

The Invisible Victims of the Abruzzo Earthquake

Laura E. Ruberto (April 11, 2009)



An unknown number of documented and undocumented immigrants in Abruzzo have died or lost their homes because of the recent earthquake.

The news this past week from Abruzzo has been devastating, but like so many tragedies it has inspired solidarity across cultural, geographical, and national boundaries. Of relevance here, as i-italy has noted so well, is the work of the Italian American community, which has come out in force to support the victims of the April 6 earthquake. This immigrant-inspired act of unity leads me to think about the plight of Italy's contemporary immigrant population in relation to the disaster.

The Italian American response to the earthquake is very much in line with similar historical cases —most notably the [1908 Messina earthquake](#) [2] and the 1980 Irpinia earthquake. I was a kid at the time of the Irpinia quake, whose epicenter in Conza was only one town over from my father's village



of Cairano. From the United States my parents became involved with other Italian Americans in Pittsburgh (PA) who wanted to help. In particular, a family friend, [Sal Patitucci](#) [3], who hosted (and still does) an Italian radio program, successfully raised thousands of dollars for the earthquake victims through a series of fundraising broadcasts. It was a wonderful example of how technology and the media can help create a global community out of the individualized experiences of immigrants.

To point out the relative lack of reporting on the earthquake's effect on immigrants is not to knock in any way these transnational acts of solidarity, either past or present. Indeed, for me they bring to the surface the cultural complexity of Italy and remind us to consider the entire population living and working in Abruzzo today.

Most sources describe Abruzzo's immigrant community as mainly hailing from Macedonia, Romania, and Albania. There has not been much attention paid to this group of victims, and some have begun to question what efforts are being made both to document their deaths and to care for the ones still alive. Many suspect that a high number of the still-unidentified bodies are non-registered, undocumented immigrants.

Although mainstream media outlets have noted in passing that determining the number of quake casualties is complicated by the high number of undocumented workers, it is not clear what is being done about this at an institutional or even grass-roots level. At the same time, a handful of "feel-good" pieces remarking on heroic and selfless acts made by immigrants are circulating.

Watch this short video made by actor-director, Michele Placido, interviewing Macedonian immigrants, where he comments on his own families' history of emigration.

I've also come across a growing number of smaller media sources—e.g., blogs, immigration rights sites (see list of links below)—that have editorialized about the problem of undocumented victims of the disaster. Collectively, such sites give voice to these silent victims.

At least one online source suggests that the number of dead may reach upwards of 1000 if documented and undocumented immigrants are considered along with others, such as those who are currently in critical condition. While that number may seem like a radical fabrication, the general idea behind it is not. It seems that upwards of 90% of the city's apartments in the historic center were rented, often off the books—as is common throughout Italy—in great part by immigrants.

As the story of Italy's most recent natural disaster unravels, the country's past and present narratives of migration remain woven within it.

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