



1st Report

**OneSight Foundation
EssilorLuxottica Italia-Censis**

**Italians suffering from
visual fragility:
a portrait of a hidden
social discomfort**

Key Findings

Rome, October 9, 2024

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1. AT LAST VISIBLE AND QUANTIFIED

How many people in Italy have eyesight problems and economic difficulties in accessing eye check-ups, purchasing glasses or contact lenses and/or any visual medication?

This is the principal question addressed in this Report, while also describing the main sociodemographic, economic, and regional characteristics of individuals who, for the first time, are being defined as in a condition of *visual fragility*.

The Report introduces and quantifies a particular, unique social discomfort, that is more widespread than one might have thought, which has a markedly negative impact on the daily quality of life of the people involved.

Visual deficits undermine basic daily tasks, with significant impacts on individual life paths and, on a larger scale, on society.

Furthermore, the well-known difficulties of the National Health Service lead to a reduction in access to medical examinations, treatment, and corrective tools that could contain or eliminate the negative impact of sight defects. These difficulties have forced people to access these services through private healthcare, at their own expense. Thus, creating disparities within eye care sector, particularly with respect to the access of preventive measures, diagnostics, corrective instruments, and potential treatments.

The condition of visual fragility is determined by the coexistence and mutual influence of economic difficulties and problems related to visual health, with the latter condition worsening precisely because of challenges in meeting the costs of eye care services, glasses, or contact lenses.

A sub-group of the visually fragile are those defined as visually poor, composed of people who, in addition to the typical features of the visually fragile, have monthly incomes insufficient to cover their monthly expenses, including those related to the health of their eyesight.

The findings of the present research prove that, within the multiple forms of contemporary social hardship, it is now necessary to include visual fragility, which may involve social groups that only partly coincide with those of traditional socio-economic hardship.



The research, therefore, shines a light on a difficult, unrecognised health and social condition, the pervasiveness of which requires continuous monitoring and ad hoc interventions.

At the operational level, having defined the conditions of the visually fragile and the visually poor, a structured questionnaire was prepared and distributed to a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Italian adults.

It was thus possible to identify citizens suffering from visual fragility and, among them, those within the group of the visually poor. Then, with appropriate over-sampling, other individuals were contacted until a total of 500 Italians in conditions of visual fragility were reached, which group also included a number of individuals suffering from visual poverty.

It was thus possible to outline the impact that the condition of visual fragility and visual poverty have on the quality of life of the people involved, the state of their relations with the National Health Service, and, in general, their access to and spending on services and benefits related to eye health protection.

The result of this Research is a unique portrait of the condition of Italians from the prospective of prevention and care of their eyesight in connection with their economic condition, with specific assessment being made of their real ability to access eye care services, glasses, or contact lenses they need.



2. INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY, RELATIONSHIPS, WORK, LEISURE: THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF VISUAL FRAGILITY ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE

There are 10.7 million Italians experiencing visual fragility (21.3% of the total population) and among them 2.7 million (5.4% of the total population) in conditions of visual poverty.

These figures reveal the significant extent of social and health related issue that has, until now, remained largely hidden and under recognized.

The highest numbers of people with visual fragility are registered among women, young people and adults, and residents of southern Italy and the islands.

The group of the visually fragile includes a higher proportion of people with low incomes. However, more than one fifth of this group consists of individuals with gross incomes above 35,000 euros, placing them well above the threshold of formal poverty.

This fact shows that this is a unique social hardship, which only partly coincides with more “mainstream poverty”, since it can also involve people with medium-high incomes, due to the significant expense related to the purchase of eye care services or corrective instruments.

In addition to suffering to a greater extent from vision defects or pathologies, people within the area of visual fragility are characterised by the fact that, compared to the rest of the population, they have experienced greater difficulty in accessing eye examinations (including preventive check-ups), as well as in the initial purchase and especially the renewal of glasses or contact lenses.

Moreover, visual fragility has further exposed individuals to a deterioration of their vision, precisely due to the reduced ability to access appropriate healthcare services or corrective tools, such as glasses or contact lenses, modulated to the evolution of vision defects.

Visual fragility, subsequently, significantly impacts quality of life in essential areas of daily life, often leading to reduce autonomy in performing routine tasks, limited enjoyment of personal leisure time, and most notably, fewer opportunities to participate in social and recreational activities.



