

Monitoring the missing: Trends in the phenomenon of disappearances in Italy, 2019–2022

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Abstract

Background: Missing persons represent a critical issue in Italy with significant social and forensic implications.

Methods: Data from the Extraordinary Commissioner for Missing Persons were analyzed for 2019–2022 by year, region, sex, age, and nationality.

Results: 75% of missing persons were male; minors accounted for the highest proportion. Sicily and Lombardy showed the greatest numbers, largely reflecting migration and population density patterns.

Conclusions: Regional and demographic disparities underline the need for preventive strategies targeting minors and foreign populations.

Take-home message: Missing persons remain a major social concern in Italy. Continuous monitoring highlights minors and foreigners as the most vulnerable groups, calling for stronger prevention and coordination efforts.

Keywords: missing persons, forensic science, forensic anthropology, missing foreigners, Government's Extraordinary Commissioner for Missing Persons.

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the drama of missing people represents a well-known and studied phenomenon that undermines people's sense of security [1-14]. Today, several organizations work to find and reunite these people with their loved ones, and to protect children and adults worldwide from disappearance, sexual exploitation or victimization by providing resources to governments, law enforcement agencies and families on prevention and response [15-18]. As in many other countries in the world, Italy has activated a detection system useful for updating the account of individuals whose traces are lost.

In 2007, the Government's Extraordinary Commissioner for Missing Persons (Commissario Straordinario per le Persone Scomparse, CSGPS), a law enforcement body dedicated to monitoring the phenomenon of missing persons, was set up in Italy, by decree of the President of the Republic on 31 July 2007, pursuant to art. 11 of law no. 400/88. The CSGPS carries out periodic analysis on information regarding sex, origin and age of the disappeared through a system of constant data collection from reports of disappearance. Half-yearly reports are produced as a result and are available free of charge on the website of the Ministry of the Interior [19-21].

The first six-monthly report was published in 2008, six months after the beginning of activities. Its main objective was to quantify the phenomenon and its management. The lack of a homogeneous collection of data and the difficulties of coordination between bodies and institutions with different competences were among the main operational emergencies to be resolved.

In the short term, data monitoring and operational coordination activities were undertaken. These activities were not limited to data collection. They also included actions for welfare, social and investigative purposes [19].

The CSGPS focuses its monitoring activities on the phenomenon of missing persons, collecting data on both Italians and foreigners, not only migrants but also tourists. The work has been carried out considering the age groups, by indicating the most vulnerable categories and therefore those on which to focus awareness-raising activities.

The data collected by the CSGPS make it possible to update the issue of missing people in Italy, to verify whether or not it is a growing phenomenon.

The authors discuss here the data collected by the CSGPS to describe the evolution of the phenomenon of missing persons from 2019 to 2022 in Italy. This analysis is performed to hypothesize thesis appropriate preventive measures aimed at containing this dramatic phenomenon.

This study aims to describe the temporal and regional trends of missing persons in Italy from 2019 to 2022 and to identify demographic patterns that may inform future preventive measures.

METHODS

The semi-annual reports of the *Commissario Straordinario del Governo per le Persone Scomparse* (CSGPS – Government’s Extraordinary Commissioner for Missing Persons) for the years 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 were downloaded from the official website of the Italian Ministry of the Interior, under the section *Press and Communication* → *Data and Statistics* → *Periodic Reports of the Extraordinary Commissioner for Missing Persons* [21].

These reports provide official nationwide data collected by law enforcement agencies and local prefectures on all reported cases of missing persons in Italy. Data were available concerning the following variables:

- Total number of missing persons by Italian region (2019–2022);
- Italian missing persons by region (2019–2022);
- Foreign missing persons by region (2019–2022);
- Missing persons by sex (2019–2022);
- Missing persons by age group (2019–2022).

Only cases recorded between 1 January and 30 November of each year were included, as defined in the original reports.

Data Processing and Analysis

Data was extracted from the official reports and organized using the Microsoft Excel 365 software package.

They were subsequently processed into tables and graphical representations to illustrate the temporal and regional trends.

