
Homelessness in Rome 2024: The PIT count

Eugenia De Rosa, Federico Di Leo, Francesca Scambia¹

Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat), Rome, Italy

➤ **Abstract** *For the first time, in 2024, the National Statistical Institute of Italy (Istat) supported the implementation of a survey to count people experiencing homelessness in the city of Rome, in the framework of a collaboration agreement with Roma Capitale. The survey “Notte della solidarietà” was based on a Point in Time – Street Count approach and took place on 20 April 2024. It was designed to address two main goals: a) counting people experiencing homelessness sleeping on the streets and in overnight shelters, and b) capturing some of the basic characteristics of the people experiencing homelessness by means of a questionnaire. The project was characterised by a cooperation among different institutions (Roma Capitale, Istat and the World Bank) and it made use of a participatory approach, with a strong involvement from civil society. More than 1 800 volunteer surveyors/enumerators were in charge of the survey on the street. The aim of this paper is to describe the main methodological and operational aspects of this survey. Finally, it discusses the main strengths and weaknesses of this experience, also in the perspective of the following survey that Istat is going to carry out in 2025 in the 14 Italian metropolitan city municipalities. The latter combines a Point in Time survey with an in-depth sample survey on homelessness.*

➤ **Keywords** *Homelessness, Hard-to-reach Populations, Point in Time count, Rome, Official statistics*

¹ The authors are researchers at the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat). This article is the joint work of the authors, however Introduction and Operational Aspects and Data Collection Process sections are written by Francesca Scambia, Methodology and The questionnaire sections by Eugenia De Rosa, Strengths and Weaknesses and Future prospects sections by Federico Di Leo.

Introduction

Extreme poverty as well as social exclusion are growing concerns in the urban contexts of industrialised countries, and homelessness tends to be concentrated in the centre of the major cities forcing service providers to find possible solutions and answers. So far, both at a national and European levels, the lack of comprehensive data does not allow for adequate monitoring and policies to combat homelessness. The first obstacle lies in defining homelessness, which is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. It is indeed quite difficult to establish a clear separation between roofless persons, those living in extreme poverty, and the people experiencing social marginalisation (Braga et al., 2025). This complexity contributes to the absence of a single, universally accepted definition of homelessness across countries. Difficulties in measuring homelessness lay also in how to capture it and in the methods to collect and produce data (Hermans, 2024). “A range of data collection methods [are used] to assess homelessness, but that may underreport or “miss” specific types of homelessness or socio-demographic groups” (OECD, 2024, p.37).

Four methods of quantitative data collection have been used by national statistics on homelessness in the EU (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014; Geyer et al., 2021; Schnell and Musil, 2024): counts (street counts/service-based counts), surveys, administrative data of social-service institutions based on information on service users, and public census or register data. Since a relevant portion of the roof/homeless have no civil registration, they escape the Population and Housing Census surveys, falling in the area of the Hard-to-reach Populations. For this, and other reasons, people experiencing homelessness are rarely included in the official statistics on poverty. People experiencing homelessness require *ad hoc* sampling strategies and surveys. Non-standard and specific methods are implemented to collect data on a population that is differently featured in different cities and countries (OECD, 2024).

Indirect sampling and a Point in Time approach (PIT) are to date the two main sampling approaches used by the National Statistical Institute (Istat) in Italy (De Rosa and Inglese, 2024). In 2011 and 2014, Istat carried out national research on people living in extreme poverty in agreement with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the Italian Federation of Organisations Working with the Homeless (fio.PSD) and the Italian Caritas (Istat, 2014). The surveys were based on the system of services used by people experiencing homelessness. An experimental survey was carried out in the city of Torino in 2014 to estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness and not using services.

In 2024, for the first time Istat supported the implementation of a survey to count people experiencing homelessness in Rome² in the context of a collaboration agreement signed in 2023 with the Department of Social Policies and Health of Roma Capitale. The city survey was designed and organised following the PIT survey approach implemented in New York since 2005 and in Paris since 2018 (Apur and Ville de Paris, 2023), and the evidence of a pilot survey conducted in 2023 in the Esquilino neighbourhood of Rome. In 2023 a team of Istat researchers and representatives of Roma Capitale participated in the city survey in Paris. The survey in Rome enabled Istat researchers to detect the main methodological aspects to be matched with organisational issues in order to achieve better results in such a complex city. This note describes and critically analyses this experience.

