

# **Demographics and trends of the homeless population in Italy: point-in-time studies.**

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## ***The social construction of homelessness and its consequences***

1. Typical constructions of the problem of the homeless in Italy are centred on the figure of the 'no abode' (*senza dimora*). Identification of this figure positions the problem in the area of social marginalisation, and the accent is placed on particularly serious situations and on the advanced stages of marginalisation processes: most often the term indicates those socially marginalised homeless characterised by multiple deprivation and often by traits of desocialisation. In my paper for the first meeting of CUHP I have widely discussed the conceptual implications of this type of construction (Tosi 2003). In these representations, the strictly housing component - not having housing - is not dominant. On the other hand a sort of distinction is made between the two conceptual areas connected - in the international debate - with the notion of homelessness: not having a home (housing exclusion) and social marginalisation/exclusion.

(In this paper the term 'housing exclusion' will designate homelessness as lack of housing (in its wider meaning), apart from the social profile of the persons concerned).

This construction provides a bad treatment of the twofold nature of homelessness, the well-known polarisation of meanings - social marginalisation and housing exclusion - that characterises the debate on homelessness and gives origin to the ambiguity of this notion (Tosi 1999). The two poles identify two different research objects that are to a certain extent independent, and have different policy implications. The different approaches raise different questions and have different policy implications. In my paper for the Paris meeting I have discussed the policy implications of the construction of the problem in Italy. The consequences of the construction are also evident as concerns the description and estimate of the phenomenon. The most obvious regards the estimate of the number of the homeless, and this is a direct consequence of the conceptual uncertainty implied by this construction - the oscillation of the definition of the homeless between the lack of a home and serious marginalisation.

This construction also affects the research organisation. Their practical implication also regards the sources for the review of the quantitative point-in-time studies in Italy which is the object of this paper. The current arrangement implies that we have to explore and link three different fields: research on the no abode, which is the main object of the paper; research on social exclusion, marginalisation, extreme poverty (the study of homelessness based on data from services regard in most cases services targeted to a wider area of problems, the homeless/no abode being only one component); research on housing exclusion, normally positioned within a wider area, identified as 'housing stress' (in most cases with real difficulties to find out the homeless components).

## *Studies on the “no abode”*

2. With few exceptions, the research on the people with no abode and the homeless in Italy is of a local nature. As regards the problems dealt with in this paper, three types of research activities are most relevant:

(a) Most research is centred on (the recipients of) specific services provided for the no abode or for persons in conditions of serious hardship. The methodologies employed cover the whole range of qualitative tools: interviews of users, participant observation etc. Much more frequent however is reprocessing of data on the use of specific services. Even if their primary object is evaluation of services and policy, these research provide useful information on demographics of the homeless population and trends (for instance: Bergamaschi 1999, Caritas Pisa 2003, FIOpsd 2002, Gazzola 1997).

(b) A small number of research projects have adopted s-night approach (in some cases accompanied by interviews with the persons identified). They combine attempts to estimate the number of homeless persons in a specific city and description of basic social profile of the homeless. Projects of this type have been carried out in (among others) Turin, Padua, Bologna, Trento (Associazione Volontari 2002, Roversi and Bondi 1996, Gui 1991);

(c) In-depth interviews/individual life histories (sometimes accompanied with participant observation methods) have been the most typical instrument to study the factors that cause homelessness, the paths to/out of homelessness, the homelessness experience. The prevailing narratives are based around a series of concepts that generally recur in studies of social vulnerability and poverty: the process nature of marginalisation, the role of fragility factors such as those that concern the family background, the absence of a support network etc. (for instance: Bonadonna 2001, Meo 2000, Bergamaschi 1999, Tosi 2003, Barnao 2003, Berzano 1992, Martinelli F 1995, Osservatorio di ricerca 2002). The *Indagine sulle persone senza dimora* performed by the Zancan Foundation for the *Commissione di indagine sull'esclusione sociale* also moved along these lines (see § 6).

This paper is focused on the main point-in-time studies at national scale. It also takes into consideration some local research and sources which are relevant to deal with estimating the extent of homelessness and building a picture of the demographics of the homeless population.

3. Despite their local (normally small scale) character, these studies have provided a good knowledge of the processes that lead to homelessness and of the experience of homelessness itself, and have improved our knowledge of the profiles and of the dynamics of homelessness. Since the early '90s, a number of studies have put forward general schemes of interpretation and there have been attempts to place the results of local studies in overall pictures which define the socio-demographic characteristics, the causes and the paths, the conditions of life and the habitats (see Pollo 1995, Pellegrino and Verzieri 1991, Caritas Ambrosiana 1997, Caritas Italiana and Fondazione Zancan 1998, Gui 1995).

It is nevertheless very difficult to paint an (empirically sound) overall picture from this research and more particularly to make a quantitative estimate of the phenomenon and to obtain a systematic picture on a national scale.

This is due firstly to methodological reasons that are to some extent obvious. There is above all the difficulty in assessing the overall situation from local research and of constructing a reliable

mosaic from data which is scarce and fragmented. There is also the fact that many of the studies are based on (data given by) service providers.

