



117 Sidewalk Hermits: Homeless Perpetrators and Victims of Crime— Preliminary Results of an Italian Study

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the dynamics regarding homeless perpetrators and victims of crime in Italy.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by presenting some of the challenges that professionals in criminology and legal medicine face when dealing with crime among homeless people.

A homeless person may be defined as “a person in a state of tangible and intangible poverty, bearer of complex, dynamic, and multifiform hardships.”¹ The study presented here was conducted in collaboration with the Italian Railway Police from a criminological perspective, and focuses on homeless perpetrators and victims of crime. For this research, 47 cases have been studied and the socio-demographic variables included:

Age: The majority of subjects were male (72%) and 28% were female. The average age of the subjects observed was 49.8 years. The average age for males was 48.4 years and 53.3 years for females.

Nationality: 74% were Italian; 26% were foreign (most of whom were Northern and Eastern Europeans).

Education: 47% had five years of schooling; 19% had eight years of schooling; 6% had 13 years of schooling; and in one case, 18 years of schooling. Almost 30% of the subjects had no schooling at all.

Duration of Homelessness: 40% were homeless for more than five years; 47% were homeless between one and five years; and 13% were homeless for six months.

Events Leading to Homelessness: Loss of employment (26%); departure from home (20%); immigration (10%); divorce (10%); home eviction (8%); death of a family member who was the only source of income (4%); financial failure (4%). The literature shows that divorce and poverty, as well as family and living problems, predispose women to homelessness and to being victimized by crime. The literature also notes the role that mental illness and substance abuse play. Drug and alcohol use are predisposing factors for homelessness, the commission of crimes, and being the victim of crime.² In addition, most mental disorders diagnosed in the homeless are correlated to substance abuse, followed by mood, psychotic, and anxiety disorders; anti-social and personality disorders; and dual diagnosis.³⁻⁶

Criminal Aspects of Sample: Fifty-one percent of the crimes committed generally involved offences against property or violence perpetrated against another person. This is in agreement with the literature, which reports that such crimes among the homeless are tied to the acquisition of, and selling of, illegal substances.⁷ Another interesting fact taken from the literature regarding the homeless is the high percentage of crimes committed against women. This has also been confirmed by the sample. Forty-three percent of the subjects studied had no previous contact with the legal system, neither as perpetrator, nor as victim.⁸ Only 20% had been previously incarcerated. This datum differs from the literature a bit, which reports higher percentages of incarceration of homeless people with respect to this sample. The relationship between homelessness and incarceration is reported in various studies: 73% of males and 27% of females had been arrested at least one time.⁹ Gardiner and Cairns (2002) reported that 77% of male subjects in their study had been previously arrested.¹⁰ Moreover, being homeless increases the chances of being detained by the police after being stopped by them. And finally, physical and sexual violence constitutes another significant risk factor that may lead to homelessness.¹¹ In the end, physical and sexual violence is a significant risk factor for becoming homeless.

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