



ITALY IN 2050

Let's imagine ourselves projected into the future. What will Italy look like in 2050? How many of us will there be and what will we be like?

I am Cristiana Conti and this is Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast by Istat, the National Institute of Statistics, where I work in the Directorate for Communication, Information, and Services to Citizens and Users. This initiative is part of a public communication project.

In this episode, we will talk about resident population forecasts. What they are, how they are made, and which surprises they hold for us.

There is no need for a crystal ball to look into the future. There are much more scientific methods, called demographic forecasts, and they tell us, for example, that in 25 years, Italy will have 54.7 million residents... a significant drop compared to the approximately 59 million of today.. And that's not all. Older people aged 65 and over will make up more than a third of the population, children and young people up to 14 years old will be just over 11 per cent, and over 40 per cent of households will consist of a single person.

But how are demographic forecasts made? And how reliable are they? I asked these questions to Gianni Corsetti, a long-serving Istat researcher and expert in this field.

Cristiana: Hi Gianni, welcome.

Gianni: Thank you, hello everyone.

C. Listen, I've just mentioned the demographic forecast data, but how do you predict what will happen? And how should we read these figures? Do they have a margin of uncertainty? And if so, what is it?

G. First of all, let me tell you that Istat has a long history of demographic forecasting. Obviously, the underlying logic is based on studying trends from recent years. Regarding uncertainty, in Europe we are among the few to adopt a semi-probabilistic approach, meaning we associate a measure of uncertainty to the values we forecast. To answer your question about how we make forecasts, I can tell you that we adopt a Bayesian stochastic method, developed together with Bocconi University, which also uses opinions provided by a panel of experts.

C. Well, now you have to explain to me what questions the experts answer.

G. We ask the experts to provide us with the future values, for 2050 and 2080, of five indicators: total fertility rate, life expectancy at birth disaggregated by males and females, and the number of immigrants and emigrants.

C. What kind of experts are they?

G. Besides Istat demographers, we have professors and researchers in demography, but also sociologists, actuaries, and economists... in short, qualified people who may have different points of view on the future of our country.

C. Indeed, understanding what will happen to the country in demographic terms is fundamental to plan public policies, and therefore different categories of citizens are interested ... But let's go back to the margins of uncertainty in the estimates, can you tell us something more about this?

G. Well, obviously an estimate by its nature cannot be 100% exact, and the wider the time interval, the more the uncertainty increases. To be clear, the forecast for 2050 is certainly more probable than that for 2080.

C. But for example, how reliable is it to say that in 2050 we will be 54.7 million residents?

G. So, the value of 54.7 million is the median between the two extremes we estimated, namely 52.5 and 56.8 million.

C. Median, so it's exactly in the middle of a distribution of values, right?

G. Right. And it is 90% probable that the actual number of residents in 2050 will be between these two extreme values.

C. Interesting. But what events could then shift the actual number towards one of the two extremes? That is, towards 52.5 million or 56.8 million residents?

G. An increase in arrivals from abroad or, conversely, a decrease in outflows from the country, a recovery in births, a further increase in life expectancy....

C. I see. And at a territorial level, how will things be from now until 2050?

G. In the short term, we foresee a slight increase in the population in the North, bucking the national trend and due to both internal and international migration. Conversely, in the Centre and especially in the South, a decrease in residents is expected.

C. And in the medium to long term?

G. The population in the North could also decrease, but only slightly if we look at 2050, while the decline could be more substantial if we look at 2080. However, as we have said, the further into the future we go, the more uncertain the forecasts become, so it is worth mentioning also a more remote possibility, according to which until 2080 a trend of slight but constant demographic growth is possible in the North.

C. And what about the Centre and the South?

G. Population growth is not foreseen. For the Centre, the projected decline is more limited, whereas the South could lose 3.4 million residents by 2050. Moreover, this could reverse the geography of the average age in the country. Today the South is the youngest region, with an average age of 45.8 years compared to a national average of 46.6 years. By 2050, it could become the 'oldest' region with an average age of 51.6 years.

C. Should we be concerned about these changes?

G. We simply have to acknowledge this and organise ourselves accordingly. Some dynamics, after all, are irreversible.

C. What do you mean?

G. I mean, for example, that we will no longer reach the number of around one million births like those of the baby boom era, this is impossible. But even returning above 500,000 births is quite improbable.

C. Because over the years the cohorts of women of childbearing age have decreased, right?

G. Correct. And even with a recovery in the fertility rate – which today is 1.18 children per woman – births will still not be able to exceed deaths. It should also be specified that forecasts are 'what-if' exercises, meaning that on the one hand they depend on the underlying assumptions, but for the most

part they depend on the current age composition, and ours is one of the oldest populations at European level.

C. What are the predicted scenarios in the rest of Europe?

G. Eurostat – the statistical office of the European Union – predicts a decrease in the overall European population by 2050.

C. And in detail?

G. The most significant decreases refer to Eastern European countries. For example, Romania and Poland – and in the South, they concern Greece, in addition to Italy. For France, a population increase is expected, and also in Germany a slight increase is expected.

C. That was very clear. Thank you very much, Gianni.

G. Thank you, and goodbye.

C. But it doesn't end here because other important forecasts can be derived from the resident population projections: those concerning families and those concerning the workforce. I have therefore invited two other researchers, experts in their respective fields. For families, I have Martina Lo Conte here. Martina, first of all, welcome, and what should we expect?