The empirical data concerns mainly users of services targeted at the areas of extreme poverty or ‘serious marginalisation’, an area within which the homeless represent a particular variant. The contributions on homelessness available in the literature are based almost totally on this type of data. Important indications on the trends and gender specificity of extreme poverty and homelessness can be obtained from these sources. There are nevertheless a number of limits to and considerable difficulties with these sources. These figures reflect differences in local structures of poverty and service provision, different methods of performing research and, if the data is on service users, the targets and the ways different services are run and their position in the local service provision system. It is therefore difficult to generalise on this basis.

A more important reason – on which I dwelt at length in my paper for the Paris meeting - is because there is so much conceptual uncertainty surrounding the definition of the problem that it is impossible to compare the available data and evaluations given by workers in the field and researchers. The focus moves in an uncontrolled manner between the excluded from housing (*senza casa*) and the no abode. This uncertainty is found even within the narrow definitions (§ 9).

### *The 1992 study on extreme poverty*

4. The first attempt to quantify both “extreme poverty” and persons of “no abode” on a national scale was conducted by the *Commissione d’indagine sulla povertà e l’emarginazione* in 1992 (the results were partially published in Commissione 1993). It has been a fundamental point of reference for recent research, both in order to estimate the size of the phenomenon and to trace the characteristics of extreme poverty and of the no abode in particular.

The survey, accomplished in 1992 in 25 geographical areas throughout the country, was focused on four categories, considered as the main components of the “population in situation, or at risk, of extreme poverty” in this country: people with no abode, foreign immigrants, gypsies, people with mental health problems. Information was gathered through two main tools: a survey addressed to social workers and experts, mainly aimed to estimate the size of the four categories and the extent of extreme poverty; a sample survey on the four categories of population (3,759 interviews, in the 25 areas selected as regards immigrants, in 10 areas as regards other categories) (Tosi, Ranci 1994 and 1995).

According to this analysis, the extent of estimated extreme poverty at national level was the following:

	Max	Min	Middle
Immigrants	401,761	282,930	322,540
Gypsies	76,523	64,313	68,313
Mental problems	49,170	45,170	47,836
No abode	61,753	44,853	50,486

A general identikit of extreme poverty can be obtained from this survey. Considering the four groups covered by the survey as a whole, the Commission emphasises the increasingly young face of poverty and social exclusion, the great exposure of male population to the risk of poverty and a lesser degree of visibility of poverty among female population, the strong correlation between poverty and health, etc.

Substantially, those of no fixed abode present these features with, however, some important specific characteristics: a greater degree of isolation - a greater number of unmarried, separated, divorced and widowed persons; a greater number in the middle age range; a worse state of health, due to alcohol and drugs in particular; a lower number of persons in work and greater resort to abusive sources of income or handouts; less use of social services.

The “no abode” category includes types of persons with different life styles and problems so that on the one hand the phenomenon cannot be defined in terms of one dimension based on conditions of psychic, social or economic marginality and on the other it cannot be seen in terms of traditional forms (vagrancy etc.). The report of the Commission attempts to identify a ‘new vagrancy’- the general identifying features of which are, as elsewhere in Europe, larger numbers of young people and of female population. Furthermore, new vagrancy is characterised by a gradual decrease in causal factors linked to ‘deliberate choice’ or ‘inner motivation’ and an increase in ‘external factors’ tied to traumatic experiences both of family nature and regarding relationships with institutions as with ex-

convicts, the mentally ill, drug addicts and alcoholics. On this basis a distinction is made in the report between 'primary no abode' - the area where social isolation and extreme poverty may be easily and consistently defined, both in terms of lifestyles and self-exclusion; and 'secondary no abode' which represent the new component.

Nearly all individual case histories are characterised by a family history in which one or more traumatic events have occurred: expulsion from the family as drug addicts, AIDS sufferers or mentally ill etc.; unmarried pregnancies; abandoned by family as children; being the son of a person of no fixed abode; traumatic breakdown of the household etc. The Commission put particular emphasis on events connected with family crisis. But attention is also drawn to other social and individual events. The most important are (long term) employment and affective troubles; then alcoholism, experience of prison, and school failure.

On the other hand it is not easy to understand the relationship existing between these events and the causes of the increase in new homelessness just as it is difficult to identify single causal factors in individual case histories of homelessness. It is, however, possible to identify the border lines between the different types and this has important practical implications. On this basis an hard core of no fixed abode homeless - estimated at between 29 and 45% of respondents - seems unreachable, refractory to intervention from institutions and to strategies of social reintegration. "It is with respect above all to the 'impermeable' hard core of no fixed abode homeless that the effectiveness and quality of services provided by the public and private sector must be measured".

The evidence provided by this research on the accommodation of the four groups in extreme poverty was the basis for a first estimate of housing exclusion in Italy proposed in the Report 1993 and Report 1994 to the Observatory on Homelessness (see § 13).

5. Subsequent attempts to estimate the size and trends of the phenomenon have been based on local studies and the opinions of social workers and service providers.