Methodology

The survey “Notte della solidarietà” adopted a PIT approach, which is currently the leading source of data on people experiencing homelessness in the big cities (Schneider et al. 2016). This methodology involves counting on a specific night on a specific time frame individuals experiencing homelessness who are found on the streets, in parks, or other public spaces, and in some cases in overnight shelters. In most cases, individual data are collected (e.g., Hungary, Denmark, Sweden), in other countries, such as Finland and Portugal, aggregate data are collected (Develtere, 2022).

A PIT method offers a snapshot of homelessness, and when done on a regular basis, can give important information on profiles and trends. It does not give information about the ‘invisible homeless’ (people not sleeping on the street nor using homeless services) and the flow of homelessness that can be investigated with the integration of other approaches (Shinn et al., 2024). For example, the Nordic countries and Belgium adopt a multi-method measurement: available data are combined with a local multi-stakeholder monitoring system (Develtere, 2022).

Following the ETHOS (European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) classification, the target population of this survey included two types: people living in public space or external space (ETHOS 1) and people living in overnight shelters (ETHOS 2). Though not drafted for statistical purposes, rather for practical and policy making purposes, this classification is a crucial reference in studying the homeless population. However, ETHOS is not a common European standard for national data collection strategies (ibidem).

² Istat expert researchers that participated in the project are: Valeria de Martino, Eugenia De Rosa, Federico Di Leo (project manager), Vanessa Ioannoni, Nadia Nur, Francesca Scambia, plus Arianna Gatta (University of Brisbane). Binario 95 is the body contracted by Roma Capitale for the logistics.

The project “Notte della solidarietà” was designed to address two main goals: 1) counting people experiencing homelessness sleeping on the streets and in overnight shelters, and 2) capturing some of the basic characteristics of the people experiencing homelessness. Information was to be collected by non-professional surveyors/enumerators filling in a short electronic questionnaire.

The survey took place on 20 April 2024. For the PIT count, winter time has been traditionally chosen. However there is a lack of established best practice regarding operational decisions such as the reference period of the count, which season of the year (Braga et al., 2025). To note also that in recent years some cities, such as Milano in Italy, are going in the field also in summer time to compare the different trends and to study homelessness flows.

The project was characterised by a cooperation among different institutions (Roma Capitale, Istat, and the World Bank) and it made use of a participatory approach, with a strong involvement from civil society. Volunteers and grass-roots organisations walked through the streets and squares of the cities during a specific night using a questionnaire. As highlighted in the literature, the great strength of this methodology is “the mobilisation of citizens and local organisations as well as the sensitisation of public opinion and policy makers through local media” (Develtere, 2022, p.8).

The project started with some preliminary meetings organised by the local administration, in collaboration with Istat and the non-profit organisations dealing with homelessness (such as Caritas, Sant’Egidio, the Red Cross, etc.). The meetings intended to make associations aware of the research project and to improve Istat’s knowledge of the target population. Knowing in advance the habits, location, and concentration of the homeless population in the city, as well as the shelters’ organisation, was crucial for the survey design. These meetings were also the occasion to make volunteers aware of their task and foster their collaboration in the whole project.

A pilot survey was carried out in March 2023 in the Esquilino area, a neighbourhood of Rome with a high concentration of people experiencing homeless due to the presence of the Central railway station. About 200 volunteers, in their majority from associations committed to tackle extreme poverty, together with medical university students of Rome, acted as volunteer surveyors/enumerators. The whole Esquilino neighbourhood was divided into 24 areas of about 2/3 km walking distance each. A team, composed by 3-5 volunteers trained to act as surveyors/enumerators had to walk the all area-distance. The pilot survey also included the guests of an emergency overnight shelter located in front of the Termini central station and operating during winter time.

