



DATI ALLA MANO

I Podcast

THE OTHER POVERTY

There is not only material poverty; there is another, equally limiting one: educational poverty. But what exactly does this definition refer to?

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

In this episode, we will address a complex phenomenon: educational poverty. It is complex because many factors contribute to it, but Istat, through a scientific commission to which various universities, bodies, and institutions contributed, has attempted to measure it.

So, as we anticipated, the issue is far from trivial. First, what do we mean by educational poverty? We all agree on the term 'poverty': it means shortage, lack. And if this lack is attributed to education in a broad sense – therefore not only to school education – if it also includes the possibility of developing one's potential through discoveries and experiences, then everything becomes more complex

So, in 2023, Istat established a scientific Commission dedicated to this topic. Imagine a group of 50 experts from various backgrounds; to be clear, it included representatives from academia and institutions, as well as Save the Children, UNESCO, UNICEF, Invalsi (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System), CNR (National Research Council of Italy), and many others. In short, this group first outlined a conceptual framework and set a target.

Specifically, it defined educational poverty as a phenomenon resulting from the family, social, and territorial context in which children and young people aged zero to 19 live – they are the identified target. And I'll stop here because I wonder: how do you measure a phenomenon that depends on different elements – the family, the school, the area where one lives? I asked **Miria Savioli** who is here in the studio with us.

Cristiana: Hello Miria, welcome.

Miria: Thank you and hello everyone.

C. I'll start straight away with the difficult question: how do you measure a phenomenon that has more than one dimension?

M. As you do with phenomena that do not exist in nature. Let me explain: educational poverty is not directly observable because it is a conceptual construct. We are the ones who decided what it consists of, and therefore we can define indicators that are traceable to our construction to measure the phenomenon as a whole.

C. For example?

M. I can give you 78 examples, because that is how many indicators we have selected.

C. Oh dear, that is a very long list... but can you tell me about some of them?

M. Just as an example, to help you understand, one indicator we have selected is sports participation, another is the presence of books at home, and yet another is the number of available places in public and private nurseries.

C. And on these aspects, overall, how are we doing in Italy?

M. We know that children and young people aged between 3 and 19 who do not play sports account for more than a third of the total (35.6%); we also know that almost four out of ten (37%) children and young people up to 19 years old live in homes where there are at most – I repeat, at most – 25 books, and that places in nurseries can satisfy about a third of the potential demand.

C. And these are already signals that must be taken into account.

M. Yes, although at a national level we also have positive signals; for example, early school leaving is sharply decreasing, and we have reached the European Union's 2030 target of remaining below 9% five years ahead of schedule.

C. Thank goodness!

M. However, to provide an overall interpretation, from the 78 individual indicators, we obtained 7 composite indices thanks to a method called AMPI, which is used to measure multidimensional phenomena. In short, individual indicators are aggregated to form indices that summarise them.

C. I imagine the process is complicated.

M. It is a statistical method, and statistics knows how to summarise complexity.

C. Right, but let's recap: you say you've worked on a conceptual framework, shall we go into more detail?

M. Well, first of all, to define educational poverty, we identified two areas: resources and outcomes. Resources are the educational and cultural ones available both within the family – earlier we gave the example of books in the home – and in the school and territorial context – think of the presence of libraries, museums, public green spaces...

C. I understand, a shortage of socio-cultural stimuli within the family can be compensated for by the school or by facilities available in the area.

M. Exactly. Outcomes, on the other hand, are the results at an individual level. So, this includes the cognitive skills acquired, but also what we call soft skills, meaning personal, relational, and social abilities.

C. So, it's not just about skills acquired at school, such as linguistic or mathematical ones, etc.

M. No, of course, those are easily measurable. We also need to consider, for example, communication skills, teamwork, critical thinking, emotional management, autonomy... in short, many different aspects.

C. I understand the complexity. But what exactly do the 7 composite indices you have identified refer to?

M. Well, three refer to the contexts in which our children and young people live: the family, school, and local area, and together they form the composite index of resources available; two concern skills, cognitive and personal and social ones, and together they form the composite referring to individual outcomes.

C. Right, tell us what these indices tell us.

M. Wait, we need to take another step, the one that concerns territorial typologies.

C. What do you mean?

M. Well, within its regional borders, Italy presents different urbanisation patterns; we have large cities, small cities, and rural areas. The Commission has identified 62 territorial units to which educational poverty indicators can be referred.