At the end of the 1990s estimates cited by the Ministry of Social Solidarity put the number of no abode at between 70 and 80 thousand, calculated on the basis of persons making use of voluntary association and state services. Of these 7 per cent consist of young people between the ages of 18 and 24, 30 per cent aged 25-34, and 45 per cent in the 35-44 age group. Alongside the 70-80 thousand who have contacts with associations, there are another 40,000 'invisible', who have no contact with associations. Foreigners account for 35 per cent of those who have contacts with associations and state services, but probably account for at least 60 per cent of the 'invisible'. In addition to clandestine immigrants, trends on the increase include very young persons and abandoned women.

*No abode who have contacts with state services and associations: 70,000-80,000*

- immigrants	35%
- women	13-16%
- age 18-35	50%
- urban areas	65%
- secondary/upper school	20%

*No abode who have no contact with state services and associations: 30,000-40,000*

- immigrants	60-65%
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Considering that the estimates of the 1992 Survey indicated a figure of approximately 50,000 no abode, the phenomenon seemed to be on the increase. There is nonetheless no rigorous data that will clear up the point or define the trends. Local data, almost always on service users, is contradictory. Data on individual services show stability or small increases in the percentage of no abode users while at the same time it shows a significant increase in the percentage of those who are sleeping on the streets. Anyway it is difficult to generalise in this basis.

Nor does the conceptual and terminological confusion help. For instance the estimates given for Rome fluctuate between 2,000 and 6,000 persons: this discrepancy can be partly explained by the variation in accepted meanings.

### *The 2000 national study*

6. A step forward in the direction of systematic knowledge of the problem of the "no abode" was taken with the study promoted in 2000 by the *Commissione di indagine sull'esclusione sociale*. The study, entitled *Indagine sulle persone senza dimora* (research project on persons of no abode), was performed by the Zancan Foundation of Padua (Fondazione Zancan 2000) and had

two objectives: (a) to identify the characteristics of persons of no abode in Italy and also to attempt a quantitative estimate; (b) to examine carefully the conditions of the no abode by means of 75 in-depth interviews. Ample extracts from the summary report (Commissione d'indagine sull'esclusione sociale 2002) are given below.

(A second study, *Modelli di intervento e politiche locali per le persone senza dimora*: models of intervention and local policies for persons of no abode, reconstructed the supply of public and private sector services present in the community in 20 Italian cities).

A 'strict definition' of the phenomenon was adopted for the study. "Only those who at the time did not have a permanent roof over their heads, even in the form of a hostel or protected accommodation were included among the no abode. Consequently the only persons included are those who spent the night of the survey (14 March 2000) on the streets or in parks or in the so-called low threshold accommodation, which is to say in dormitories that offer a bed to sleep in and a shower for short periods of time but which do not require and do not allow any participation in daily routine". According to the authors, "if this definition may appear, and is in effect, controversial, since it takes no account of the complexity of the phenomenon even in its limits and its dynamics, it does nevertheless have the advantage of being sufficiently precise to allow quantitative estimates and also cannot be suspected of overestimating the phenomenon. On the contrary, any estimate based on this definition is almost by definition an underestimate of the phenomenon since it excludes those who have been given temporary accommodation - by local authorities or voluntary associations - in board and lodging community hostels or those who are staying temporarily with relatives and friends".

It was decided to use the s-night approach to find persons of no abode (a count of persons on the street on one night and of persons spending the same night in a 'first level' dormitory). "The count was taken in a representative sample of municipalities. Firstly the areas in which the survey was to be conducted were identified distinguishing between local authorities with more than 250,000 inhabitants, those with populations of between 50,000 and 250,000 and social and health services districts - i.e. groups of local authorities - with a population of less than 50,000 inhabitants". Then, using information supplied by local informants, places were selected in the areas where the survey could be taken. 2,668 of the 5,000 persons counted were interviewed.

On the basis of this data the researchers proposed an estimate of approximately 17,000 persons of no abode (according to the 'strict definition' adopted) present in Italy, heavily concentrated in the largest local authorities. The estimate was reached on the basis of "a complex calculation of weightings of the different areas and of the probabilities of underestimating due to difficulties in the count".

***The no abode: estimate of the phenomenon by geographical area and by size of local authority***

	<b>Persons counted</b>	<b>National estimate</b>
Large local authorities	2,369	5,470
Medium local authorities North East	79	685
Medium local authorities North West	104	1,580
Medium local authorities Central Italy	40	880
Medium local authorities South	-	150
Small local authorities North East	39	2,255
Small local authorities North West	3	187
Small local authorities Central Italy	34	2,603
Small local authorities South	-	-
Partial total	2,668	13,800
	<b>Persons counted in low threshold accommodation</b>	<b>National estimate</b>
Large local authorities	2,041	2,560
Medium local authorities	88	429
Small local authorities	6	138
Partial total	2,135	3,100
<i>Total</i>	<i>4,803</i>	<i>17,000</i>

The estimate that was obtained is much lower than those that had been proposed and which we have reported. This gap seems considerable even if account is taken of the “strict” definition that was adopted and that the s-night methodology tends to underestimate the size of the phenomenon. It must in any case be recalled that a quantitative estimate of the homeless was not a primary objective of this research project, which focused more on identifying the characteristics of persons of no abode and the paths to homelessness.

7. These aspects are the most important part of the study. The analysis of conditions and processes of homelessness is based on 2,668 interviews, carried out the same night of 14 March. Afterwards (April) 75 in-depth interviews were realized to go into some critical aspects, concerning socio-demographic profiles, housing, everyday life, social networks, and ‘biographic routes’.