Visual fragility, thus, exposes individuals to a higher risk of solitude, even to the extent of confinement within their own homes, or dependency on others to leave the house and participate in social life.

The impact on employment is also considerable, with many individuals believing that their vision problems directly affect their job performance, resulting in damage to their income and career prospects.

The research also highlights that the condition of visual fragility entails facing adverse psychological conditions, with feelings such as frustration or irritation over tasks they wish to complete but simply can not, or at least not as they would like. This often leads to the inhibiting choice to refrain from certain activities for fear of embarrassment in situations where they are exposed to the gaze and judgment of others.

Thus, visual fragility generates not only substantial material constraints that affect the daily lives of individuals but is also severely detrimental to the psychological conditions for those who suffer from it.

Among Italians, and even more so among those in conditions of visual fragility, there is an increasing awareness that the root cause of the inadequate attention and effort towards eye health lies in the difficulties faced by the National Health Service in ensuring universal access to essential ophthalmic services, either free of charge or with just a ticket, for both prevention and the various corrective measures for vision defects.

There is a strong conviction that we have long entered an era of “ophthalmology by social class”, where the protection of good eye health is heavily influenced by an individual’s economic ability to purchase the necessary eye care services in the private healthcare sector, as well as their ability to secure appropriate corrective tools over time.

Italians believe that a shift is needed in the provision of visual care, ensuring that those who currently lack sufficient financial resources are guaranteed essential services to protect their vision. In the longer term, it is crucial to reintegrate a broader range of ophthalmic services within the National Health Service, capable of meeting the protective needs of all social groups, thereby eliminating the discriminatory effect of income and wealth disparities, which are notoriously widening in our country.

For Italians, the tutelage of vision health should be recognized as a fundamental right, to be guaranteed to everyone, at all times and everywhere, in line with the original mission of the National Health Service.



Without good eye health, Italians believe, the healthcare and social costs that individuals must bear are high, as are the more general social and healthcare costs imposed on society.

Reduced workplace productivity and a growing number of individuals requiring assistance due to loss of autonomy are two key factors that highlight the urgency of addressing visual fragility. These issues alone make visual fragility a new priority in efforts to enhance individual well-being and improve the quality of life for all Italians.



3. THE NUMBERS

3.1. A widespread condition

3.1.1. The significance quantitative dimension

In Italy, the area of visual fragility encompasses 21.3% of the total population, equivalent to 10.7 million citizens of age.

Within this area, there is a subset of individuals who have a monthly income insufficient to cover their expenses, amounting to 2.7 million people, or 5.4% of the population.

These figures reflect a social discomfort that is significantly widespread within Italian society.

3.1.2. More women, more young people and adults, and more residents in the South-Islands

Within the area of the visually fragile are 18.8% of all men and 23,7% of the women.

Among young people, the percentage is 25.5%, among adults it is 26.7%, and among the elderly, it is 8.8%.

Additionally, the rates of visual fragility are 15.9% in the Northwest, 14.5% in the Northeast, 24.4% in Central Italy, and 27.9% in the South and Islands.

3.1.3. Not only low wages

Among people with incomes up to 15,000 euros, 32.8% are in conditions of visual fragility. For those earning between 15,000 and 30,000 euros, the percentage is 24.1%, for those between 35,000 and 50,000 euros, it is 17%, and for those earning over 50,000 euros, it is 10.1%.

A comparative analysis of income distributions between those within the area of visual fragility and the other citizens indicates that 25.2% of individuals with incomes up to 15,000 euros fall within the area of visual fragility, compared to 13.9% among the others. For those earning between 15,000 and 35,000 euros, the percentage is 40.3% for the visually fragile, compared to



34.3% for other citizens. Regarding incomes between 35,000 and 50,000 euros, 16% of the visually fragile falls into this category, compared to 21.1% of non-fragile individuals. Finally, for those earning over 50,000 euros annually, 4.8% of the visually fragile are in this income group, compared to 11.5% of other citizens.

Those with lower incomes, therefore, are much more exposed to the risk of visual fragility. However, it is noteworthy that nearly 21% of those in conditions of visual fragility have an income of at least 35,000 euros.

3.2. What differentiates the area of visual poverty

Visual poverty has a gendered connotation, as women represent 66.6% of those affected by this condition, compared to 57.3% in the broader area of visual fragility and 50% among other citizens.

