POPULATION REPORT 2025

TOWARDS A POSITIVE DEMOGRAPHY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Italian Association for Population Studies

Edited by : Daniele Vignoli, Anna Paterno, Manuela Stranges

SUMMARY

The new **Population Report** of the Italian Association for Population Studies, edited by **Daniele Vignoli** and **Anna Paterno**, challenges the dominant and often pessimistic narrative surrounding Italy's demography. At a time when commentators and the media portray a rather bleak picture of the country's future, "positive demography" offers a proactive and constructive approach to the dynamics at play. Italy is facing major issues: low fertility, new family dynamics, international migration and the presence of foreign populations, changes in health conditions and longevity, to name just a few. Population studies provide the necessary foundation to anticipate, understand, and manage demographic change. The authors invite us to view the ongoing transformations more as opportunities than as threats, offering new interpretative frameworks and suggesting targeted policies to successfully tackle the challenges of the coming years.

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

A POSITIVE DEMOGRAPHY APPROACH FOR ITALY

Daniele Vignoli & Anna Paterno

This ebook—a summary of the recently published Italian volume **Population Report 2025. Towards a Positive Demography** (Vignoli and Paterno, Il Mulino, 2025)—offers a distinct and, in many ways, novel interpretation of Italy's socio-demographic dynamics through the lens of positive demography. In contrast to the prevailing alarmist narratives that dominate media and public discourse, it presents a more balanced perspective on population change. Embracing positive demography does not mean denying or downplaying the very real demographic challenges facing the country. Rather, it calls for a shift in perspective: acknowledging that we are undergoing a profound transition into a qualitatively different phase—neither better nor worse, but new. This approach encourages us to recognize the opportunities embedded within demographic shifts, while actively engaging with the challenges they entail.

Italy, like many advanced societies, is witnessing major transformations: increased longevity and better health in later life, a persistent gap between desired and actual fertility, changing family structures, international migration flows, educational improvements, and evolving patterns of youth autonomy. These trends are reshaping not only population structures but also social expectations and institutional needs. For instance, the school dropout rate and the share of young people not in education or employment have significantly declined in recent years—especially in some regions—while new forms of family life are increasingly accepted. Migration, despite its complexities, has helped mitigate population decline in the short term. Moreover, some areas of the country are beginning to exhibit encouraging signs of demographic well-being.

Nonetheless, real challenges persist: very low fertility, delayed transitions to adulthood, inequalities across regions and social groups, and mounting pressure on welfare and pension systems due to population ageing. Yet these issues need not be interpreted solely through a lens of crisis. A long-term, ev-

idence-based outlook reveals space for action, innovation, and resilience.

By 2050, Italy is expected to exhibit a radically different demographic profile, one in which post-parental and post-retirement individuals represent the largest share of the population. This marks an unprecedented societal configuration, with no historical template to guide us. Understandably, fears about demographic decline—frequently expressed through dramatic metaphors such as *demographic winter* or *population meltdown*—have fueled both public concern and scholarly debate. But relying on outdated 19th- or 20th-century models to interpret today's demographic patterns risks misdiagnosis. The discontinuities we are experiencing signal the beginning of a new demographic regime that will transform life at all levels—individual, familial, territorial, and national.

A recent global expert survey on demographic change (European Commission 2023), underscores the need to focus future demographic policies on sustainable development and human capabilities—rather than chasing numerical targets. Experts agree on the importance of stabilizing welfare and healthcare systems while also supporting young generations. Crucially, the strongest consensus in the survey was not around pessimistic views of population trends, but around the imperative to align demographic thinking with broader social and developmental goals.

The volume, edited by the Italian Association for Population Studies (AISP), aligns with this emerging paradigm. It challenges the dominant narrative of demographic doom and instead proposes a reflective and constructive reading of Italy's demographic present and future. Through the lens of positive demography, the volume does not shy away from hard truths—it recognizes the complexity of issues such as persistent low fertility, youth employment precarity, shifting migration patterns, and growing longevity. But it also emphasizes that these trends are part of a wider transformation—offering possibilities for social innovation, policy reform, and institutional adaptation.