There are different ways of being of no abode depending on characteristics and personal histories and the survival strategies employed to tackle life on the streets. If one looks at the sample that agreed to be interviewed, the no abode are mainly male, relatively young and composed of equal numbers of foreigners and Italians.

#### ***Persons of no abode by sex and age***

<b>Sex</b>	
Male	80.8
Female	18.2
Other	1.0
<b>Total valid</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age group</b>	
27 years and under	15.5
From 28 to 37 years	30.9
From 38 to 47 years	23.1
From 48 to 57 years	16.0
From 58 to 64 years	8.7
65 years and over	5.8
<b>Total valid</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The condition of being of no abode is above all a male problem. “In the case at least of native Italians, these are people who have completely failed in their life plans and men are more exposed to this than women, presumably because of the different social roles expected of the two genders and the greater exposure of men to substance abuse”. As regards the age distribution, the no abode are relatively young with an average age of around 40,5 years, without any particular differences between males and females. This average is in reality composed of markedly older Italians and younger foreigners.

#### ***Persons of no abode by marital status***

Single	53,2
Married/cohabiting	21,8
Separated/divorced	18,1
Widowed	5,9
Other	1,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

824 gave no answer

#### ***Persons of no abode by level of education***

None	7,1
Primary/junior	34,2
Lower secondary	33,7
Upper secondary	17,7
University	3,9
Other	3,4

<b>Total</b>	<b>100,0</b>
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1.097 gave no answer

The figures for marital status confirms that the no abode are lone isolated persons. Seventy eight percent seem to have no affective ties. As regards level of education we have a population which in actual fact has a medium if not medium to high level of education.

#### ***Persons of no abode by nationality***

	<b>Percentages</b>	
Italian	53,8	
Foreign		45,6
Stateless	0,6	
<b>Total valid</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

287 gave no answer

The breakdown by age - an average of 45.5 years for Italians and 34.1 years for foreigners - shows two different types of persons on no abode. "It appears quite clear that the case histories of persons who end up on the streets are different: in the case of Italians they have failed at a relatively mature age, while in the case of foreigners their no abode condition is clearly linked to their migration. This distinction between 'Italian' case histories and 'foreign' case histories is probably the best key to interpreting the phenomenon at national level".

#### ***Duration of condition of no abode by nationality***

	<b>Italian</b>	<b>Foreigners</b>	<b>Total</b>
Up to 1 year	16.1	31.4	23.3
From 1 to 3 years	33.3	46.0	39.4
From 4 to 6 years	21.2	11.9	16.8
From 7 to 9 years	11.6	4.5	8.2
10 years and over	17.8	6.2	12.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>

12 stateless persons were excluded

There is a clear correlation with the duration of the no abode condition. "The duration of the condition of no abode for Italians is quite variable. Almost one fifth had been of no abode for at least 10 years. These are persons in extremely rundown condition, with a high probability of having lost all possibility/capacity of independently returning to acceptable conditions of life. In the case of foreigners, the fact that the large majority have started to lead this life relatively recently leads one to suppose that many will return to, or reach, 'normality'. For a large proportion of foreigners of no abode - even if not for all - having to adapt to extremely precarious accommodation is, at times, a transitory condition along the migratory road. The precariousness in this sense may mean difficulty in integrating into the working and social fabric of society, but it is a problem which they might solve in the future. This does not make the conditions of life of these people who spend sometimes short, sometimes long periods in extremely difficult housing conditions and receive very little institutional assistance any less serious".

The possibility of the no abode to gain access to relationship networks - family, friends or institutional - is extremely small if not non existent. Friendship networks seem stronger than family networks. They are, however, in most cases, friendships with other persons of no abode: relationships in which the circulation of resources is modest. There do not appear to be any significant differences between Italians and foreigners as far as family relationships are concerned. However, foreigners more frequently have friendship relationships: even those obliged to live on the streets are more likely to be able to count on a network of friends than their Italian counterparts.

#### ***"How many relatives or friends can you turn to give you a hand?"***

	<b>Relatives</b>	<b>Friends</b>
None	70,7	40,7
One or two	19,9	25,2
More than two	9,4	34,1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>

1,404 gave no answer on relatives and 1,440 on friends

### ***No abode by main means of support***

Begging	37,2
Work (permanent and casual)	34,8
Pensions (work, invalidity, welfare)	10,2
Benefits (public and private sector)	8,6
Other*	9,2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100,0</b>

\* Help from relatives and friends, prostitution, savings, "wits", other.

1.432 gave no answer

The activity most frequently give by the interviewees for obtaining money to live was begging, but it only constitutes the main means of support for a little more than a third of them and is closely followed by work. Although in all probability these are marginal and often irregular jobs, the existence of a labour market for persons of no abode suggests that many of them may be able to recover and exploit their work capabilities. The failure of the institutions to provide these people with assistance is demonstrated by the low proportion, 10%, that counts on public of private benefits. Finally a further 10% of the no abode receives public sector assistance as a result of their age (work or welfare pensions) or state of health (invalidity pensions).