Descriptive statistical analyses were performed to summarize the distribution of missing persons by demographic (sex, age) and geographic (region, nationality) variables. No inferential analyses were conducted, as the aim of the study was to provide a descriptive overview of national trends in missing persons rather than to test specific hypotheses.

Data Sources and Limitations

All data analyzed in this study were aggregated, anonymized, and publicly available, and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Nonetheless, several limitations should be acknowledged:

1. The CSGPS database may contain duplicate or unverified reports, depending on the progress of investigations.
2. Data may be incomplete for the last month of each year, since official reports close on 30 November.
3. Variations in reporting practices among regions may influence comparability of data.

Despite these limitations, the CSGPS reports represent the most comprehensive and authoritative source currently available for monitoring the phenomenon of missing persons in Italy.

RESULTS

Data on missing persons in Italy from 2019 to 2022, broken down by sex and age group, are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively.

The data on missing persons in Italy between 2019 and 2022, broken down by the different Italian regions, are presented in Table 1. The data for each year refer to the period 1 January - 30 November as indicated in the CSGPS report. The data in Table 1 are then further broken down into Italian missing persons (shown in Table 2) and foreign missing persons (shown in Table 3).

Figure 1. Missing people in Italy from 2019 to 2022 – sex.

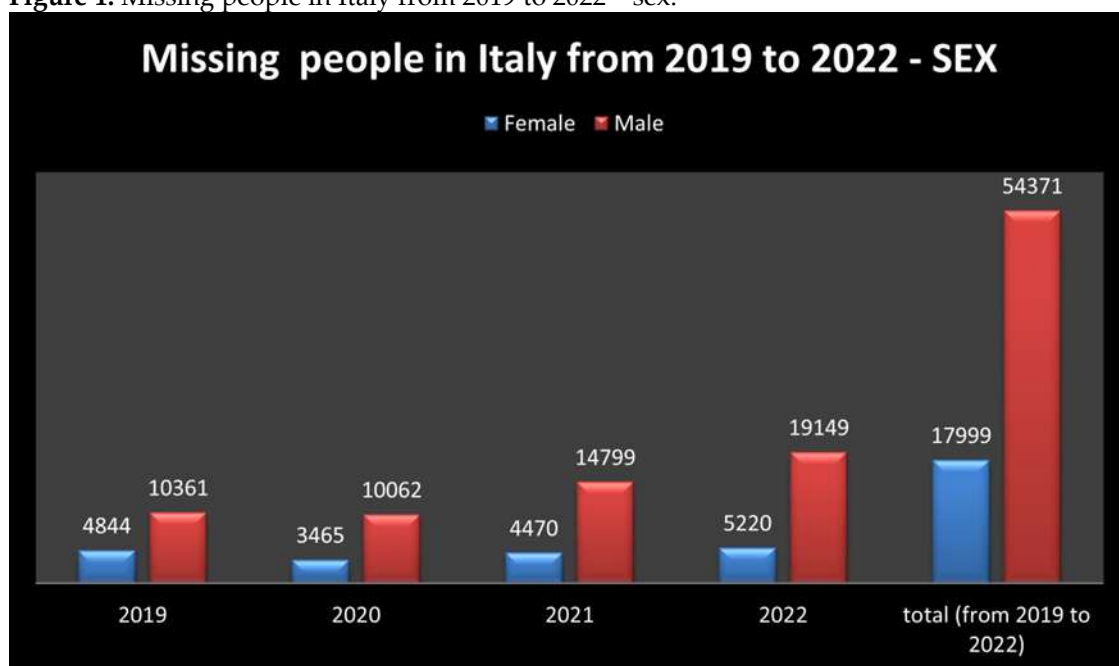


Figure 2. Missing people in Italy from 2019 to 2022 – age groups.