There is also a higher presence of elderly individuals, who constitute 15.9% of those in visual poverty, compared to 11.9% in the total group of the visually fragile and 33.2% among other citizens.

Additionally, 49% of those in visual poverty have a low income, compared to 27.8% in the total area of visual fragility and 13.7% in the rest of the population.

Moreover, 53.7% of those in visual poverty reside in the South of Italy and on the Islands, compared to 43.6% of the total group of the visually fragile and 30.6% of other citizens.

Finally, 21.7% of people in visual poverty live in municipalities with over 500,000 inhabitants, compared to 17.4% of those in conditions of visual fragility and 11.9% of other citizens.

3.3. Vision Defects and Ocular Pathologies

3.3.1. The numbers

70.6% of Italians have at least one vision defect or an ocular pathology. Among these, 42.8% have some form of myopia, 28% have astigmatism,



18.8% have presbyopia, and 6.9% have hyperopia. Of these individuals, 92.9% received a diagnosis from an ophthalmologist or were informed of their vision defect by an optician, while 7.1% recognized the symptoms themselves.

Regarding the frequency of eye exams, 6.7% of Italians undergo check-ups several times a year, 33.1% once a year, 28.8% every two years, 28.7% less frequently, and 2.8% never.

Among those with vision defects, 5.7% do not use corrective instruments, 69.8% only use eyeglasses, 23% use both eyeglasses and contact lenses, and 1.5% use only contact lenses.

Among those with a visual defect and a low income, 6.9% do not use any corrective tools, while this percentage drops to 3.9% for people with annual incomes of at least 50,000 euros.

3.3.2. Difficulties, even with glasses or contact lenses

Despite using glasses or contact lenses, 57.6% of Italians report still having difficulties with their vision. Specifically, 37.4% report mild difficulties, 17.6% describe moderate difficulties, and 2.6% severe difficulties.

Additionally, 40% believe that, without urgent and appropriate measures, their vision health will deteriorate.

Of these, 18.8% rely on a warning from their ophthalmologist, while 21.2% hold this belief based on their own subjective assessment.

3.4. People with visual fragility more exposed

64% of people in a state of visual fragility suffer from myopia, compared to 37% of other citizens. Additionally, 49.7% of those with visual fragility have astigmatism, whereas the percentage is 22.2% among other citizens.

23.2% of those with visual fragility suffer from presbyopia, compared to 17.6% of other citizens.

77.4% of individuals with visual fragility experience vision difficulties even when using glasses or contact lenses. Among these, 47.4% have mild difficulties, 24.8% moderate, and 5.3% severe.



In contrast, it is 52.5% of the other citizens who have reported of having vision problems even when using corrective tools, of which 34.8% have mild difficulties, 15.7% moderate, and 1.8% severe difficulties.

3.5. High barriers accessing visual care

In the past twelve months, 83.5% of those in visual fragility and 23.2% of other citizens, when facing expenses, encountered difficulties or had to forgo replacing their glasses. Regarding eye exams, 78.2% of individuals in the area of visual fragility and 18.1% of other citizens faced similar challenges.

Additionally, 53.4% of those with visual fragility and 10.9% of the others struggled with costs for medications or medical devices; 46% of those with visual fragility and 8.1% of others faced difficulties with the initial purchase of glasses; 37.3% of those with visual fragility and 7.3% of others had difficulties purchasing contact lenses; and 14.4% of those with visual fragility and 2.2% of others encountered challenges affording cataract surgery.

3.6. The unequal protection of a healthy vision

80.6% of people in a state of visual fragility believe they do not have sufficient financial resources to ensure the desired level of ophthalmic prevention, compared to just 7% of other Italians.

55.6% of people in the area of visual fragility are convinced that their vision would not have deteriorated as severely if they had had sufficient financial resources to pay for preventive visits, treatments, or corrective tools. Among the non-fragile, this figure is only 4.6%.

3.7. The economic burden of ocular health expenses

23.9% of people in a state of visual fragility have experienced a significant decline in their lifestyle due to expenses related to vision problems, compared to 1.9% of the rest of the population.



Specifically, 47.6% of the visually fragile had to cut other expenses to finance their vision health, compared to 6.5% of non-fragile individuals.