### ***Night accommodation by nationality***

	Italians	Foreigners	Total
Dormitory, hostel, shelter	34.5	29.4	32.1
Uninhabited house, shack	7.8	19.7	13.3
Temporary emergency accommodation	3.5	5.0	4.2
Station, rail coach, automobile	24.2	15.4	20.2
Street, park	24.6	23.9	24.3
Other	5.4	6.6	5.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

1,190 gave no answer

On the question of accommodation too, the most effective key to interpretation is that which distinguishes between Italians and foreigners. Around two thirds of those interviewed, with a greater frequency for Italians, sleep in public or private sector shelters. "Given the characteristics of the sample, it is accommodation for the night only and which can only be used for a limited period of time. A substantial proportion of those interviewed slept in the open, on the streets under arches and in parks or gardens. As far as intermediate accommodation is concerned, foreigners prefer to occupy empty houses and shacks, while a quarter of the Italians find a place to sleep in railway stations and coaches or in automobiles. It is perhaps interesting to underline that almost half of the Italian no abode spend the night in extremely precarious conditions - railway stations and in the open - signalling, as indicated, more serious damage to subjective life as a whole. In the case of foreigners, those two solutions 'only' involve less than 40%, while almost a quarter of them have found their own solutions with a minimum level of permanence (abandoned houses and emergency accommodation)".

"On the basis of the information acquired, we can therefore conclude that for a significant number of foreigners, the course of a migratory path and integration into Italian society leads to stages of inadequate housing accommodation. They are certainly situations in which they find it impossible to satisfy fundamental personal needs. The situation of the Italians, however, seems to be characterised by the presence of a large proportion of persons who have seriously deviated from the more diffuse models of life. As we have seen, the Italian no abode have been in that condition for many years longer than the foreigners, adapting for the most part to extremely precarious housing conditions. Or perhaps it is actually because the Italians who become of no abode are more often on a progressive path to isolation and degeneration of their personal capabilities and social capacities than foreigners are, that they are more likely to be found among those who are unable to find a shelter no matter how precarious. Foreigners on the other hand are more likely to find strategies for permanent housing where what is missing is not so much the capability or the desire to stay in housing as the housing itself, or the money to rent it. And that is not all; for foreigners, the "temporary" condition of being of no abode can be knowingly accepted, if not 'chosen', to contain the cost of the initial phase of

settling in Italy where the risk is that if that phase is too long, not only is their health compromised and therefore the chances of a normal life, but the very chance to integrate into a network of relationships that allow them to get out of their no abode condition”.

8. The in-depth interviews confirmed the existence of numerous different no abode figures, with different histories, identities, cultures and mentality. The only shared factor in the heterogeneity of all these case histories is the common matrix of suffering that accompanies the lives of persons of no abode. “In the search for a sense, and explanation for their condition, while they spoke of the cruelty of fate, of their own faults or those of others, or the incapacity of the institutions, none spoke of their own free choice. Apart from this there do not seem to be any other common traits”.

“Studies and research on poverty have demonstrated that in most cases, the condition of socio-economic hardship is the outcome of a process during which a chain of event occurs”. “These events progressively require the use of greater and greater resources until the capacity of the individual or the family to satisfy their own needs is exhausted. Basically, in general, the condition of poverty cannot be put down to one specific circumstance but to a progressive worsening of life as a whole. In the case of persons of no abode, however, a ‘precipitating’ event can often be traced which marks the breaking point in their life histories. Usually it is the circumstance in which the home was lost. In most cases, however, there are events which weigh on situations - individual or family - that have already been weakened, in which resources or capacities are already scarce both because of intrinsic fragility - atypical families, scarce cultural resources, scarce financial resources - and because of a previous succession of destabilising events - illnesses, bereavements, psychological problems and unemployment. There are often ‘events-catastrophes’ at the origin of a no abode condition which unload onto a multiplicity of factors to produce vicious circles that it is very difficult to exit from. The spheres in which these events most frequently occur are those of work and family relationships”.

One characteristic trait of Italian no abode case histories is the fragility of the original background, the high exposure, that is, to possible paths to poverty.

Work is often seen as the road to the return to normal life, but the labour market only offers marginal and precarious areas of work to the no abode pushing almost all of them into clandestine and precarious work. “The range of occupations given by those interviewed is extremely wide: cleaner, abusive car parker, truck driver, street newspaper seller, agricultural labourer, nurse, car washer, welder, mechanic, house painter, brick layer, labourer, tile layer, domestic, gardener, leaflet distributor, shepherd, street musician, translator, charcoal burner, doll-maker, theatrical promoter, street market unloader, ice cream maker, beer transporter... Many of the no abode have partially or completely - old age, sickness - lost the ability to do a job. But it is very difficult even for those who are able to work to find a good job, often because employers dismiss them when they discover they are of no abode or because they are obliged to put up with very precarious pay and conditions”.

One of the main reasons for the great precariousness of the lives of the no abode lies in their inability to count on a sufficiently robust network of support. Solitude is a characteristic trait of a great many of the no abode.

