



DATI ALLA MANO

I PODCAST

WHERE WE LIVE

How much does the place we live in affect our lives? I'm thinking about how accessible a hospital is, how close is a school for our children or a train station... but also the presence of cultural heritage and environmental conditions.

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 broader project to promote statistical literacy.

In this episode, we will talk about the different places we live in, for example, how metropolitan cities and their outskirts appear, and conversely, how small towns in Italy's inland areas appear.

The data tells us that in 2023, 21.3% of the population aged 14 and over believes they live in places "affected by evident deterioration", meaning where there are dilapidated buildings, a degraded environment, a deteriorated landscape... Dissatisfied people are more frequent in the South, particularly in Campania, followed by the Centre, and finally the North. The lowest percentage of dissatisfied people is found in the autonomous province of Trento.

Dissatisfied with the landscape of their own place of residence... Yet it is said that Italy is the most beautiful country in the world, but it is known that it is made up of many districts with very different structures, sizes, and characteristics, not all of which have grown in compliance with urban planning regulations: even in 2022, more homes were built in Italy than those authorised by the Municipalities, because illegal building unfortunately exists, and while it appears marginal in the North, the same cannot be said for the South, where it is estimated that around 40 new illegal homes are built for every 100 authorised.

But let us move on to the differences between cities and towns: almost half of Italian Municipalities, 48.5% to be precise, belong to the so-called 'Internal Areas', which are small inland districts where almost a quarter of the population lives. Let me explain further: there are 13.3 million individuals living in places distant from those large centres that offer essential health, education, and mobility services – that is hospitals, schools, and railway stations. However, these places, on the other hand, are often rich in environmental and cultural resources. Recently, books have been published and films made about these small communities. But what is the impact of demographic decline, affecting the whole of Italy, on these towns?

I asked Francesca Licari, an expert on the subject.

Cristiana. Welcome, Francesca.

Francesca. Thank you, it is nice to be here.

C. If we wanted to describe the demographic characteristics of the country's internal areas in a few words, how could we summarise them?

F. We can say that in ten years, while the cities lost 1.4% of their population, the municipalities in internal areas lost 5% of their residents. More than triple, therefore.

C. Really!

F. But there's more. The National Strategy for Internal Areas divided these municipalities into three categories: intermediate, peripheral, and ultra-peripheral, depending on their distance from the cities that offer the services you also mentioned ...

C. That is, hospitals, schools, and railway stations, right?

F. Right. I was saying that given these three categories, for ultra-peripheral municipalities - so the furthest from the cities - the population loss from 2014 to 2024 was as high as 7.7%, which is more than five times the loss in the cities.

C. So, the demographic crisis 'bites' much harder in the small internal municipalities.

F. Yes, and it's speeding up.

C. This is because young people leave to seek their future - and consequently to start families - where there are more job opportunities.

F. Exactly, they move towards the cities or abroad. And if they are young graduates and do not return - because if they return, they bring new skills with them, and that is positive - if they do not return, as I was saying, the small municipalities are impoverished of valuable human capital.

Between those who left and those who returned, the balance remains negative: inland areas lost about 160 000 young graduates between 2002 and 2022.

C. While older people remain.

F. In fact, the problem is precisely the lack of young population. Births are falling and the population is ageing, especially in ultra-peripheral municipalities. There, for every 100 children up to 14 years old, there are 243 older people aged at least 65.

C. Well over the double.

F. ...and with an overall older population, the mortality rate is also higher compared to that of urban centres. However, life expectancy at 60 tells us an interesting story.

C. What do you mean?

F. Nationally, life expectancy once people reach 60 decreases as one moves away from large centres, but it rises again in ultra-peripheral municipalities.

C. So, do people live better in places further away from large cities?

F. It's a hypothesis: less pollution means a lower incidence of respiratory tract cancers, and the pace of life is more relaxed... In the South, moreover, all municipalities in inland areas – not just the most peripheral ones – outperform large cities.

C. Good news in a future that doesn't look rosy... what scenarios can we foresee for inland areas?

F. If current conditions persist and the trend does not change, in 20 years, at a national level, 80% of municipalities in inland areas are bound to depopulation... And the South will fare the worst.

C. Again these damned differences between the North and the South...

F. Sure, also because of the demographic support that immigration can provide, the attractiveness -in terms of job opportunities - of a small municipality in the Dolomites is different compared to a small town in Irpinia.

C. Therefore, in order to save the inland municipalities, a change of direction is needed.

F. An urgent change! And the NRRP can do a lot through investments aimed at strengthening the National Strategy for Inner Areas.

C. Yes, we need to strengthen services – not just focus on tourism and food and wine traditions... which nevertheless are interesting. Thank you, Francesca, for being with us.

F. Thank you and see you next time.

What does it mean, however, to live in one of the larger municipalities? It depends on many factors. Our cities are different from each other and differ internally from area to area. That is why we asked Simona Mastroluca – who participated in a dedicated focus – to give us an overview of our metropolitan cities.