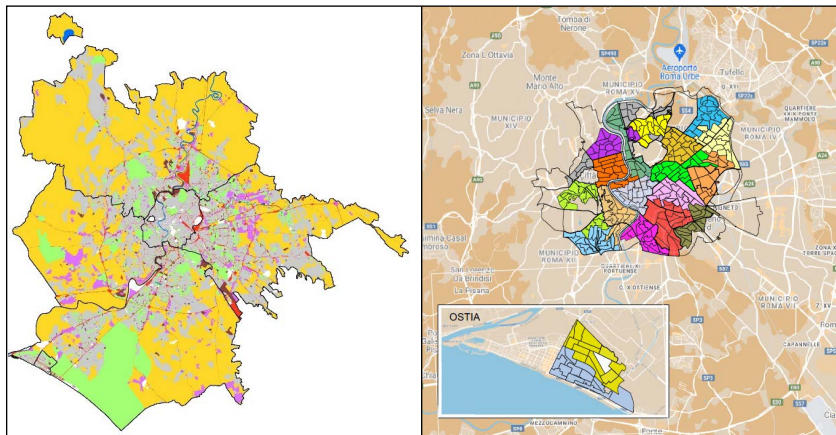
The experience of the pilot survey led to the design of the methodological and organisational framework of the 2024 city survey. A new version of the questionnaire with more information (e.g., work, services, health), to be used both on the street and in the overnight shelters, was developed and a more complex data collection strategy was designed (De Rosa et.al., 2025). The main tool was the CAPI technique. For the city survey, a contracted body was in charge of the logistics/organisation after a call by Roma Capitale.

For the first target population – people living in public space or external space (ETHOS 1) – the detection area was limited to the area of the railway ring of Rome, therefore including the city centre, plus some railway stations out of the ring and a part of Municipality 10³ (Ostia), particularly interesting for the target population. Though the detection area was limited, it represents a relevant part of the urbanised area. The municipality of Rome (Figure 1) includes vast agricultural areas (50.1% of the total – yellow colour in Figure 1), public parks and nature reserves (9.0% of the total – in green), while residential buildings or areas for civil use are only 19.9% of the total (in grey).

The detection area represented a relatively small part of the whole city (3.7% of the total), but it is very important for the goals of the research as it is intensively populated (20% of the total) and includes wide industrial areas, public buildings, quarters, and infrastructures (e.g., railway stations, large parts of the underground network) as well as services for people experiencing homelessness.

The territory was divided into smaller survey zones (Figure 2) and also included two types of ‘special areas’: hospital outbuildings and gardens plus the paved banks of the Tiber river in the city centre. Volunteers were in charge of the survey on the street. More than 1 800 volunteer surveyors/enumerators registered themselves to participate in the night survey answering a call on the Web. As for the ‘special areas’, the hospital staff conducted the survey in the hospital outbuildings, while in the gardens and the paved banks of the Tiber, the local police collected the information. In both cases there were not individual interviews, but just the recording of the total number of the roofless people, their sex, and, when possible, their nationality.

³ The city of Rome is divided into first-level administrative subdivisions named Municipalities.

Fig. 1 – The City of Rome and the detection area**Fig. 2 – Detection area and survey zones**

Source: Istat (2024) Notte della Solidarietà

For the second target population – people living in night shelters (ETHOS 2) – the choice was on facilities that are directly accessed by people experiencing a condition of roof/homelessness, excluding specific facilities for migrants (e.g., CAS and SAI)⁴, as well as those that host women victims of violence for their protection, and Housing First/Housing Led. The detection area for shelters was not limited to the so-called ‘Rail-Ring Area’, but it covered the entire territory of the city. The survey in the night shelters was carried out by the people in charge of these facilities, as it happens in the PIT count carried out, for example, in NYC (Schneider et al. 2016).

This type of counting exercise suffers from a ‘service paradox’: “the more services are available, the more people experiencing homelessness are registered and counted” (EC and Develter, 2022, p.9). It must also be noted that people experiencing long-term homelessness are over-represented in many PIT counts. There are other critical issues of the unsheltered count to be taken into account, such as that “the reported number is almost certainly an undercount because rough sleepers often have good reasons to remain hidden... counts are often undertaken by people with little methodological training, and methods vary across communities” (Shinn et al., 2024, p.2). However a key advantage of the PIT count remains that it catches, or is able to catch, people experiencing homelessness who do not make use of services. These data are crucial for supporting local homeless services and provide information for shelters and affordable housing as well as more long-term solutions for people and families who are at-risk of falling into homelessness.

⁴ CAS (Centres for the Extraordinary Reception), SAI (reception and integration system).

The Questionnaire

The platform chosen for the web questionnaire was Survey Solutions provided by the World Bank, a friendly tool easy to install on the smartphone. Some information, such as the area, the surveyor code, the questionnaire progressive number, and the starting time were pre-loaded in each individual questionnaire. The individual questionnaire was aimed at recording the number of both the sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness. It had to be completed for every single person experiencing homelessness aged 18 years and over in order to provide the basic information to draft the profile of people experiencing homelessness.