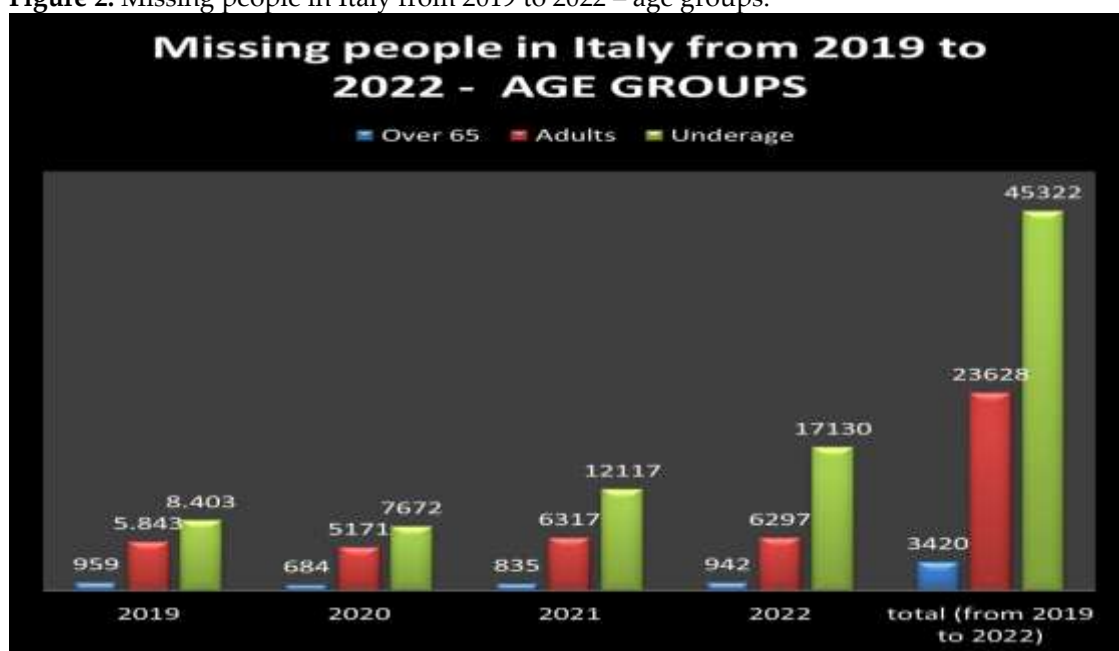


Table 1. Missing persons in Italy from 2019 to 2022, data broken down by Italian region.

Period Italian Region	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2019	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2020	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2021	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2022	Total
Sicily	2030	2593	4098	7226	15947
Lombardy	2284	1637	2391	2988	9300
Campania	1158	943	1001	1888	4990
Apulia	750	717	976	1627	4070
Lazio	1253	958	1230	1388	4829
Friuli Venezia Giulia	848	1567	1547	1279	5241
Emilia Romagna	974	778	1092	1231	4075
Piemonte	1015	728	926	1098	3767
Calabria	444	330	872	999	2645
Toscana	692	500	657	907	2756
Veneto	741	513	690	897	2841
Liguria	669	332	546	722	2269
Basilicata	67	173	243	409	892
Marche	249	168	217	360	994
Abruzzo	179	155	273	333	940
Sardinia	190	125	219	302	836
Molise	91	102	297	265	755
Umbria	163	137	189	221	710
Trentino Alto Adige	205	174	179	205	763
Aosta Valley	32	13	7	24	76

Table 2. Italian missing persons in Italy from 2019 to 2022, data broken down by Italian region.

ITALIAN MISSING PEOPLE					
Period Italian Region	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2019	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2020	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2021	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2022	Total
Lombardy	1416	1002	1471	1735	5624
Campania	798	654	700	1016	3168
Sicily	662	564	692	996	2914
Lazio	684	556	674	795	2709
Emilia Romagna	558	416	615	658	2247
Piemonte	604	435	506	654	2199
Apulia	499	412	457	653	2021
Veneto	406	312	420	579	1717

Toscana	380	260	355	505	1500
Liguria	223	136	181	254	794
Sardinia	149	113	165	246	673
Calabria	151	86	143	214	594
Friuli Venezia Giulia	125	122	137	193	577
Trentino Alto Adige	145	122	117	137	521
Marche	143	82	109	179	513
Abruzzo	118	93	127	146	484
Umbria	94	78	90	129	391
Basilicata	35	31	39	74	179
Molise	23	18	20	41	102
Aosta Valley	8	7	5	13	33

Table 3. Foreign missing persons in Italy from 2019 to 2022, data broken down by Italian region.