56.6% of individuals with visual fragility (compared to 33.5% of the others) faced ophthalmic expenses of at least 300 euros: 39.2% (compared to 13% of the others) had to use their savings, and 10% (compared to 1.4% of others) had to seek financial assistance.

In addition, 18.6% (compared to 1.2% of the non-fragile) were unable to pay the 300 euro expense and postponed or gave up on obtaining ophthalmic services or corrective tools.

3.8. Quality of life penalised

3.8.1. Reduced loss of autonomy

Vision problems and their related effects have a very, or somewhat, negative impact on the daily lives and well-being of 57.5% of Italians. This is the case for 88.2% of people in a state of visual fragility and 49.2% of other citizens.

The risk of losing self-sufficiency in daily life is high for people experiencing visual fragility. Not surprisingly, 40.9% of those with visual fragility rely on the help of others to carry out ordinary activities, compared to 12.9% of other citizens.

Additionally, 29% of people in visual fragility have difficulty performing household chores, compared to 9.1% of non-fragile individuals; 40.3% of those in visual fragility struggle to find items on shelves, compared to 11.2% of others; and 20.7% of those in visual fragility have difficulty dressing or washing themselves, compared to 4.5% of non-fragile individuals.

Overall, 59.6% of people with visual fragility and 22.1% of other Italians experience limitations in at least one of the four considered areas of domestic and personal autonomy.

3.8.2. Limited mobility

25.5% of those with visual fragility experience mobility problems, compared to 5.9% of non-fragile individuals.



Challenges exacerbated by difficulties in reading road signs or store names, affecting 55.2% of those with visual fragility, compared to 18.1% of others.

Additionally, 45.7% of those with visual fragility struggle to notice surrounding objects while walking, compared to 11.3% of those who are not in this category.

37.6% of those with visual fragility, compared to 10.8% of others, have difficulty stepping off curbs or stairs in low-light conditions.

Finally, about 82% of those with visual fragility drive a car, compared to 86.9% of the rest of the population.

Driving presents daytime difficulties for 28.6% of those with visual fragility, compared to 7.6% of others. These difficulties increase significantly at night, with 74.4% of those with visual fragility finding driving challenging, compared to 43.1% of other citizens.

3.8.3. Risk of confinement

32.1% of people with visual fragility (compared to 9.1% of the rest of the population) are forced to stay at home most of the time.

A notable 28.8% of those with visual fragility never leave the house alone, compared to 7.5% of other citizens.

52.9% of those with visual fragility feel a loss of control over their environment and actions, compared to 17% of other Italians.

As a result, 58.9% of those with visual fragility, compared to 21.8% of the rest of the population, are exposed to various experiences of confinement.

3.8.4. Constraints on leisure

There are significant restrictions on activities related to managing personal leisure time, as 62.8% of those with visual fragility and 28.7% of other Italians struggle with hobbies or tasks that require good near vision.

61.6% of those with visual fragility and 31.6% of others have difficulty reading standard print in newspapers and magazines; 53% of those with visual fragility and 13.8% of non-fragile individuals find it difficult to watch films or television programs.



3.8.5. Diminished social relationships

46.9% of those with visual fragility have limitations in attending theatre performances or live sports events, compared to 12.6% of other citizens. In terms of participating in social, leisure, and entertainment activities, 28.5% of those with visual fragility face difficulties, compared to 7.4% of non-fragile individuals. Managing relationships with friends and family is challenging for 20% of those with visual fragility, compared to 4.3% of non-fragile individuals.

In summary: 83.9% of people with visual fragility (compared to 47.2% of others outside this group) face limitations in at least one area of leisure management or participation in social activities.

3.8.6. Difficulties reading on digital devices and screens

75.3% of visually fragile individuals experience difficulties or discomfort when reading on smartphones, compared to 36.4% of other citizens. With other types of screens, such as computers and smart TVs, 79.1% of those with visual fragility have difficulties, compared to 38.9% of non-fragile individuals. Additionally, 74% of those with visual fragility need to enlarge the screen to read, compared to 40.3% of other citizens.

Finally, 88.5% of people with visual fragility encounter difficulties using digital devices and screens, compared to 55.5% of other citizens.

3.8.7. Severe Psychological Impacts

58.8% of people with visual fragility feel frustrated by the things they are unable to do, compared to 21.7% of those who are not in this group.