Scientific research plays a vital role in this reorientation, providing both the analytical tools and the empirical evidence needed to better understand and navigate demographic change. Across its chapters, this volume guides the reader through current dynamics and explores actionable pathways forward. It invites policymakers, scholars, and citizens alike to view demographic transformation not merely as a threat, but as a catalyst for renewal.

One example of this reframing is the way we think about ageing. Traditional indicators, such as the ageing index (Pop 65+/Pop 0–14), often rely on a static threshold of 65 years to define "old age," reinforcing a negative perception of ageing populations. However, as recent studies (e.g., Strozza et al., 2024) suggest, ageing can be understood differently if we shift the metric from chrono-

logical age to remaining life expectancy. A 65-year-old in 2024, for instance, lives significantly longer and in better health than a peer from 2000. Adjusting for this evolving reality, Italy's prospective ageing index in 2023 drops from 193 to 164 elderly people per 100 youth—suggesting a less alarming, and more realistic, demographic balance (Figure 1). Recognizing and leveraging such shifts is key to shaping the future contours of what we might call the *next Italy*.

Figure 1. Old-age indices (Pop 65+/Pop 0–14) and prospective old-age indices (population exceeding the prospective old-age threshold / Pop 0–14) for the resident population in Italy (per 100), 2000–2024.
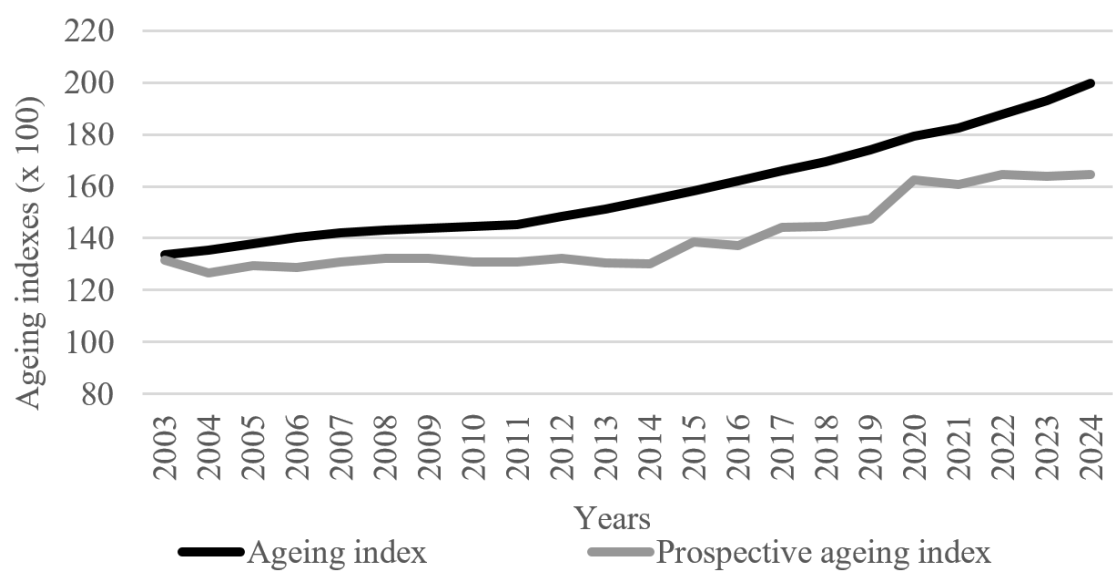
Note: Adapted from Strozza et al. (2024).

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European Commission: Joint Research Centre, Icardi, R., Gailey, N., Goujon, A., Natale, F. et al. (2023), Global demography expert survey on the drivers and consequences of demographic change, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/139588

Strozza, C., Egidi, V., Testa, M. R., & Caselli, G. (2024). Ageing and diversity: Inequalities in longevity and health in low-mortality countries. Demographic research, 50, 347-376.

Vignoli, D., Paterno, A. (2025, Eds). Rapporto sulla Popolazione – Verso una demografia positiva [Towards a positive demography]. Bologna: il Mulino.

CHAPTER 1

BIRTHS AND FERTILITY

Cinzia Castagnaro, Giammarco Alderotti,
Alessandra Burgio & Sara Miccoli

In a scenario where Italy reached a new negative record for births in 2023 (just under 380 thousand), the decline in births is occurring alongside an increase in the share of children born outside marriage (now more than 40%) and those born to at least one foreign parent (now more than 20%).

