

Book-reading habits in Italy

2009

Every year the survey on “Aspects of daily life” gathers information about leisure-time book reading. The term “readers” refers to people aged 6 and over who have read at least one book not strictly for work or study reasons during the 12 months prior to the interview.

The information presented today is taken from the survey conducted in February 2009 and regards book reading and the contents of home libraries.

The sample included 19,000 households, representing a total of 48,000 individuals. For further information see the methodological appendix available on the Istat website.

1. READER PROFILE

Sex and age differences

In 2009, 45.1% of the population aged 6 and over said they had read at least one book (over 25,300,000 people). The highest percentage of readers was found among the 11-17 age group (over 58%), peaking between the ages of 11 and 14 (64.7%), and declining with age. Already from the age of 35 upwards the percentage of readers fell below 50%, declining sharply from the age of 65 and over. The lowest percentage was observed among the 75-plus age group (22.8%).

Women read more than men: the figure for female readers was in fact 51.6%, compared with 38.2% for male readers. Gender-based differences are found in all age groups and are extremely marked between the ages of 20 and 24, an age range in which the percentage for female readers was over 66% while for male readers it was 39.2%.

Gender differences disappear out only for people aged 75 and over, an age range in which 23.3% of men and 22.5% of women said that they read during their leisure time.

The influence of educational level and professional status

Education level has a strong impact on reading levels, ranging from a maximum of 80.6% among graduates to a minimum of 28.4% among those with a primary school leaving certificate or no qualifications.

Taking into account professional status, among people over 15, higher-than-average reading levels are found among executives, business people and self-employed professionals (62.7%), managerial staff and employees (68.1%), and, obviously, students (65.2%). In contrast, the lowest reading levels are found among manual workers (30.6%), individuals who have withdrawn from the labour force (33.2%) and housewives (35.9%).

The North-South divide

In geographical terms the highest percentage of readers is found in the North, where almost 52% of the population aged 6 and over had read at least one book in the 12 months prior to the interview, and in the Centre (48%). In the South and Islands the percentage of readers fell to 34.2% and 35.4%.

In addition, there is a significant regional variation in reading levels: the regions of Trentino-Alto Adige and Friuli-Venezia Giulia recorded reading levels of over 56%, while Marche, Umbria, Abruzzo, all of the regions of the South and Sicily fell below the national average. In particular, Calabria (34.3%) and Puglia (33.1%) occupied the last place.

Likewise, in geographical terms, taking into consideration the type of municipality, a greater diffusion of readers is noted in highly urbanised centres and areas, followed by a gradual reduction in the percentage of readers as one moves towards smaller and smaller centres.

Number of books read: “weak readers” and “strong readers”

Individuals who have read a maximum of 3 books during the 12 months prior to the interview are considered “weak readers”, while those who have read 12 or more books over the same period are considered “strong readers”.

The figures confirm that book readers are weak readers: 44.9% in fact said they had read up to 3 books during the past year, while only 15.2% had read 12 or more books.

Weak readers are mostly male (48.1%), children and young people aged up to 14 (over 48%), people aged 75 or over (49.5%), people with a lower secondary school certificate or a lower qualification (over 50%), manual workers (55.3%), first-time job seekers and housewives (over 51%), and the population resident in the South (57.6%).

The highest percentages of strong readers are found, in contrast, among women (16%), with a peak among women aged 55-59 (20.5%), people aged 65-74 (19.8%), graduates (24.4%) and executives, business people and self-employed professionals (19.8%) and individuals who have withdrawn from the labour force (18.7%). Geographically the highest percentages of strong readers are found in the North-west (19.5%).

2. HOME LIBRARIES

Owned books at home

In 2009, 89.2% of households said that they possessed books at home: 62.5% of households had up to a maximum of 100 (28.9% up to 25 books, 33.6% between 26 and 100 books), just over a quarter said that they owned more than 100 (26.7%), while 10.3% of households said they did not have any books (2,474,000 households).

The region with the highest percentage of households with no books at home is Sicily (20.2%), followed by regions in the South (15.0%), while in the Centre-north regions the percentage does not reach 9%. The regions with the lowest percentages of households who do not have books are Trentino-Alto Adige (2.8%) and Valle d’Aosta (5.0%).

The largest percentages of households with more than 100 books at home are found in the Centre-north, where over 29% of resident households own more than 100 books, while in the South this percentage falls to less than 19%. Friuli-Venezia Giulia (36.6%), Emilia-Romagna (33.4%) and

Sardinia (32.9%) are the regions with the highest percentages of households with over 100 books at home. In Sicily, Campania and Basilicata, in contrast, this percentage is below 17%.

Children and book-reading: the influence of the home library

On the family front the stimuli provided by parents can have a decisive influence on children's and young people's interest in reading.

Of these stimuli, an important element, closely linked to the education level and reading habits of parents, is the number of books kept at home. The figures show an increase in the percentage of young readers in those households where books are present and in particular in those where the home library is larger.

Indeed, on average, 64.7% of boys and girls aged 11-14 said that they had read at least one book during the 12 months prior to the interview. This percentage rises to 83.9% in households with over 200 books, while it falls to 29.6% in households without books.

GLOSSARY

Book readers: people aged 6 years and over who have read at least one book not strictly for work or study reasons during the 12 months prior to the interview

Weak readers: people aged 6 years and over who have read between 1 and 3 books not strictly for work or study reasons during the 12 months prior to the interview

Strong readers: people aged 6 years and over who have read 12 or more books not strictly for work or study reasons during the 12 months prior to the interview