Moreover, 62.6% of people with visual fragility often feel irritable, compared to 25.3% of other citizens.

43.5% of those with visual fragility feel worried about doing things that might embarrass them, compared to 13.7% of other citizens.

Additionally, visual limitations prevent 52.6% of people with visual fragility from engaging in gratifying and enjoyable activities, while only 16.6% of other citizens experience this same difficulty.

42.5% of those with visual fragility feel lonely, even when surrounded by others, compared to 14.1% of other Italians.



Regarding five typical psychological challenges associated with vision deficits, 75.4% of people with visual fragility (compared to 36.6% of those outside this group) have experienced negative impacts in at least one of these areas.

Finally, 29.9% of people with visual fragility experience all five negative emotional states, compared to only 6.4% of other citizens.

3.9. Penalised labour

47.7% of employed individuals with visual fragility report lower work performance and productivity, compared to 18.2% of other employed individuals. Among those with visual fragility, 22.7% had to stop working, compared to 6.3% of other citizens (tab. 7).

27.7% of employed individuals with visual fragility had to change jobs or at least tasks due to vision difficulties, compared to 8.6% of other workers. Additionally, 57% of employed individuals with visual fragility perform work activities that pose risks to their vision, compared to 37.2% of other employed individuals.

3.10. Not equal healthcare for everyone

3.10.1. High barriers of access to the health service and intense recourse to the private sector

41.8% of people with visual fragility have tried to book an eye exam through the National Health Service, paying only the ticket or receiving the service for free due to exemption. Only 19.3% of other citizens have done the same.

For every 100 attempts to book an ophthalmology service through the National Health Service, 35.9% of people with visual fragility manage to get an appointment at public or accredited private facilities after waiting the required time on the waiting list. This percentage is higher among other citizens, reaching 57.9%.



In 34.4% of cases (compared to 16.3% for other citizens), people in the area of visual fragility have turned to fully paid private facilities, while 8.8% of those with visual fragility have used intramoenia services, compared to 11.3% of other citizens.

Finally, 17.3% of those with visual fragility have either postponed or cancelled the service, compared to 7.7% of other Italians.

Over the course of the year, 62.8% of those with visual fragility, compared to 42% of other citizens, sought private or intramoenia healthcare services for vision-related issues.

3.10.2. The role of economic disparities

87.4% of people with visual fragility and 83.9% of others are convinced that in Italy, *those with money can take care of their vision more quickly and effectively than others.*

After all, 84.6% of Italians believe that in the eye care field, equal health protection has given way to a de facto inequality.

It is now a predominant belief, shared by 86.4% of people in the visual fragility area and 76.1% of other citizens, that most of the services and healthcare related to vision protection, must be paid for out-of-pocket by Italians.

Furthermore, 86.5% of those with visual fragility, compared to 37.4% of those outside this group, say that if they had more money, they would care for their vision more and better.

For over 90% of Italians (with a similar percentage among visually fragile individuals and the other citizens) good vision health should be considered a fundamental human right.

For 92.4% of Italians (90.1% of those with visual fragility and 93.1% of others), vision prevention and protection are essential for individual and collective well-being.

The prevailing opinion remains that too little attention is currently devoted to eye care and vision health in general. 66.6% of Italians (78.6% of those with visual fragility and 63.4% of others) believe that the National Health Service pays too little attention to ophthalmology, while 71.4% (84.2% of those with visual fragility and 68% of others) are convinced that investments in vision prevention are inadequate.



3.11. Differences in the protection of children's visual health

85.1% of families with children have had their children's vision checked, with the highest rate occurring at the start of elementary school.

Specifically, among older children, it was found that 3.3% received an eye exam at birth, 36.5% before the age of three, 49.1% at the start of elementary school, and 11.1% subsequently.

For 81.9% of parents, the visits were motivated by preventive reasons, while 18.1% made them because of the presence of vision impairment.

49.4% of preventive visits were initiated by the parents themselves, while 50.6% were done based on a paediatrician's recommendation.

63.2% of families opted for private facilities for their children's visual care, compared to 36.1% who relied on public services.

74% of the interviewed parents reported that their children have at least one vision defect: 51.6% have myopia, 27.8% have astigmatism, and 8.7% suffer from hyperopia.