FOREIGN MISSING PEOPLE					
Period Italian Region	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2019	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2020	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2021	1° Jan – 30 Nov 2022	Total
Sicily	1368	2029	3406	6230	13033
Friuli Venezia Giulia	723	1445	1410	1086	4664
Lombardy	868	635	920	1253	3676
Lazio	569	402	556	593	2120
Calabria	293	244	729	785	2051
Apulia	251	305	519	974	2049
Emilia Romagna	416	362	477	573	1828
Campania	360	289	301	872	1822
Piemonte	411	293	420	444	1568
Liguria	446	196	365	468	1475
Toscana	312	240	302	402	1256
Veneto	335	201	270	318	1124
Basilicata	32	142	204	335	713
Molise	68	84	277	224	653
Marche	106	86	108	181	481
Abruzzo	61	62	146	187	456
Umbria	69	59	99	92	319
Trentino Alto Adige	60	52	62	68	242
Sardinia	41	12	54	56	163
Aosta Valley	24	6	2	11	43

DISCUSSION

Data collected by the CSGPS activity makes it possible to study the trend of the phenomenon of missing persons in Italy. Table 1, Table 2, Table 3 and Figure 1 show data broken down by Italian region. This data clearly shows relevant regional differences. Indeed, the total number of missing persons in Italy between 2019 and 2022 is mainly concentrated in Sicily (15947), accounting for about 23% of the total. Italian missing persons are mainly concentrated in the region of Lombardy (5624), where they represent about 20% of the total, while foreign missing persons are mainly concentrated in the region of Sicily (13033), where they represent about 33% of the total. It is reasonable to assume that the high number of cases involving foreigners in the region of Sicily is linked to migratory

phenomena favoured by the geographical position of the region in question. Indeed, the migratory flow towards Italy probably contributes predominantly to the presence of foreigners in the regions of southern Italy.

The tragedy of the migrants who died in the Mediterranean poses a challenge to those who have to identify victims. Olivieri et al. (2018) argued that new identification strategies should be sought, whether anthropological, odontological or genetic, or combined strategies [22].

Somewhat surprisingly, certain regions responded anomalously to the restrictions linked to the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sicily, Molise and Basilicata show an increase in 2020. Friuli Venezia Giulia is the second Italian region in terms of the number of missing foreigners (4664): it is likely that these data are attributable to the transit of migrants across border areas. The evident majority of missing foreigners in these regions suggests a greater risk of the phenomenon linked to human trafficking. In relation to this risk, the United Nations has drawn up Conventions and Protocols in an attempt to prevent and punish forced disappearances, whether or not linked to human trafficking, considering this act as a violation of human rights [23-25].

Regarding the phenomenon of missing foreigners in Europe, Laakkonen (2022) has recently proposed using the term 'migrant disappearability' to refer to a condition that does not necessarily lead to death or disappearance, but which exerts a pressure towards precariousness and threat, limiting the horizon of possibilities that racialised migrants in the Global South have before them [26]. Thus, migrant disappearability makes connections between various elements such as border violence and surveillance, forensics, and political rhetoric [26].

The data show that around 75 per cent of missing persons are male and that minors have a higher rate of missing persons than other age groups (Table 1, Table 2). People over 65 have much lower values than other age groups, with a slightly higher detection of missing male individuals. The adult age group shows a significant increase, in respect to elders, in the number of missing people. These values are largely exceeded by the number of missing minors. In this age group, missing male minors show an impressive increase between 2019 and 2022, estimated at around 4,000 more missing each year. In 2022 there was a doubling of missing persons reports compared to 2019. This could be related to children trafficking.

The data collected by the CSGPS show interesting correlations with those reported in the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022, carried out by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [10]. UNODC is an organization that supports Member States in the fight against crime and the violation of human rights.