Since 2008, the year in which the number of births reached the highest level since the beginning of the 2000s (576,659), there has been a 34.1% decline, amounting to nearly 200 thousand fewer births in just 15 years. This decrease is partly due to structural changes in the female population of childbearing age; the number of women in this age group has been steadily declining as a consequence of the drop in fertility and births that began in the second half of the 1970s.

Specifically, between 2008 and early 2024, there were 2.3 million fewer women of childbearing age. Moreover, their age structure has become older, meaning there are fewer younger women. The younger segments of the population continue to shrink year after year, with a particularly sharp decline in the number of women aged 30–34—an age group in which women typically have children—especially from 2008 onwards. Another factor contributing to the decline in births since 2008 is the drop in fertility, which is conventionally measured through the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), or the average number of children per woman.

Breaking down the decrease in births over the past 15 years into two components—population structure and reproductive behavior—it is estimated that between 2008 and 2023, the change in the age structure of the female population alone accounts for two-thirds of the observed decline in births, while the remaining third is due to lower fertility rates (1.20 children per woman instead of 1.44). Italy also stands out for the steady increase in the mean age at childbirth. Compared to 1995, the mean age at childbirth has risen by more than two years, reaching 32.5 years in 2023.

Regarding reproductive behaviors,

the crucial issue is bridging the gap between desired fertility and realized fertility; among those without children who state that they do not want children in the future (10 out of 100 women aged 18-49 years), 8 out of 10 report difficulties preventing them from fulfilling their desire for parenthood. Structural interventions are needed to ensure a smooth transition to adulthood: in contemporary Italy, two sources of income and adequate family resources are now considered necessary conditions for having children. The demographic trap, caused by decades of low fertility and significantly contributing to Italy's population aging, can only be unlocked by investing in younger generations.

Medically assisted reproduction (MAR) also plays an important role in ensuring reproductive rights in contemporary Italy, where the average age at childbirth is increasingly higher, and infertility issues are becoming more widespread. The number of live births resulting from assisted reproductive technology increased from over 12,000 in 2013 to almost 16,000 in 2022, marking a 29.9% rise. As a proportion of total live births, the percentage of babies born through MAR rose from 2.4% in 2013 to 4.1% in 2022. The overall average age figure shows high variability depending on the mother's age and the birth order. Out of every 100 live births conceived through MAR, 38 were born to mothers aged 40 and over. Additionally, among first-order births, the contribution of MAR in 2022 was 6.7% across all ages and 32.1% for live births conceived through ART by mothers aged 40 and over.

Figure 2. Total fertility rate (TFR, left axes) and Mean age at childbirth (right axes). Italy. Years 1995-2023
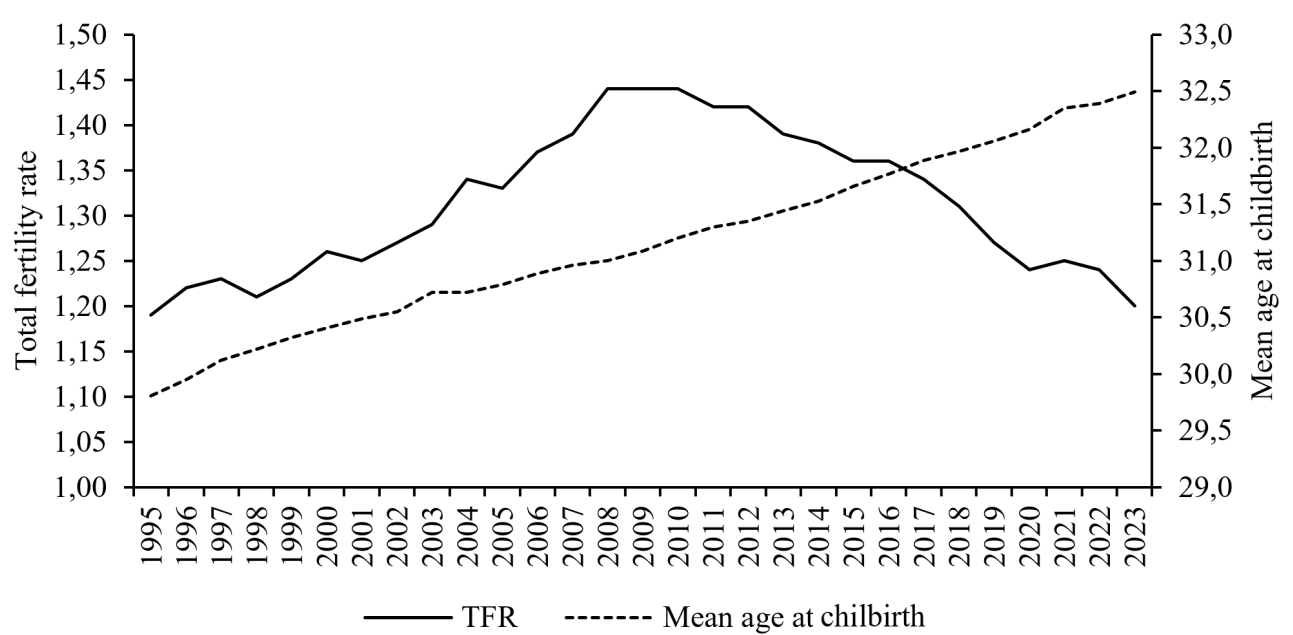
CHAPTER 2