On the whole, the profiles that emerge from this study are quite similar to those furnished by the 1993 survey, except perhaps for a slightly younger population of no abode (but the comparison is not easy, given the different methodologies of the two surveys). The big difference is in the marked increase in the percentage of foreign persons of no abode. One other important difference is the increase in work as a means of support and the reduction in begging, but also the increase in pensions: a combination that could indicate a certain change in the phenomenon - an increase in ‘normal’, non deviant components actually caused by the poverty factor and at the same time the role that an absence of welfare cover plays in the problem of homelessness.

### *The estimates at issue*

9. Problems arise, however, as concerns the estimate, the low figure proposed compared to previous estimates. Afterwards, higher estimates, of between 50,000 and 80,000 have continued to be reported by field workers and the press (e. g. Lambruschi 2003).

The estimates given by associations for individual cities are as follows: 5,000-6,000 for Rome, 3,000-5000 for Milan, 1,000 for Turin, 1,000 for Naples, 300-800 for Bologna, 300-900 for Genoa, 500-1,500 for Florence. These figure would seem to confirm the doubts over the estimate of 17,000 no abode advanced by the Commission survey (Lambruschi 2003; Badaracchi 2002; AA. VV 2002).

The authors of the *Commissione* study have offered no comment on the difference between their estimate and previous estimates. As seen, they acknowledge that any estimate based on the “strict definition” they adopted is “almost by definition” an underestimate of the phenomenon. Generally speaking, however, the definitions used by previous estimates should not be very different. They all use the prevailing concept of the homeless in Italy, that of the ‘person of no abode’.

If the numbers were underestimated, it is most probably a consequence of the methodology they adopted. It is well known that the s-night methodology tends to underestimate the size of the phenomenon. From what can be inferred from the description of the method, the main limitation would seem to regard the identification of the areas in which the homeless to be counted and interviewed were to be found. The identification of these areas was based on information provided by experts working in the field.

Finally it is interesting to note that the method included considerable resort to informers, even for correcting errors resulting from the differing success of the work in the various geographical areas and for assessing the underestimates. This makes this method similar to those used in previous surveys.

Apart from the limits of the methodology employed, this survey too shows traces of the uncertainty over the definition of the homeless, the oscillation between the lack of a home and ‘serious marginalisation’ without adequate discussion of the relationship between the two aspects. The authors of the *Commissione* survey resort to the typical “and-and” definition, they define the homeless as “persons with no fixed dwelling, in precarious material conditions, with no formal/informal network of support”.

And there again, as far as the previous figures are concerned, the big differences in the figures, especially for some cities, and the large fluctuations in the figures despite the common use of narrow definitions raises question marks.

The fact is that estimates suffer from conceptual uncertainty surrounding the definition of the problem of homelessness even within the narrow definitions. There are differences in the figures identified and the corresponding empirical situations, even within the narrow definitions usually indicated by the term “no abode”. For example, on the one hand the shacks, falling down buildings, and ruins in which many foreigners find shelter are difficult to find empirically (they are hidden) and on the other hand in many cases the people who live in them do not correspond to the most typical (extreme or traditional) image of the no abode. Similarly travellers are usually not considered as forming part of the homeless and to a certain extent neither are immigrants. Even if they are living in shacks, travellers (and immigrants) are not considered to be of no abode.

(If then we were to extend the concept of homelessness further, for example by adopting the Feantsa criteria either by considering situations of housing exclusion, then obviously even the higher estimates given above would be decidedly too low: see § 13).

### ***Profiles of the homeless population***

10. The risk profiles of (extreme) poverty have been highlighted by several studies in these years. The profiles and the description of the underlying factors partly overlap with those recorded for the homeless. Frequently found elements include psychic problems, the multi-

problem situations of many persons hit by extreme poverty, the specificity of the factors and the paths to poverty of women, minors, immigrants etc. There is also the hidden character of much extreme poverty and the lack of contact with services (Cooperativa sociale Servizio Psicosociosanitario 2002).

An increase has been reported almost everywhere, a strong increase in some cases, in both the no abode and other types of marginalised groups.

In Bologna the no abode have increased by 25% compared to 1995; in Rome it is estimated that the phenomenon has increased tenfold over the last ten years; the number of Italian men turning to the night dormitory in Vicenza has almost tripled in the last 5 years, while the number of women has increased from 1 to 14. The figures on service users show a high percentage of persons turning to the service for the first time: 43% of no abode users of the SAM service in Milan are persons who have contacted the service for the first time, an increase of 30%. 40% of the no abode in Rome have been in that condition for less than three months (Badaracchi 2002).

Generally speaking, the most recent data confirms trends that have been developing for some time with regard to the new composition of the no abode. A decrease in average age has been reported almost everywhere, together with an emphasis on the specificity of the young homeless where the problems are different for young Italians (multi-problem situations) and young foreigners (problems more connected with legal status and consequent difficulty in finding decent work, etc.).

The trend with regard to gender composition is more uncertain. Women remain, however, a minority (10%-30%) and are characterised by different problems from those of males and by the specificity of the paths to marginalisation. To a large extent, female homelessness is 'latent' (Tosi 2000, Ruspini 2000). Differences between Italians and immigrants (often suffering from material problems such as housing and work or connected with pregnancy; the percentage of women among immigrant users of services is particularly high) were also reported for women.

