

# From Local Data Collection to a National Network

Insights into national-level data collection and coordination on homelessness and mortality in Italy



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*The article describes the origin and development of Italy's national monitoring system for deaths among people experiencing homelessness. Starting as an individual initiative by a worker at the social cooperative La Esse in Treviso – who collected local news reports to give a name and a story to those who died on the street – the project gradually grew into a national programme managed by fio.PSD from 2021.*

In Italy, extreme poverty claims victims all year round. Since 2021, fio.PSD – the Italian Federation of Organisations working with people experiencing homelessness – has been publishing an annual report documenting deaths among people experiencing homelessness across the country. The initiative, known as “La strage invisibile” (annual report on deaths among people experiencing homelessness in Italy), draws on local news monitoring and reports from member organisations to build a picture of a phenomenon that is both structural and persistently underestimated.

The data collected are not a formal statistical survey. They represent, in the Federation's own words, an estimate of a broader phenomenon that remains largely hidden. And yet, what emerges year after year is striking in its consistency: this is not a seasonal emergency. It is a chronic, nationwide crisis.

## The 2025 Data: A Persistent Crisis

In 2025, fio.PSD recorded 415 deaths of people experiencing homelessness in Italy – a figure broadly in line with 2024 (434) and 2023 (415), confirming that annual fatalities have stabilised above the threshold of 400. Behind that number are individual lives lost across 235 municipalities, from major metropolitan centres to small provincial towns.

Monthly deaths ranged from 21 to 44, with higher concentrations in winter and spring (226 deaths combined). Yet the summer and autumn months also registered significant figures, driven by heatwaves, chronic health conditions, accidents, and barriers to healthcare access. The data challenge a persistent public misconception: that homeless deaths are primarily a cold-weather problem.

The profile of those who died reflects deep structural vulnerabilities. Men accounted for 91.5% of them. More than half (56.5%) were foreign nationals, predominantly from non-European countries – particularly Morocco and Tunisia, with a growing presence of people from South Asia, especially Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Italian citizens represented 29% of the total, a slight increase on the previous year.

The most sobering figure is the average age at death: 46.3 years. Against Italy's national life expectancy of over 81 years, this represents a gap of more than three decades – a stark measure of what life on the street does to the human body and mind.

Geographically, the North accounts for the largest share of deaths: 29% in the North-West and 19.7% in the North-East. The Centre follows at 26%, the South at 17%, and the Islands at 8.3%. Lombardy recorded the highest regional total with 78 deaths. Lazio came second with 60, followed by Veneto, Tuscany and Campania. Rome recorded 36 deaths within the city limits and 48 across the wider province, making it the single deadliest location in Italy. Milan, Bergamo, Turin, and Naples also registered significant numbers.

Critically, only 40.5% of deaths occurred in Italy's 14 metropolitan cities. The majority – around 60% – took place in smaller provincial contexts, many of which lack adequate services. This challenges the assumption that severe adult marginalisation is exclusively an urban problem.

### Where and Why People Die

The places where bodies were found reveal the material conditions of life on the margins. In 34% of cases, deaths occurred in public spaces – streets, parks, open urban areas. These are visible places, but offer no protection, shelter or immediate assistance. A further 23% of deaths occurred in improvised shelters: shacks, abandoned buildings, make-shift structures that offer a semblance of refuge but none of the safety or hygiene of proper housing.

A notable 15% of deaths involved drowning – an indicator of the dangerous proximity to uncontrolled natural and urban environments that characterises many homeless lives.

As for causes of death, 42% were attributed to sudden illness or underlying health conditions. These are not simply individual medical failures: they are the predictable outcome of years without access to regular health-care, late-stage diagnoses, no preventive care, and the impossibility of adhering to treatment. Conditions that would be manageable in a housed person become lethal on the street.

A nearly equal share – 40% – of deaths resulted from traumatic or accidental causes: assaults, accidents and suicides. For context, Italy's national statistics show that the general population dies from external causes in only 4% of cases. The disproportion is not incidental. Street life exposes people to dramatically elevated levels of risk: physical violence, dangerous environments, profound social isolation and acute psychological stress.