C. Why is this important?

M. Because the aim of all the Commission's work is to provide data to the different administrative levels to combat educational poverty. Think of inland areas, where there might be primary schools with children of different ages in a single class; that territory will have different needs compared to a large city. Therefore, each region has been divided into three different urbanisation areas, and we have created maps that allow us to identify different educational poverty situations in the territory and monitor them over time.

C. Interesting. So, tell us about the territories.

M. At this point, however, I would like to hand over to my colleague, **Barbara Baldazzi**, I don't want to hog the limelight.

C. Certainly, let's have a change of guard. Welcome to you too, Barbara.

Barbara: Thank you

C. So, tell us about the situation in our regions. I would say let's start with the good news.

B. Ok, first I need to specify that to describe the different territorial realities – to give you the good news and the less good news – we have defined a national average that is equal to 100; territories with a score below 100 are those with a better situation, while those with an index exceeding this average value are those most at risk of educational poverty.

C. Ok, all clear

B. So, the best situations regarding the overall available educational and cultural resources are found in the autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano, in Marche, in Toscana, and in Emilia Romagna; in all these cases, we are referring to city areas.

C. Interesting.

B. Regarding the outcomes – so we are referring to cognitive, personal, and social skills – we find better situations than the average again in the cities of Marche, in the rural areas of Umbria, and in the cities of Abruzzo.

C. Well, Marche achieved a clean sweep!

B. Yes, definitely.

C. Now, however, we must mention the bad news.

B. Regarding resources, the worst situations are in the rural areas of Sicilia, Calabria, and Liguria. As for the outcomes, the most concerning situation is in Sardegna, both in large and small cities, and in rural areas.

C. So the situation in Sardegna needs attention if the outcomes in all areas are below average.

B. Yes, I would say so.

C. Any other detailed data?

B. We can explore and map the availability of educational and cultural resources by delving into the specifics of different contexts.

C. Tell us.

B. So, the family context shows a polarised Italy, with a worse situation in Sicilia, Calabria, and parts of Campania and Liguria. In contrast, school context resources are more homogeneous across the territory.

C. Uhm, that means our schools offer similar opportunities.

B. And there is another interesting aspect: regarding cognitive skills, we again have a polarised Italy, with the worst situations in the South. However, concerning personal and social skills, it is precisely in the South that we find some of the best performances.

C. Practically a comeback for the South.

B. In a way, yes.

C. Listen, but returning to Italy as a whole, children and young people up to 19 years old represent what proportion of the population living in our country?

B. In 2025 they are 16.9% of the total.

C. So I would say a significant share.

B. Yes, and above all, young people represent the future of the country, so investment is important. The very existence of the phenomenon of educational poverty affects the whole of society because it can translate in the future into unemployment, inactivity, and a scarcity of human capital.

C. I understand. I understand, and I wanted to reflect on some data I read that struck me: 58% of state schools do not have a gymnasium. 51.1% of state nursery and primary schools do not have a canteen. 41.5% of public and private schools of all levels are not accessible to pupils with motor disabilities.

B. Yes, these are data we know from our research. And certainly, they deserve consideration.

C. Another question: what is the difference between the condition of educational poverty and the risk of educational poverty?

B. We consider children and young people to be in a state of educational poverty if they have not reached – relative to their age group – a level of competence necessary to avoid forms of social exclusion in various areas of life. Conversely, those who live in contexts deprived of educational and cultural resources and opportunities are at risk of educational poverty. Let's be clear, this is not a destiny, but a risk, precisely.

C. Thank you very much, Barbara, for the information you have given us.

B. Thank you all and goodbye.

So, we have seen that measuring a multidimensional phenomenon like educational poverty is possible thanks to statistics. We have also seen that the situation is quite varied across the territory, but that the available information can be of great support for consciously managing the territory and offering our children and young people tools to develop their potential. And at this point, I cannot help but recall Article 3 of our Constitution, which states: "It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the

effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country.”

I am Cristiana Conti and this was Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast by the Italian 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

Miria Savioli, Barbara Baldazzi, and Manuela Bartolotta collaborated on this episode.