Martina. Hello, and thank you for the invitation. By 2050, we should expect an increase in the number of families.

C. But how can that be? The population is decreasing, and families are increasing?

M. The key is the average size. There will be more families, but they will be smaller. Today a family is composed of an average of 2.21 members, in 2050, we will reach 2.03 members. And more than four out of ten families will consist of a single person.

C. But when you talk about single people, what should we imagine? Young people leaving their family of origin and going to live on their own?

M. Yes, perhaps. However, the increase mainly concerns older people. Today, there are already 4.6 million single people aged 65 or over; by 2050, we expect this number to be 6.5 million, especially women.

C. Right, women live longer. And what about the classic couple with children?

M. We need to get used to a concept of family less linked to the traditional members. Families consisting of couples with children are the type expected to experience the sharpest decrease. Today, they represent more than one in four families; by 2050, they will be just over one in five.

C. Other family types?

M. Childless couples will see a slight increase, from the current 5.4 million to 5.7 million by 2050 and will represent just over one in five families. This means that by 2050, the number of couples with children and that of childless couples will almost be the same.

C. Do we have assumptions on the reasons for all these transformations?

M. They are the result of deep changes in our society. Ageing and increased life expectancy are increasing the number of single people. The decline in births reduces families with children. Then there is couple instability: separations lead to an increase in single individuals and single-parent households. Here too, it is mainly about women: single mothers, already exceeding 8% today, are expected to represent 9% of households by 2050. And then there will be a slight increase in multi-person households.

C. What do you mean, what are multi-person households?

M. Those formed by people not linked by a couple or parent-child relationship. For example, two siblings living together. This type, which today represents 2.5% of households, will reach 3.2% by 2050.

C. But tell me, why has Istat started to focus on family projections? If I'm not mistaken, they were not done before 2021,. Why is it important to study these figures?

M. Because the family is the unit where decisions are made: home, health, consumption. Everything starts from the family dimension. And this has consequences. Just think about supermarkets, how many single-portion packages they already offer today. Think about those who build houses, what type of housing will tomorrow's families need?

C. This is in general. What should we expect at a territorial level?

M. A strong convergence, with the South increasingly transitioning towards socio-demographic models similar to those of the Centre and the North.

C. What does this mean in absolute terms?

M. It means that in the South too we will see a significant increase in single-person households and a decrease in couples with children – so the difference compared to other geographical areas will decrease.

C. In conclusion, by 2050 throughout Italy we will have smaller families, more single people, and fewer couples with children. But, as I already asked Gianni, should we be concerned?

M. No need for alarm. Society is changing, and this entails a new population structure that we will necessarily have to deal with.

C. Thank you, Martina, for being with us.

M. Thank you, it was a pleasure.

C. And now, last but not least, let's talk about the workforce. What awaits us in 2050? To answer this question, we have our third expert with us: Marco Rizzo. Hello Marco, and thank you for being here.

Marco. Hello, thank you for the invitation.

C. So, we've seen that in 2050 there will be fewer of us, we've seen that we will be older... will there still be anyone who can work... and support those who will be retired?

M. Don't panic. We have an ace up our sleeve: the activity rate.

C. Wait, let's remind our listeners what we mean by activity rate.

M. We mean the proportion of the active population – that is, all those who are already working and those who are looking for work – relative to the working-age population. In practice, it refers to the proportion of people available to work.

C. And what will happen to the activity rate?

M. We expect it to increase. After all, it's a trend we've been observing since the 2000s.

C. Shall we take a look at this trend?

M. So, in twenty years, between 2004 and 2024, the total activity rate has risen from 62.5% to 66.6%. And the increase was driven mainly by greater female participation.

C. ...interesting.

M. The gender gap, just as we have seen it decrease over the last 20 years, is expected to continue to fall in the future too. Overall, compared to today, in 2050, the total activity rate should reach 73.2%, with a 9% increase for the female component and 3.7 for the male component.

C. So, are the two genders moving towards equality in labour market participation?

M. That is the direction, but even in 2050, the gap will still exist. Smaller, but it will be there. However, in terms of numbers, the total active population will decrease less than the overall population.

C. Let me rephrase: we will be fewer, but proportionally there will be fewer inactive people. Right?

M. Correct. We must consider the progressive increase in life expectancy and the improvement in health conditions, which should consequently lead to an evolution in the age for retirement: the activity rate for those aged between 65 and 74 should rise from today's 11% to 16%.

C. So, also on the topic of work, no need to panic.

M. No need to panic, it will be a matter of differentiating jobs according to different age groups and investing in the skills needed to manage new scenarios.

C. Thank you, Marco, everything is clear.

M. Thank you all and goodbye.

In summary, the future can only hold the continuation of the phenomena we are already observing today. And the advantage is that we know where we are going, so that we have the time and means to prepare.

I am Cristiana Conti and this was Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast from the National Institute of Statistics.

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Are there topics you would like to explore further? Write to me at datiallamano@istat.it.

Martina Lo Conte, Gianni Corsetti, Marco Rizzo, Manuela Bartolotta and Sara Maulo worked on this episode.