The CAPI questionnaire was divided into three parts. In the first, the surveyor alone, with no interaction with the person encountered, filled in the information required including the estimated age and gender of the person believed to be homeless, and the full address of the meeting place. All the produced questionnaires were anonymous. A specific question distinguished the street from night shelter detection. 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 and started counting and filling out the questionnaire. Surveyors were then asked to detail the type of place where the person was encountered (e.g., railway station, garden or green area, car park, etc.), the type of bedding or clothing, whether or not appropriate for the season. For the purpose of counting, one tent counted one person and the same was for cars (one questionnaire) regardless of the number of people; in the case of closed tents and cars, the instruction was to count only, without carrying out the interview.

The second part of the questionnaire required interaction with the person and was aimed at defining eligibility and collecting some socio-demographic information, such as the employment status, health, and the use of services. The interviewer, after briefly presenting the aim of the survey, collected the explicit consent of a person to participate in the short interview. In the event of a denial, the reasons for the refusal had to be indicated. In the night shelters, the only fact of being a guest in the facility was an evidence that the person belonged to the target population. For the survey on people living in public space or external space, two questions in particular completed the set of information to test eligibility: i.e., a question on age, only persons who were 18 and over could be interviewed, and a question on where the person was going to sleep that night. The interview ended for those who stated they were going to sleep in a house (their own or a friends/relatives/third parties' house), in a caravan, or camper van, as they were not included in the target population. For those who say they were going to sleep on the street or in other makeshift accommodation, more specific information was collected on where the person was

going to sleep and the reasons why they were not sleeping in a night shelter. A further question 'where did you sleep in the last seven days?' helped to better characterise the condition of the respondent.

A set of core information was collected both for the survey on the street and in the night shelters, i.e., the length of stay in the city of Rome (and in Italy for foreigners), the country of birth, possession of Italian citizenship, employment (distinguishing between those who were working at the time of the survey, those who were not employed but had worked in the past, those who have never worked, and those who were retired), and the use of services for the homeless (such as the distribution of food parcels, clothing, outpatient clinics/distribution of medicines, showers and/or personal hygiene services, canteens, distribution of blankets, drinks, food or other items, night or day shelters, etc.). Another dimension was health, investigated by means of a question on the subjective perception on their health and a more 'objective' question: asking 'When you are sick and need treatment, whom do you go to?'. The interview ended by asking the person whether they resided in an Italian municipality, in order to indirectly investigate the possibility of benefiting from various rights. The time of completion was then recorded. When useful, the questions included the response 'I do not know/prefer not to answer' and 'it was not possible to detect'. In order to gather information on aspects that were not considered in the conceptualisation of the phenomenon, the answer options often included the option 'other', with blank lines to specify in the absence of a codified answer, and in order to adapt answers to the respondent.

The third and final part of the questionnaire was filled in by the surveyor/enumerator alone on the basis of their assessment. They recorded whether the person showed or said they had one or more identity documents during the interview. By means of multi-response questions, an attempt was made to understand the quality of the information collected by asking the surveyor to indicate whether the person experiencing homelessness showed they properly understood the Italian language, if they were altered (by alcohol, drugs, psychotropic drugs, etc.), and/or had health problems, specifying their nature in a blank field. In this way, data on some characteristics were collected both based on the perception of the respondent (in the second part of the questionnaire) and on the assessment by the surveyor. Finally, some blank lines were provided for comments and other remarks concerning the person encountered (for example, whether the person was with other people, had a pet, etc.) but also on the interview, asking, for example, if for some reasons the interview could not be completed, or if the information/answers provided by the person experiencing homelessness appeared unreliable, indicating these cases.

For all the ‘special areas’ – hospital outbuildings and gardens plus the paved banks of the Tiber river in the city centre – a specific questionnaire was designed just to record aggregates related to the number of people experiencing homelessness counted, their sex (male/female/info not available), age group (18-24/25-39/40-54/over 54) and when possible, the nationality (Italian/not Italian/ info not available) and origin by geographical area (Europe, Maghreb and the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Americas, Asia, Other, or info not available). A PAPI questionnaire was used and a targeted training was designed for this tool. A similar form was also designed to collect data in those night shelters where individual interviews were not possible.

