people’, ‘I don't know where to leave my parcels’, ‘I was poorly received’). A specific question is aimed at addressing a very extreme situation (‘In the last year, have you ever had trouble in finding enough food?’). Another relevant dimension included is whether the person is a registered resident in an Italian municipality and the reasons why they are not registered. This helps indirectly examine the ability to

access various rights. In addition, the possession of not-expired documents and the use of a series of services, such as bank account, postepay card, address for mail collection, phone number, internet connection, are also explored for their role in facilitating the exercise of certain rights.

e) work and sources of income (as pensions, public benefits, money from family members, and income received from employment) and use of job centers or participating in a training course or a job placement project;

f) family and social relations including romantic relationship, having children, friends, contact with family members, reference persons in situations of need, etc....

g) typical day. This final section aims at understanding whether the person is engaged in activities that make them feel good, going beyond primary needs, such as reading, listening to music, playing cards, traveling. An open field to describe how the person usually spends their day is also provided, with the aim to understand how people experiencing homelessness construct their self-identity that goes beyond the stigmatised one.

4.4. Observation and evaluation parts

This part, as experienced in other surveys on the homeless people, is crucial to provide proxy information which enable to have a more complete picture on the situation and profile of the interviewed person. At the beginning, before interacting with the person, the interviewer is required to write some information and identification details concerning the area and time of the interview. In addition to that they write information on the location where the encounter takes place and to this aim some items are provided. They have to write whether an arranged place to sleep is prepared or not. In this same section they also choose between the interview to sheltered and unsheltered people.

After the interview is concluded or if the person does not complete the entire questionnaire, a designated section for the interviewer was created to offer an assessment and remarks on the interview. The first question is: Was the interview interrupted before the questionnaire was completed?

Considering the survey takes place in the street for a large part and involves a hard-to-reach population, the possibility it is interrupted is quite high. This situation can happen due to reasons related to the person's difficulties in answering (language, questions' understanding, physical limits), the context (other disturbing people arrive). Therefore, the second question for the interviewer is: Did the person demonstrate to understand Italian language? After that the language in which the interview was conducted is registered. Two questions follow to collect the interviewer's observation whether the person was altered or not (i.e., under the effects of alcohol, drugs, etc.) there is also a possibility of answering that the

interviewer is not able to assess alteration. The following question is: Do you believe that the person you met had mental health issues? Then a question on health problems (excluding mental health issues): Do you think the person you met has one or more health problems? If the interviewer believes that the person has health problems, the question is: Does the health problem limit the person's movement/mobility? Then questions focus on the obstacles the person met in answering questions: In understanding questions, in remembering events, In placing events in time, In the high number of questions, In the language in which the interview was conducted (poor knowledge), Due to the person's difficulty in speaking (e.g., dental problems), Other difficulties (Specify). Finally, the interviewer is asked to report if and which of the recorded answers provided by the interviewed person appeared not to be true. A final blank field is left for remarks by the interviewer, in the introduction of the blank field some examples are provided to help the interviewer in filling out the field with useful information (make a note, for example, if the person is with the partner, with fellow countrymen, accompanied by a pet, etc.).

This closing section of the questionnaire to be filled-out by the interviewer alone completes the information and provides a clearer context in which the interview took place. It provides a possibility of using also those interviews which were not completed by means of the reasons why. The aim is also to detect more general information that cannot be directly asked to people experiencing homelessness.

5. Concluding remarks: suggestions for training

This type of survey is quite peculiar because it targets a 'hard-to-reach' population and is conducted by non-professional interviewers. These two factors are crucial to consider when planning a successful training to achieve the desired outcomes

People experiencing homelessness are very different among themselves, but they share a condition of vulnerability and an experience of distress. For instance, the story of women experiencing homelessness is often characterised by violence or by the separation from their children due to different causes. This condition is to be communicated during training, emphasising the need of approaching people with a special care and attention especially on sensitive topics. Also, the way of speaking has to be very clear, in order to be understood, considering also the different mother tongues. The approach should be very calm and ready to listen also to topics that may appear not directly relevant to the purpose of the interview. At the same time, it is important not to miss information that may emerge in the conversation. To this aim the role of the observer is very relevant. Interviewers are to be trained on how to open a conversation and ask all the questions, but they should be aware that the sequence of the answers may not be perfectly followed, though the information

maybe anyway provided by the homeless person while speaking of another topic. Therefore, interviewers should deeply know the questionnaire in order to have in advance a clear knowledge of the information to be collected.

On the other side the interviewers are chosen among associations and organisations used to deal with extreme marginalization. This characteristic may facilitate the approach and the interaction. However, during that night/evening they are not called to carry out their usual activity with the homeless people. This means that training should focus on the specific task as interviewers they are required to perform.

Due to the environmental and personal conditions of the respondent, especially when on the street, it may happen that the interview is suddenly interrupted, in these cases the interviewers have to be well trained on what to do to close the interview saving all the already collected data.

Training plays a crucial role and should consider all these aspects, and also use all the lessons learned during pre-test of the questionnaire considering the specific feature of this survey.

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