YOUTH AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Giancarlo Ragozini, Romina Fraboni & Alessandro Rosina

Recent data indicates that the situation of young Italians is improving, despite ongoing structural challenges. There has been a significant reduction in school dropout rates and NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training). Additionally, youth employment has recovered, and fewer young people are living with their parents, which may suggest a growing capability to realize the desire for independence.

Italy is experiencing a progressive demographic "dejuvenation." The average number of children per woman has remained below the replacement level (2.1) since the 1970s and below 1.5 since 1984, leading to profound demographic shifts. In 1951, individuals under 30 constituted the majority of the population; today, their share has nearly halved (27% in 2024), the lowest in Europe. Since 1981, the under-30 population has declined from 25 to 16 million, while those over 65 have doubled from 7.5 to over 14 million.

Educational levels have improved, with the share of 25-34-year-olds holding at least a high school diploma rising to 80.1% in 2023 and the percentage of graduates reaching 30.6%. However, educational attainment remains strongly influenced by parental educational levels. School dropout rates are decreasing across all regions, with particularly positive figures in Central Italy (7%) compared to the European average (9.5%), while the South remains more critical (14.6%).

The NEET phenomenon is also showing a positive trend, with a reduction in territorial disparities. Between 2018 and 2023, the gap between Central and Northern Italy narrowed from 4 to 1.5 percentage points, while the difference between the South and the national average decreased from over 10 to 8.6 percentage points. However, Italy still ranks second in Europe for NEET prevalence.

Youth employment rates indicate a recovery, though they remain below the European average. Between 2018 and 2023, employment among the

15-24-year-olds increased from 17.6% to 20.4%, and among the 25-34-year-olds from 61.9% to 68.1%. However, territorial and gender disparities remain critical.

Another significant issue is prolonged family cohabitation: in 2023, 63.2% of 18-34-year-olds lived with their parents, down from 67% in 2021 but still higher than the 58% recorded in 2010. Women tend to leave the family home earlier than men, but in recent years, they have also increased their permanence, reducing the gender gap.

The transition to adulthood is characterized by delayed parenthood. Compared to the early 2000s, the percentage of partnered mothers aged 25-34 has decreased from 37% to 27%, while the proportion of fathers in the same age group has fallen from 21% to 13%. Additionally, there is a rising preference for cohabitation over marriage.

Despite these improvements, without structural policies on education, work-life balance, active employment measures, and housing access, these positive trends may not lead to meaningful changes in life trajectories and professional fulfillment for new generations.