Operational Aspects and Data Collection Process

Training

For a very challenging survey with non-professional surveyors and aimed at a Hard-to-reach Population, training played a crucial role (Develtere, 2022). Istat designed the training that was directly carried out by Istat researchers with the cluster coordinators, while the external body in charge of the logistics carried out the training of the team leaders. For the purpose, two video tutorials were prepared: one on the questionnaire app, and one on the way to approach people experiencing homelessness in the street and in the night shelters to properly conduct the interview. Simple instructions on how to fill out the questionnaire, also in the case of non-interaction with people experiencing homelessness, were provided. Also instruction on what to do (e.g., make sure to cover the entire assigned area/zone – maintain an appropriate distance from the interlocutor), and what not to do (e.g., do not request any documents and do not take photographs) were provided in a printed document after the training.

In the field: PIT on the street

Volunteers were in charge of counting and conducting the survey on the street. The territory for the PIT count on the street was divided into 338 survey zones 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, each one had a cluster coordinator which was the reference person for all the team leaders of that cluster.

An online platform was created for the registration of volunteers and team leaders. Each team was assigned one area to be surveyed, they had to go to their area walking through all its streets, checking also people sleeping in cars or tents. Detailed maps, with instructions, were developed in collaboration with the cartog-

raphers of Roma Capitale, marking the all path to be walked for each team. The perimeters which marked the area borders were divided according to the side, so that each team was aware of their task and competence.

Each team was organised by 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 a final account of the people met ('team summary'), 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 person experiencing homelessness on the road and proceeded with the observation-interview by providing answers to the interviewer; and the compiler wrote in the questionnaire the information collected or observed.

Special attention was paid to the composition of the teams, in terms of age, gender, and expertise, trying to have at least one member of the associations supporting the homeless and one university student. The associations were very much involved and interested in facilitating the phenomenon of people experiencing homelessness to emerge. Their skill in approaching people experiencing homelessness was very helpful for the survey. On the other hand, students helped to focus on the aim of the survey and maintain a rigorous approach to data collection.

On the "Notte della Solidarietà" the teams (one team one area) gathered in their clusters. Each cluster had a meeting point. They received all the necessary materials together with the bib to be recognised as interviewers. All team leaders were in charge of using the app and saving all the data. A few paper questionnaires were provided for emergency cases only.

The survey (street count) started at 9.30 pm on Saturday, 20 April 2024. The temperature was relatively cold for the season: 12 degrees Celsius. The last team concluded the survey at 00: 30 am. A final account of the people met and the collected questionnaires was provided by each team using a paper form (Summary Report) to monitor the field and allow a comparison between the information saved in the app and the real team count.

The survey also included the collection of aggregated data in hospital outbuildings and gardens plus the paved banks of the Tiber river in the city centre by the hospital staff and the local police.

In the field: PIT in the overnight shelters

The provision of overnight shelters is the main solution adopted by local administrations in Italy to meet the needs of roofless and people experiencing homelessness. There are different types of night shelters: some are permanent, i.e., they are open

all year round, while others open during emergency periods only, when the so-called 'Cold Plan' comes into force (December-March/April). The emergency facilities are set up in derogation to habitability regulations in order to ensure protection from low temperatures; the big marquees set up during the winter are typical example of them. An ordinance issued by the mayor requires the municipal authority in charge to undertake initiatives to mitigate the difficulties of the weaker social groups, with particular regard to the roof/homeless.

In Rome, as in other cities, there are facilities that operate in agreement with the local administration, at the departmental (the whole city) or municipal level, while other facilities are provided by private no-profit bodies (religious orders, parishes, associations, etc.). The services offer different daily coverage: i.e., H24 and H15. Breakfast is generally included while dinner and lunch depend on the opening times. Other available services are showers and the change of clothes. The management of night shelters in the capital city has, as mentioned, several levels: the main number of beds is attributable to the facilities financed in agreement with the Department of Social and Health Policies of Roma Capitale. Other places are located in the various municipalities within the city using funds allocated by the central administration to establish small overnight facilities to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness in different areas of the city of Rome. The Sala Operativa Sociale (SOS) is in charge of sorting the hospitality in the facilities at a central level (Department). The SOS was, on the first "Notte della Solidarietà", the reference point for the identification of both departmental and municipal overnight shelters. It also worked on the list of facilities managed by the private sector through contacts with the associations and the whole no-profit involved in tackling extreme poverty and marginalisation.