Finally there was confirmation of the substantial numbers of immigrants among the homeless (an increase among the users of many services). One new development in some large cities was the increase in homeless families. The appearance of homeless families is not limited exclusively to immigrants (Italian families account for 9% of service users in Rome). In this case too, the problems and case histories are different. The causes of homelessness for Italian families in Rome are both economic (unemployment and casual work, high housing costs) and connected with illness, ill treatment in the home, etc. The prevalent factors leading to homelessness for foreign families are the lack of a stay permit or the status of refugee.

In addition to problems of a material nature a large percentage of psychiatric problems are reported among Italian no abode together with drug/alcohol problems. Service providers in some cities report an increase here.

One question to which service providers have drawn attention recently is the large proportion of the no abode/marginalised population which remains outside the services networks. 43.5% of the persons who turned to San Gallicano services (an hospital organisation in Rome which provides health services to persons in difficulty) had had no previous contact with any institution (Osservatorio clinico 2002). In addition to many of the classic no abode, the problem concerns large part of the persons who sleep in abandoned factories and similar buildings. The majority are immigrants often with no stay permit (Caritas di Roma 2003).

11. As has already been mentioned, immigrants - in addition to being particularly affected by housing hardship - also probably constitute a growing component of homelessness. The involvement of immigrants in homelessness, even in the extreme forms has been reported in Italy

for many years now. While it is an obvious consequence of the substantial numbers of immigrants without documents present in the country, it nevertheless draws attention to the causes of the failure of the plans/life histories of a certain number (in any case small if compared to the total number of immigrants present in Italy) of immigrants. Both points bring policies into question, immigration and welfare policies: all the more so because the phenomenon affects Italy more than other countries.

A survey by Fiops ((Federation of organisations that work with the street homeless) performed in 7 cities in 2002 found massive growth in the numbers of immigrants among the users of services for the street homeless. According to 43% of those surveyed immigrants accounted for more than 50% of users: “both the perception of workers and the data collected confirmed that the flow of immigrants using services had generally increased over the years... 62% of those surveyed reported an increase in service use by immigrants” (Fiops 2002).

As already seen, the study by the *Commission for the Investigation of Social Exclusion* on the no abode [2000] estimated that 46.2% of these were foreigners. Previous estimates published by the Ministry of Social Affairs put the figure for immigrants at 35% of the 70,000-80,000 street homeless that had contacts with public or voluntary sector services. A further 30,000-40,000 of ‘invisibles’, who had, that is, no contacts with services or voluntary associations was added to this figure. At least 60% of the latter were estimated to be immigrants.

Recent data for big cities indicates that immigrants account for between 15% and 30% of the street homeless and the no abode. If one considers these persons suffering homelessness as a percentage of all immigrants, the proportion is very low: 1-2% of total immigrants (AA. VV. 2002). The percentage rises considerably if the immigrants living in shacks, falling down buildings and so on are considered. These types of accommodation reflect specific problems which has to do with difficulties (partly interrelated) resulting from the lack of a stay permit, difficulty in gaining access to housing markets and insecure work rather than the social marginalisation problems typical of the no abode.

The different types of problems and different case histories of homeless immigrants compared to the Italian homeless has also been highlighted. In most cases the homelessness of immigrants, often also ‘street’ homelessness, reflects difficulties connected with having no documents, with access to housing and with insecure work. The outcomes of these situations are, however, different. In most cases they evolve towards positive integration, while in others they precipitate into drifting and social marginalisation.

“We can state, in general terms, that there is a large difference between the manner and duration of being an Italian of no abode and of being an immigrant of no abode. The Italian who resorts to services for the no abode is generally suffering hardship because of the failure of his or her life which manifests with the loss of work, of their network of social relations and of housing. For immigrants, being of no abode may be a risk, a cost, a transitory phase in a migration plan, a phase in their lives connected with difficulty in satisfying primary needs, while for an Italian citizen it is often the outcome of a process of progressive marginalisation and isolation with very different psychological and relationship implications. Some of the immigrants who use services for the no abode are found in situations of marginalisation and isolation very similar to those of the Italians. These are situations where because of age, illness, and the break up of relationships the immigrants migration plan has failed, often accompanied by isolation from his or her ethnic group or family” (Fiops 2002).

Homeless immigrants provide a clear example of a type of homeless where the housing dimension is often decisive. Moreover there is a high probability of immigrants suffering housing exclusion without serious elements of marginalisation occurring and an even higher probability of them suffering housing exclusion without those features of destructuring that characterises many no abode: they are simply poor people without a home. For them the lack of housing may be nothing more than a stage on the road to integration in society.

Put in other words, the state of homelessness for immigrants may have totally different meanings. It may be the outcome of a process of marginalisation, exclusion that has become chronic indicating the failure of an immigration project or it may be an initial period of precariousness common to many immigration histories where housing exclusion reflects a critical temporary

period or an extreme temporary compression of housing needs, above all in the initial phases of a settlement case history (Tosi 2001b).

As regards the socially marginalised and homeless immigrants - the no abode immigrants – they seem to have a specific physiognomy. While for Italians, the paths to marginalisation today that start with the loss of a home are not predominant, for immigrants paths to marginalisation often start with housing exclusion. Lack of accommodation which persists can accelerate the drift into social exclusion.