Figure 3. Young people (aged 15-34) neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) by macroregion.
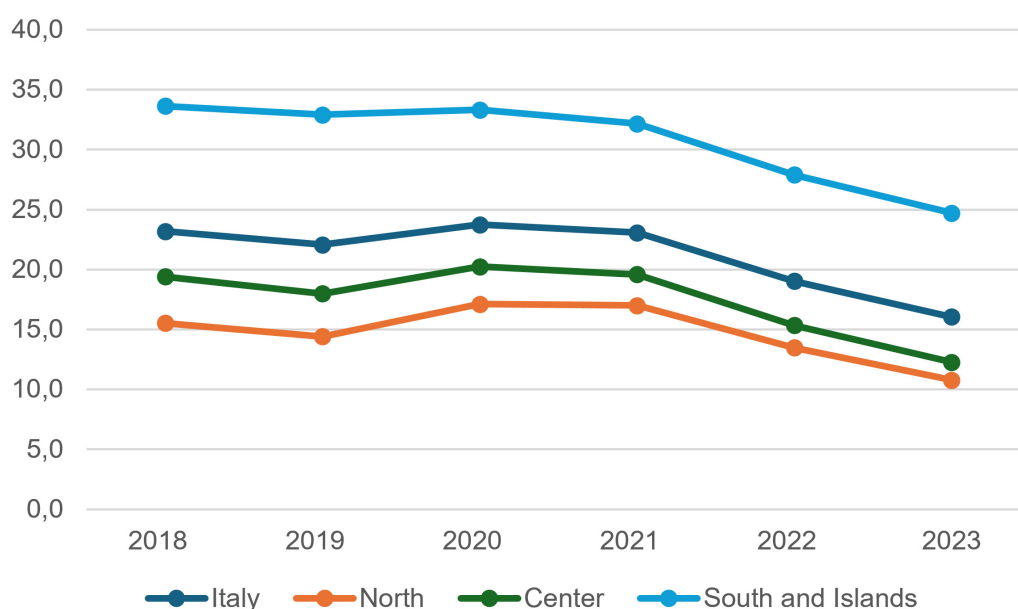
CHAPTER 3

NEW AND 'NEWEST NEW' FAMILIES

Agnese Vitali, Silvia Dardanelli, Francesca Rinesi,
Martina Lo Conte & Gabriele Ruiu

In 2003, the most common family type was still the couple with children, which accounted for 42% of families. Twenty years later, in 2023, this percentage has decreased to 31%. In particular, couples with co-residing children aged 0-19 years declined from 27.5% to 19%. On the contrary, single-person households account for about one in three households in 2023, up from one in four in 2003, and may reach almost 40% by 2043. Single-person households constitute a heterogeneous group of profiles, the predominant being: widowed women aged 65+, never-married and divorced/separated adult men and single youth. Also, second marriages doubled between 2003 and 2023, linked to the rise of divorces even at older ages; the share of non-marital cohabitations doubled in just over a decade, from 6% in 2010 to 12% in 2023; and over 18,000 civil unions among same-sex partners were celebrated since June 2016, when they were legally recognized. The legal system does not grant same-sex couples access to medically assisted reproduction or adoption, nor does it allow them to be legally recognized as "families" (see, e.g., the Senate's approval of the criminalization of surrogacy even when performed in countries where it is legally permitted). Yet, existing legal barriers to parenthood are not insurmountable: according to the permanent census, same-sex couples with co-residing children were at least 739 in 2021, up from 529 in 2011 –a small but non-negligible number attesting the growth of a "newest-new" family form.

On the one hand, these trends suggest a greater ability to self-determine, allowing everyone to fulfil their aspirations, even when these do not conform to prevailing social norms. Indeed, the acceptance by the general population of new family forms, such as adoption among same-sex couples, is slowly growing. On the other hand, public policies seem to remain anchored to the image of "family" as the nuclear couple, especially in relation to parenthood. The rights of new

reproductive and family models gradually emerge not through legislative action, but rather through decisions of the Constitutional Court and judicial rulings, which shape their evolution case by case. The most recent example is the declaration, in March 2025, of the unconstitutionality of the ban on international adoption for singles.

Families in Italy are evolving at a faster pace than policies and laws. This misalignment between social and legal change means that some family structures, despite becoming increasingly common, are not adequately protected. The emerging family dynamics—particularly elderly individuals living alone, LGBTQ+ families, the desire for parenthood among singles—pose a significant challenge to an institutional framework that remains anchored to the nuclear (heterosexual) family model, which relies on unconditional intergenerational support during the life course.

Table 1. Household types in Italy (percentages). Years 2003*, 2013*, 2023*, 2033**, 2043**.