Definition and construction of the list

At Istat's request, and for the first time, the Department drafted a list of both financed and private facilities available overall in the area of the Roma Capitale. To this end, Istat provided a definition of the facilities to be included in the initial list, i.e., of a transitory, emergency, low-threshold nature. Therefore, as already mentioned, the choice was on facilities that are directly accessed by people experiencing a condition of roof/homelessness, and who move from shelter to shelter.

For the construction of the updated list, Istat started matching the list of the facilities financed in agreement with Roma Capitale and the list prepared on the occasion of the research 'InStrada, per conoscere chi è senza dimora' (Gatta, 2022). The information was then checked and updated with the help of Roma Capitale and the "Permanent table of the associations combating extreme poverty".⁵ The list, prepared

⁵ Institutional body on extreme poverty created by Roma Capitale to share information with associations tackling extreme poverty.

in April 2024, included both permanent and emergency facilities still open at the date of the survey. The 48 night shelters on the list were divided into: departmental-financed shelters (23), municipally-financed shelters (11), and shelters run by non-profit and private organisations (14). The list included facilities of different size ranging from the Caritas shelter, which accommodates almost 200 people, to small centres for 5-6 people. For this reason, the number of staff needed to carry out the survey was defined according to the shelters' capacity. A ratio of one interviewer for every 20 guests was established, outsourcing interviewers in centres with a limited staff.

Data collection in shelters

In order to carry out the survey, the Social Operating Service (SOS) of Roma Capitale, was in charge of contacting all the shelters in the week before the survey. They checked shelters' availability on the "Notte della Solidarietà". Out of the 48 facilities on the list, nine did not make themselves available for individual interviews, while one refused to participate because they were under restoration and another one did not meet the definition adopted. The unavailability to carry out individual interviews was limited to facilities run by religious orders. Istat prepared a specific form to collect data in those night shelters where individual interviews were not possible. This form, together with some information on the shelter, collected aggregated data on the number of men and women, the age of the guests divided into four classes, and their origin divided into five areas, namely Italy, the Middle East and Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Ten shelters filled-in this form for a total number of 287 individuals. All the other facilities conducted individual interviews alike in the street and on the same evening.

The survey (shelter count) started at 5.30 pm on Saturday, 20 April 2024. The last team concluded the survey at 23: 30 pm. During the survey 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.

Main Results

The 2024 PIT count in Rome provided information on the number of unsheltered persons in the so-called Rail Ring of Rome and part of the district of Ostia. It also enabled us to have figures on how many persons in the whole city use the overnight shelters, emergency shelters, and similar transitory solutions for the homeless. On the "Notte della Solidarietà", 948 people throughout the 338 survey zones of the detection area were found to experience homelessness, additionally 70 people were counted both in hospital out-buildings-gardens and along the paved banks of the Tiber river ('special areas'). People hosted in the 47 winter shelters, emergency

shelters, and similar transitory solutions amounted to 1 186 (sheltered homeless). The grand total of the PIT-Count is 2 204 (Table 1).

The majority of the people experiencing homelessness were detected in the areas near the main Railway Station (Termini) and the Vatican City, particularly at St. Peter's Basilica area. Relevant presence of homelessness was along the main underground and railway stations. In Figure 3, the distribution of the unsheltered homeless in the city survey zones is marked by different grey nuances according to the number of counted people. Unsheltered homeless were detected in 204 survey zones out of the total 338 (i.e., in 60.4% of the zones); 15 of them were characterised by a higher presence (10 or more people experiencing homelessness), while in 134 zones, no people experiencing homelessness were detected.

Table 1 – Total People experiencing homelessness counted (2024). Absolute and Percentage Values

PIT COUNT SECTOR		Homeless	Percentage
Unsheltered Homeless			
Direct Individual Count	CAPI Questionnaires	815	
Aggregated Count	PAPI Questionnaires	133	
Total Count Areas		948	43.0
Hospital Out-Buildings and Gardens Aggregated Count	PAPI Questionnaires	22	
Paved banks of the Tiber river Aggregated Count	PAPI Questionnaires	48	
Total Count Special Areas		70	3.2
Grand Total Unsheltered Homeless		1 018	46.2
Sheltered Homeless			
Direct Count	CAPI Questionnaires	891	
Aggregated Count	PAPI Questionnaires	295	
Grand Total Sheltered Homeless		1 186	53.8
GRAND TOTAL (Unsheltered + Sheltered Homeless)		2 204	100.0