Cristiana. Hello and welcome.

Simona. Thank you and hello everyone.

C. So, you worked on this focus based on data from the 2021 permanent census, on administrative data, and also on indicators related to the availability of services in the area. A focus dedicated to metropolitan cities and their outskirts, right?

S. Right, and I can already tell you that the concept of the periphery needs to be re-evaluated.

C. What do you mean?

S. We are used to thinking of cities as places where the centre offers better living conditions, while socio-economic decline progresses as we move away from it. This is not the case, or at least not always the case.

C. Tell us more.

S. It depends on where areas of social vulnerability are located within cities. It's not impossible for them to be in the centre.

C. An example?

S. Rome. In Rome, in very central areas, we have indicators associated with the vulnerability I mentioned.

C. Which indicators?

S. I'll list a few for you: ageing index, proportion of young people who are not studying or working, percentage of the population who have not completed lower secondary education, unemployment rate, households with potential economic hardships, elderly people living alone in a home they do not own, early departure from the education system. So, also in central areas of Rome, we have values for these indicators that are higher than the city average.

C. Interesting....listen, what do you mean by "families with potential economic hardships"? Who are they?

S. In our research they are families with children where the reference person is under 64 years old and no member is employed or receives an occupational pension.

C. And these can also be found in the centre of Rome?

S. Look, on average in Rome these families make up 2.3% of the total, but it exceeds 3% in several areas outside the GRA, the Great Ring Junction, and also in some central areas.

C. How are other cities doing in this regard?

S. In Naples and Palermo we have a significantly higher percentage of vulnerable families – that is, in the conditions I mentioned earlier.

C. Meaning?

S. In Naples, it is 6 families out of 100, but there are areas where the number exceeds 8%. And almost half of the families in Naples do not own the home they live in..

C. And in Palermo?

S. A similar situation as Naples, with an average percentage of 5.8% of families with potential economic hardships. However, here the situation regarding home ownership is a little less complicated: the proportion of families who do not own the home they live in is lower, for example, than in Turin and Milan.

C. Earlier, you mentioned another indicator concerning elderly people that can highlight socio-economic hardship...

S. Yes, people aged 67 and over who live alone, without owning their home.

C. And in which cities are they found, mostly?

S. In Milan, we have the highest percentage, 12.6%. This is followed by Reggio Calabria (10.4), Venice (10), Bologna (10), and Turin (9.4)

C. Listen, earlier you spoke about differences between specific city areas, but how do you achieve such fine sub-municipal detail? I mean, how do you relate indicators to specific city areas?

S. Well, in most cases, we can rely on data relating to 756 000 territorial units, namely the census sections, and this allows us to analyse the national territory with a lens I would call effective, don't you think?

C. Certainly, and with an update capability that the old ten-year census couldn't even dream of.

S. Yes, the permanent census also has this advantage.

C. Let us return to the metropolitan cities.

S. What else would you like to talk about, in particular?

C. I would you like to talk about young people.

S. As you know, Italy has a rather high ageing index.

C. I know, I know and I remind our listeners that in our country for every young person up to 14 years old we have two elderly people aged at least 65.

S. It must be said that, in general, the ratio improves in the areas of municipalities where we have a higher percentage of foreigners.

C. For example?

S. For example, in Turin there is an area in the North where the number of foreigners is more significant and the ratio between young people and elderly people is much more balanced, I would say it's almost even. In Milan, on the contrary, in 18 of the 88 sub-municipal areas considered, the ratio is 3 to 1.

C. Do you mean three elderly people for every young person?

S. Exactly, and in almost all of these 18 areas, the proportion of foreigners is lower than the municipal average.

C. So the correlation is confirmed.

S. But it's not a rule, for example in Palermo the relationship between the ageing index and the incidence of foreigners is not so clear. We have neighbourhoods with a low ageing index and a high foreign presence, and others where the ageing index is still low but the presence of foreign residents is also low.

C. Well, our cities offer us a rather varied picture.

S. Absolutely. By the way, the focus on metropolitan areas was the subject of a parliamentary hearing, so for those who wish to delve deeper, texts and statistical tables are available on the Istat website..

C. And like all hearings, you can find it under the heading 'communications and analyses'. Thank you, Simona, for this interesting chat.

S. Thanks to you.

To conclude, the places of living in our country are highly differentiated: on the one hand, we have internal areas often rich in traditions and natural resources, but at risk of depopulation due to a shortage of services; on the other hand, metropolitan areas that offer a very varied internal picture, and not only because of the historical differences between the North and the South. The demographic crisis affects both small and large realities at the same time. It is important that official statistics are able to record all this and to provide the various aspects in fine detail. This information is useful to identify areas of greater criticality and to plan targeted actions to promote balanced and sustainable growth in the territories.

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

Sara Maulo, Manuela Bartolotta, Francesca Licari, Sara Miccoli, Gerardo Gallo, Angela Ferruzza, Simona Mastroluca, Raffaele Ferrara, Fabio Lipizzi and Luigi Costanzo worked on this episode.