Household type	2003	2013	2023	2033	2043
Households with at least one family unit	**72.6**	**67.8**	**63.1**	**59.5**	**57.1**
Couples with non-co-residing children	20.9	20.5	20.4	21.4	21.8
Couples with co-residing children	42.2	36.2	30.8	26.2	23.0
of which with chidren up to 19 years	*27.5*	*23.5*	*19.3*	*15.9*	*14.3*
of which with chidren aged 20+	*14.7*	*12.7*	*11.5*	*10.3*	*8.7*
Single-parent household	8.2	9.7	10.8	10.8	11.1
of which single mothers	*7.0*	*8.0*	*8.8*	*8.6*	*8.6*
of which single fathers	*1.2*	*1.6*	*1.9*	*2.2*	*2.5*
Households with two or more family units	1.3	1.5	1.1	1.1	1.1
Households without a family units	**27.3**	**32.2**	**37.0**	**40.5**	**42.9**
Single-person household	25.5	30.2	34.4	37.7	39.9
of which men	*9.4*	*12.4*	*15.6*	*17.0*	*17.4*
of which women	*16.1*	*17.8*	*18.8*	*20.7*	*22.5*
of which aged 65+	*13.4*	*14.7*	*16.1*	*19.6*	*23.0*
of which aged 75+	*7.8*	*9.6*	*10.5*	*12.4*	*15.3*
Multi-person households	1.8	2.1	2.6	2.8	3.0
Total households	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

* Analysis on data from the survey Aspects of Daily Life. Data for 2003, 2013, and 2023 refer to two-year averages 2002/2003, 2012/2013 e 2022/2023.
** ISTAT data on household projections with base January 1, 2023 (https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/previsioni-della-popolazione-residente-e-delle-famiglie-base-112022/).

CHAPTER 4

MIGRATION AND IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS

Manuela Stranges, Cinzia Conti, Livia Elisa Ortensi,
Salvatore Strozza & Francesca Tosi

Between 2002 and 2023, Italy experienced significant international migration, with over 7.8 million arrivals and 2.37 million departures. The resulting net gain of 5.5 million was almost entirely due to foreign nationals (+6.2 million), as Italians recorded a net emigration of about 700,000. The peak period of immigration was 2007–2011, driven by regularizations and EU enlargement. Immigration persisted during the Mediterranean crisis but slowed with COVID-19. While early flows were dominated by Eastern Europeans, recent migrants increasingly come from South Asia. At the same time, emigration by Italians rose, especially after 2012.

Immigration has significantly shaped Italy's demographic trends. Between 2002 and 2023, the population increased by 2 million—exclusively due to foreign residents, who grew by nearly 4 million. Over the same period, the Italian population declined by 2 million, despite 2.1 million naturalizations. Foreigners contributed both through net migration (+55‰) and a positive natural balance (+14‰). While the 2002–2011 decade saw strong growth (+3.1 million), the following years recorded a decline (-1.1 million), driven by lower migration and natural increase.

Geographically, population growth was concentrated in Central and Northern Italy, while the South lost population due to natural decline and internal emigration. Citizenship acquisition rates were highest in the North (28‰), followed by the Centre (20‰) and South (18‰).

Foreigners also improve Italy's age structure. Their average age is 35.9, compared to 47.1 for Italians. Without migration (Figure 4), the share of over-65s would have risen from 19.1% to 26.2%; instead, it reached 24.3%. The working-age share declined more slowly when foreigners are included. From 2002 to 2024, the working-age population shrank by 752,000—a loss of 3.6 million Italians partly offset by 2.85 million foreigners.

Immigrant women have helped sustain fertility. Between 2002 and 2023, births with at least one foreign parent rose from 48,000 to 81,000, peaking at over 108,000 in 2012. In 2023, 21.3% of births involved

at least one foreign parent. Foreign women's fertility declined (from 2.83 to 1.79), but remains higher than that of Italians (1.14). The average age at childbirth among foreign mothers increased, narrowing the gap with Italian women.

Economically, immigrants fill key roles in medium- to low-skilled sectors, offsetting labour shortages linked to low birth rates and higher youth education levels. Between 2016 and 2020, work permits fell below 15,000/year, leading to irregular work and a 2020 regularization. Political recognition of economic migration has since returned, with 452,000 entries planned by 2025. In 2023, foreign contracts grew by 4.7% (non-EU: +6.7%). Foreigners make up 10% of the workforce, contributing 9% of GDP (€164 billion), with higher shares in agriculture, construction, and hospitality. Foreign entrepreneurship is also rising, with over 775,000 immigrant entrepreneurs. Fiscal contributions are substantial: in 2023, 4.4 million immigrants filed taxes, with 87.2% employed. They paid over €10.1 billion in IRPEF, generating a positive net fiscal balance of €1.2 billion.