Source: Istat (2024) Notte della Solidarietà

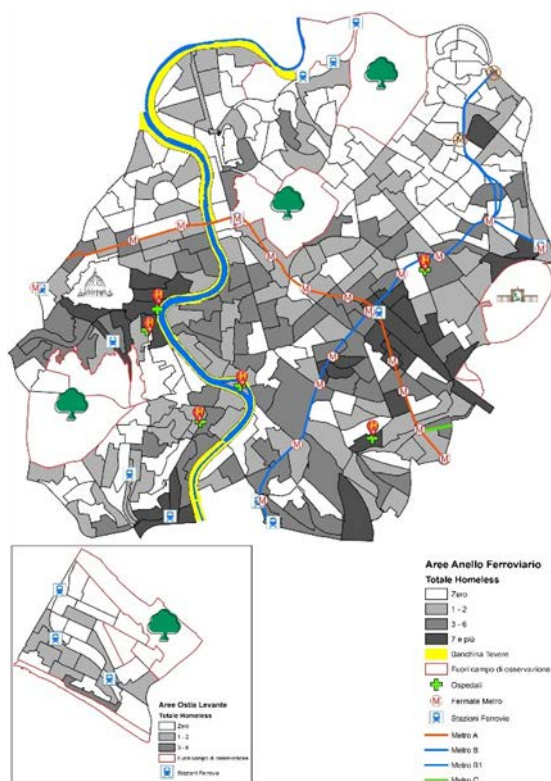
Women experiencing homelessness accounted for 15.3% of the total number of people on the streets; along the banks of the Tiber, the presence of women was only 8.3%. This percentage raised to 27.9% for the overnight shelters.⁶ The modal age class was lower for unsheltered homeless (aged between 40-49), while the largest class for the sheltered was between 60 and 69. A relevant presence of the over-69-year-olds was also detected (11%) in the overnight shelters.

Italy is the nationality mainly present (17.5% of street homeless and 23.6% of the sheltered), while Romania is the country with the second highest number (20.1% and 10.6% respectively). The other countries with the highest number of respond-

⁶ Data from the overnight shelters were collected in the whole city and not in the selected area.

ents are Somalia (4.2% and 5.3%) and Morocco (5.8% and 2.6%).⁷ Only 9.9% of the unsheltered had access to clinics and centres distributing medicines, compared to 20.2% of the sheltered group, this fact could indicate either a difficulty in accessing services due to a lack of information, or a greater amount of information and/or care on the part of the sheltered persons. People encountered in the street reported using the shower facilities and the distribution of meals and other comforts (37.1% and 23.1% respectively) much more often than the sheltered people (22.9% and 7.8% respectively). The latter probably make use of showers within the shelters.

Fig. 3 – Unsheltered homeless counted in the survey zones of Rome



Source: Istat (2024) Notte della Solidarietà

⁷ These data are based on the interviews carried out by the surveyors and do not include the aggregate data received with the paper questionnaires (the number of sheltered people individually interviewed is 600).

Strengths and Weaknesses

In terms of coverage, the results do not provide an exhaustive, though still significant, measure of the unsheltered homelessness. On the contrary, the figures of sheltered homelessness are exhaustive. At a first stage the PIT count in Rome was supposed to cover the entire area of the city. From an operational perspective, covering such a large area in one night requires recruiting and training a huge number of interviewers, resulting in high costs (Gatta, 2022). For this reason, the partners agreed on carrying out the survey on the unsheltered homeless in a limited area of the city.

As for the case of the ‘special areas’, (hospital outbuildings/gardens and the paved banks of the Tiber), the count was not exhaustive, particularly focussing on the Roma Capitale. The count provided information on some specific areas which are particularly interesting to produce a snapshot of homelessness in the city. NYC uses advanced methodological approaches to ensure the effectiveness of their counts (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2014). These methodological approaches were partly used for the “Notte della Solidarietà”. Indirect estimates of homelessness in the entire Municipality could be provided. A first exercise, taking into account differences in the homeless population density that increases in areas with different topographic classifications (e.g., parks, residential areas), was presented in 2024 at the UNECE Group of Experts on Measuring Poverty and Inequality (Di Leo et al., 2024).