According to the 2022 UNODC report, human trafficking is decreasing in some countries around the world, such as East Asia and the Pacific, North Africa and the Middle East, Central America and the Caribbean, South America and Sub-Saharan Africa. Instead, from 2019 to 2020 the countries that experienced an increase were North America, Central, Eastern, South-West and South-East Europe, and Central and South Asia. The results re-reported in our study agree with this statement.

Our results seem to agree also with UNODC data that report an increase in male victims of human trafficking in Southern European states over the last decade. In 2019 there was a 3% increase in boys and men induced into forced crime and mixed forms of exploitation. This contrasts with the general decrease recorded in 2020.

Since the start of data collection by the UNODC in 2000, a significant decline in missing people in the world was recorded for the first time in 2020, probably linked to Covid-19 re-restrictions. This decrease could be linked to a reorganization of human trafficking in less controlled areas, where this criminal activity can be facilitated and not attract the attention of the authorities. The decrease in 2020 may also have been due to the closure of some commercial establishments such as pubs, night bars, clubs, fuelling the possibility that traffickers have found more hidden ways and making this phenomenon less traceable [27].

Furthermore, the fact that many victims of human trafficking free themselves, without the help of the authorities, increases the possibility that they do not identify themselves as victims and do not report to the authorities. Therefore, the data are probably underestimated.

War can potentially be one of the causes of the increase in the number of victims of trafficking and exploitation, such as refugees and displaced persons. In fact, many of the victims of human trafficking are people coming from areas where there are armed conflicts, such as Africa and the Middle East [27].

Climate change also causes an increase in the number of victims of human trafficking, acting as a multiplier of stress. In 2012, 23.7 million people were displaced by natural disasters and many more fled places at risk of poverty due to climate change [27].

Various research initiatives were activated by the CSGPS. For example, the use of mass media to raise awareness of the problem has been increased. An example is the commercial "When someone disappears" together with the Department for Information and Publishing ("Dipartimento per l'Informazione e l'Editoria Die") of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in 2020 and the video commercial "Let's help them find their way". Furthermore, the dedicated websites have been revisited and updated, including news, evidence, agreements and protocols. In this context, space has been created dedicated to advice aimed at citizens to try to prevent the problem [28].

In Italy, collaboration between institutions was encouraged such as, for example, the Memorandum of Understanding with the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Department for Family Policies on 7 January 2021 and the Memorandum of Understanding with the Guardia di Finanza on 17 March 2021. The collaboration agreement with ISTAT and the Department of Public Security - Central Criminal Police Directorate of 31 May 2021 and the Protocol with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of 6 December 2021 are just some examples of the initiatives carried out by the Office of the CSGPS, as well as scientific research aimed at supporting the finding of missing persons [29-39].

Strengths and Limitations

This study provides one of the few systematic overviews of the phenomenon of missing persons in Italy, based entirely on official data collected by the *Commissario Straordinario del Governo per le Persone Scomparse* (CSGPS).

Its main strength lies in the use of national, standardized, and continuously updated datasets, which ensure high coverage and comparability across regions and years. The multi-year analysis (2019–2022) allows the identification of temporal and demographic trends, offering useful insights for policy-making, preventive strategies, and forensic investigations.

However, the study also has several limitations.

First, the analysis is based on aggregated secondary data, which does not allow for the identification of causal factors or detailed individual-level analyses. Second, potential inconsistencies or delays in reporting among Italian regions may affect data completeness and comparability.

Third, the CSGPS reports do not distinguish between resolved and unresolved cases, nor do they provide information on the causes or circumstances of disappearance.

Finally, as only descriptive statistical methods were used, the findings should be interpreted as indicative trends rather than statistically validated associations.

Despite these limitations, the study represents a reliable and valuable contribution to understanding the dynamics of missing persons in Italy and highlights the need for continued monitoring and interdisciplinary research on this complex social and forensic issue.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the data processed by the CSGPS Office well documents that the activation of monitoring of the number of missing people, implemented by the CSGPS, has made it possible to keep the trend of this phenomenon in Italy under control. The data collected demonstrated how the phenomenon in the Italian territory differs both at the regional level and with regards to sex and age groups. Further research into the characteristics of the phenomenon will make it possible to verify the effectiveness of measures to prevent, contain and eliminate this scourge.

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