The data make clear that the street does not merely reflect pre-existing vulnerability – it amplifies it, turning manageable health problems, ordinary accidents and emotional crises into fatal events.

### How the Monitoring System Was Built

The system that now underpins Italy's national data collection on deaths of homeless people began not as a policy initiative, but as one educator's response to grief.

While working in Treviso for the social cooperative La Esse on projects with people experiencing homelessness, a recurring and disturbing pattern emerged: people were dying on the street and disappearing without a trace – without a name, without a story, without any collective memory of their existence. The question was not only how many people were living without a home, but how many were dying, and under what circumstances.

*The first attempts at data collection were entirely informal and involved monitoring local news sources daily, using keyword alerts to intercept stories that would otherwise remain scattered across dozens of local outlets.*

Reports from social media and informal communications between street workers added further fragments. Alongside the numbers, the aim was to reconstruct brief accounts of the final hours of those who had died – a minimum act of recognition, an attempt to restore some dignity to people who had fallen through every institutional net.

This approach drew inspiration from comparable experiences abroad, notably the “Collectif Les Morts de la Rue” in France and the Homeless Persons' Memorial Day in the United States. In Italy, an early public moment came with “La Notte dei Senza Dimora” – the first edition of which was held in Treviso on 17 October 2011 – which opened connections to other organisations working on the ground.

Over time, informal contacts between individual practitioners evolved into a broader network. Organisations across the country began contributing their own local knowledge, integrating media sources with direct field experience. This combination improved not only coverage, but also the quality and accuracy of individual case reconstructions.

The pivotal transition came in 2021, when fio.PSD formally incorporated the project into its national work. The shift from an individual initiative to a coordinated system required shared agreement on criteria, tools, and methods. A standardised reporting form was developed to allow

consistent data collection across different contexts. Over successive iterations, the form was expanded to include information about service contact history, housing arrangements in the final period of life, and indicators of health or social vulnerability. This allowed the data to move beyond raw counts toward a more nuanced understanding of individual trajectories and systemic failures.

One significant methodological development was the integration of data from the Ministry of the Interior on unidentified deceased persons. Including this category brought to light the most extreme cases: individuals who, after dying, remained nameless for months – or permanently – and were buried without identification. This is marginalisation in its most absolute form, where the absence of a home coincides with total erasure from social and institutional existence. The choice to include these cases in the monitoring is both a methodological and an ethical one.

The system continues to evolve. Challenges remain in sustaining the engagement of local organisations, improving data completeness, and developing better tools for public reporting. An interactive map, updated in real time, is now available on the fio.PSD website. But the work is unfinished – and the questions it raises, about how to intercept, understand, and narrate the deaths of homeless people, remain as urgent as ever.

### From Emergency Response to Structural Change

The evidence accumulated over five years points clearly toward one conclusion: emergency measures alone are insufficient. Winter cold-weather plans – temporary shelter expansions, strengthened outreach units – are essential and save lives. But deaths occur across all twelve months, and the numbers are not declining.

What is needed is a shift in approach: from emergency response to prevention; from a repair-based model to a housing-led system in which stable, dignified accommodation is the starting point for recovery, not its end goal. The Housing First model, which provides permanent housing without preconditions and builds support services around a stable home, has demonstrated consistent results in international and national programmes alike. Over the past decade, more than 70 Housing First programmes run by fio.PSD member organisations have housed over 1,700 people.

Current policy frameworks offer some grounds for cautious optimism. Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan includes an investment in temporary housing (Investment 1.3) targeting 3,000 people across 265 projects by 2026. The National Inclusion Plan (2021–2027) allocates

€830 million to interventions addressing severe adult marginalisation, including Housing First. The Poverty Fund directs €5 million per year specifically to Housing First programmes.

But housing is not the only answer – particularly in the context of a broader national housing crisis. Parallel investment is needed in proximity services, integrated social and healthcare provision, early intervention, and workforce development. The goal is to intercept vulnerability before it becomes chronic, and to ensure that a person's experience of poverty does not have to end on a street, in an abandoned building, or in an unmarked grave.

Every number in the annual report represents a life. Making those lives visible is, in itself, an act of resistance against the systems and circumstances that made them invisible.