The questionnaire had to be short, thus could neither deepen the homeless’ story nor the mobility of people experiencing the different forms of homelessness (Demaerschalk et al., 2018). Also, the causes of homelessness could not be properly investigated. The count was conducted at the end of April, i.e., during spring time which is not a recommended period for such a survey as known homelessness is affected by seasonality, therefore the results cannot be compared with similar PIT count in other cities. During weekends is also not recommended. The best practice is to conduct the survey during winter, as homelessness is highly influenced by seasonality and the goal is to assess the core of the phenomenon.

From the organisational point of view, the survey was quite complex – as is normal for a PIT count – especially for the involvement of non-professional and volunteer surveyors. However, it worked quite well thanks to different reasons: a) the personal motivation of the involved citizens, b) the training, and c) the matching of teams, composed by members of associations and university students. The latter was crucial to have a mix of different ages and approaches to the people experiencing homelessness, which took advantage both from the associations’ experience and from the students’ rigorous sticking to the provided rules. In addition to that, it should be noted that the involvement of a large number of volunteers help raise

awareness among the general public (Hermans, 2024). On the other hand, the involvement of universities, especially medical students, was the first step for an experimental project of street medicine. The latter has an implication not only for people living on the street, but also for the whole community living in the area. The Tor Vergata University is a forerunner in this perspective.

The willingness and interest of local governments to collect data was another crucial issue in carrying out studies and surveys on this 'very' hard-to-reach population. As far as it concerns Italy, the local governments, such as municipality, are in charge of finding responses and solutions to homelessness and to design policies for it. Agreements with these bodies could be the way of funding initiatives of research as it was for the case of Rome in the "Notte della Solidarietà".

De-briefing

In order to draw useful information for following initiatives or editions, a de-briefing was organised by Istat with the 20 cluster coordinators. Some critical aspects emerged: more training needed to cover all the aspects, focusing especially on the questionnaire; clarifying the goals of counting and interviewing; thinking about a different distribution of teams in the territory considering that some areas had no people experiencing homelessness; and providing also English and French versions of the questionnaire to facilitate the interaction. Cluster coordinators also suggested to add more questions on access to services and discriminatory practices; adding in the team kit useful information on homelessness and the available services. Finally, some technical problems with the Survey Solutions app and time delays occurred suggesting further attention on this aspect. The major concern was with the Summary Reports, which were filled in by not more than 50% of the Teams. A general underreport resulted from the comparison between the Summary Reports and the app data flow, it accounted for approx. 10% of the counted people.

Future Prospects

The project carried out in Rome has increased Istat experience in carrying out research on people experiencing homelessness. It enabled us to test the PIT count in the largest Italian city. Some issues emerged as crucial for a successful survey and for future implementation. The main challenges are connected with definitions (the counted population), and the territory to be analysed as clearly emerged in the case of Rome.

It should be also considered to broaden the service-based counts to a range of social-service institutions. In this way, people in different ETHOS categories could be contacted. However, the 'service paradox': "density and quality of the service

system have a strong impact on data output; people that are not entitled to use or are not in touch with social-service institutions are not recorded” (Hermans, 2024 p.198) has to be taken into account. Additionally, regions and areas with a weak service network and institutions are partially mapped.

As stated by Schnell and Musil (2024, p.124) “it is widely acknowledged that a comprehensive measurement of the extent and profile of homelessness should rely on multiple data collection methods and data sources, addressing different dimensions of this phenomenon”. Different methods bring into light various aspects of homelessness (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010).

In order to take into account this complexity, within the framework of the National Census, the decision was made of implementing the PIT count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness in the main Italian cities, the 14 Centres of Metropolitan areas. This survey is planned to go in the field by the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026. The Istat national project will combine the first aim of counting people experiencing homelessness in order to know the dimension of homelessness, and at the same time is intended to deepen the reasons for homelessness and the causes of it by conducting a sample survey on the same target population after the count. Therefore, future PIT surveys are going to be planned together with a census of the services provided for people experiencing homelessness. This project is part of a wider plan of establishing a permanent Observatory on the extreme poverty by means of agreements with national institutional actors (e.g., The Ministry of Labour and Social Policies) and carrying out other surveys focused on specific topics, such as the available services or the associations and bodies working to tackle extreme poverty and monitoring the phenomenon.

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