The specificity of the problems and the case histories and the determining role played by illicit legal status (partly) explains the type of homelessness of a large proportion of the immigrant homeless. In addition to and rather than by situations of street homelessness, they are characterised by more or less widespread accommodation in shacks, falling down buildings, ruins, found in the urban fabric.

### ***Research on housing exclusion***

12. In addition to, and different from the research on the no abode, there is a certain body of research on housing stress and housing poverty. In principle, quantitative analysis of homelessness and understanding of the composition of the homelessness population could take great advantage of this research activity, especially in trying to get a wider identification of the problem, not limited to the marginal/extreme components as with the ‘no abode’ category.

Consistently with the prevailing representation (the distinction made between housing exclusion and social marginalisation/exclusion) the activity of research on housing and the research on the no abode are separate: each with different institutional places, different actors etc.

This is one reason of the difficulty to use this research for the study of homelessness. The separation also involves difference in typical questions and typical instruments: more about family background, work and housing resources, social networks, capabilities, individual biography in the research on the no abode, typically about housing situations/conditions – often with a very poor concern for ‘social’ variables – in the research on housing.

Moreover, in most cases this research too is local research, with problems similar to the research on the no abode: with similar difficulties to paint an (empirically sound) overall picture and to obtain a picture on a national scale.

However, even in the few cases in which the research is at national scale, the usual reference field is the wide area of ‘housing hardship’ or ‘housing stress’: this widening (in some way opposite to the focalisation on the no abode) favours a categorisation frame which makes it difficult to disclose – within this wide area - the situations of homelessness.

13. Notwithstanding, attempts to produce estimates of housing exclusion on a national scale have been made on the basis of this type of data.

In 1994, while the no abode were estimated at about 50,000 persons, those corresponding to the definition of homeless proposed by FEANTSA were estimated at between 150,000 and 200,000 persons. The Italian Report for the European Observatory on Homelessness proposed - on the

basis of official sources - an estimate of at least 500,000 persons suffering from 'housing exclusion' (Tosi, Ranci 1995, Irs 1994).

The estimation was based on the data of the 1992 study by the *Commissione d'indagine sulla povertà e l'emarginazione* integrated with two types of housing exclusion indicators available: those relating to some poverty groups (immigrants in particular); and those relating to housing characteristics and types of accommodation (e. g. Census data on improper housing and cohabitation).

To summarise, there are 150,000 to 200,000 persons in housing exclusion situations among those in extreme poverty; at least 50,000 with no abode, 40,000 persons in forced cohabitation and 125,000 in 'improper housing'; 30,000 travellers and 180,000 immigrants excluded from housing (immigrants: 50-90,000 in shelters or "reception centre", 20-40,000 in 'precarious accommodation': sleeping rough, caravans, squats..., 60,000 in forced cohabitation, 50,000 in marginal substandard rented sector).

Of course, these figures cannot be summed together because the data overlaps. Anyway an estimation of about half million persons excluded from housing is not unrealistic. All the more so if we consider that all the specific estimates on which we base this figure are extremely cautious; and that other groups, on which we have no data should be added: market temporary accommodation for the non foreigner, etc.

Once again, the picture is different as concerns the research on foreign immigrants. In this case a wider and richer body of local studies makes it possible to identify – within the large immigrant population in housing stress – the extreme situations, the cases of genuine housing exclusions or the situations of homelessness (the no abode and those with no housing)

In Lombardy, immigrants of no abode were estimated (2001) at 3,800 persons (less than 1% of total immigrants). However total numbers living in precarious/temporary arrangements comparable for the most part to homelessness according many broader definitions (in addition to the no abode, those staying in dormitories and shelters, or who are staying with friends as guests or who sleep at the work place or in hotels, etc.) account for more than 20%, amounting to over 90,000 people. Those living in extreme conditions in the city of Milan account for 3.4% of immigrants amounting to 4,800 persons, while total precarious/temporary arrangements account for over 30%, amounting to 48,000 people. There are 7,000 immigrants in reception centres in Milan (5%) and over 16,000 in Lombardy (almost 4%) (Blangiardo 2001).

One study by Censis (1993) showed the importance of the component immigrants in making the total of the 'marginal demand': 33,1% of the households in housing poverty ( 54.7 in Milan, 69.7 in Rome, 51.1 in Florence 37.8 in Genoa, 27.0 in Palermo)

The Censis estimates cited on marginal demand enable us to start to make a partial estimate of the different incidence of hardship on different risk categories. For example in the case of Milan, according to those estimates the elderly constituted 28% of the marginal demand (less than in other areas) and immigrants 55% (more than in other areas). Since the proportion of the elderly in the population was around 20% and that of immigrants around 5%, these estimates would indicate that housing hardship hits both categories to a greater extent than other population categories (or than the population as a whole) and that the percentage is much higher for immigrants that it is for the elderly.

14. The contribution that surveys on the general population can give to the study of the homeless population is very poor. In both the Census and the survey type studies (on quality of life etc.) carried out by Istat (National Institute of Statistics) the marginal populations are under-represented, and the typical questions do not 'catch' this problem in appropriate ways: for instance, housing is mainly seen in terms of tenure (presently hardly relevant as an indicator of need; in the Census there is no information on income etc.)

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