Despite this, labour inequalities persist. Immigrants—especially non-EU and women—face higher poverty risk and lower wages, even when educated. Challenges include under-recognition of foreign qualifications and a highly segmented labour market. While immigrants mitigate demographic and economic challenges, better support for integration, citizenship, and social mobility—particularly for women and children—is needed.

In sum, immigration is a structural part of Italy's demographic and economic landscape. It helps counteract ageing and depopulation, supports fertility and key industries, and contributes to public finances. Yet, full benefits require stronger, inclusive integration policies.

Figure 4. Comparison of the Percentage Values of the Population Aged 20–64 (left axis, in grey) and Aged 65 and Over (right axis, in black), for the Total Resident Population and for Italian Citizens Only. Italy, 2002–2024
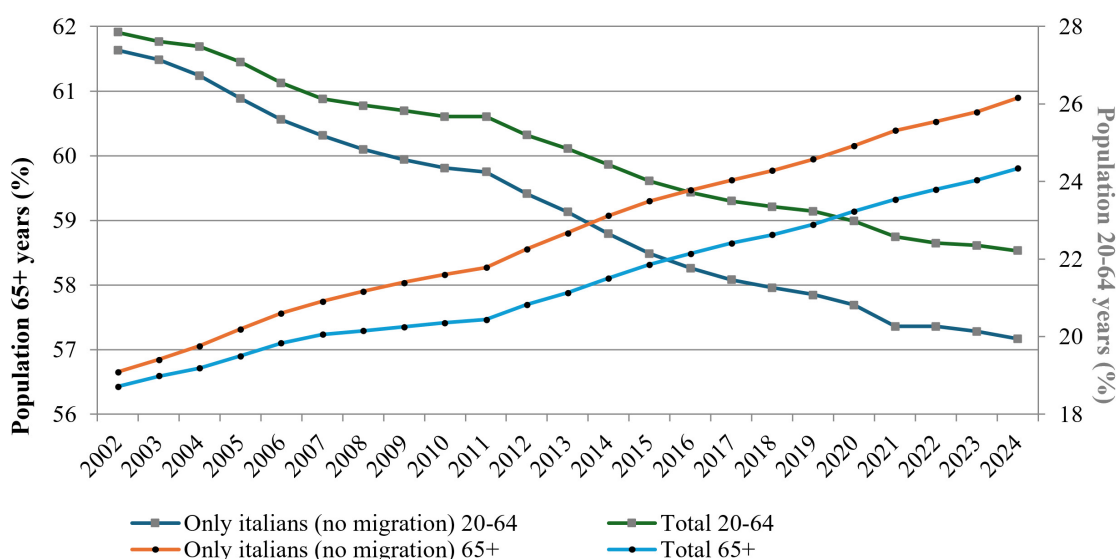
Source: Calculations based on ISTAT data.

CHAPTER 5

HEALTH AND SURVIVAL

Gustavo De Santis, Elisabetta Barbi, Luisa Frova,
Laura Iannucci & Giambattista Salinari

The period 2020–2021, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, saw sharp increases in mortality, not only in Italy. However, prior to these two years, survival trends had been positive, and the crisis was followed by a swift recovery: in 2023 (the latest available data), life expectancy returned to pre-pandemic levels, ranking among the highest in the world. The positive news extends beyond overall mortality to specific causes (nearly all of which declined, except during the COVID-19 period) and territorial disparities, which are relatively small. A partial exception is cardiovascular diseases, which are strongly correlated with ageing and remain the leading cause of death in old age. As illustrated in Figure 5. (referring to men – with a similar trend observed for women, albeit at levels approximately 10 points lower), territorial differences may have even widened during the period under review: despite overall progress, the "Mezzogiorno" (i.e. the South and the Islands) still lags behind.

Figure 5. Standardised mortality rates due to circulatory system diseases, Italy, 2013–2022 (men, per 10,000).
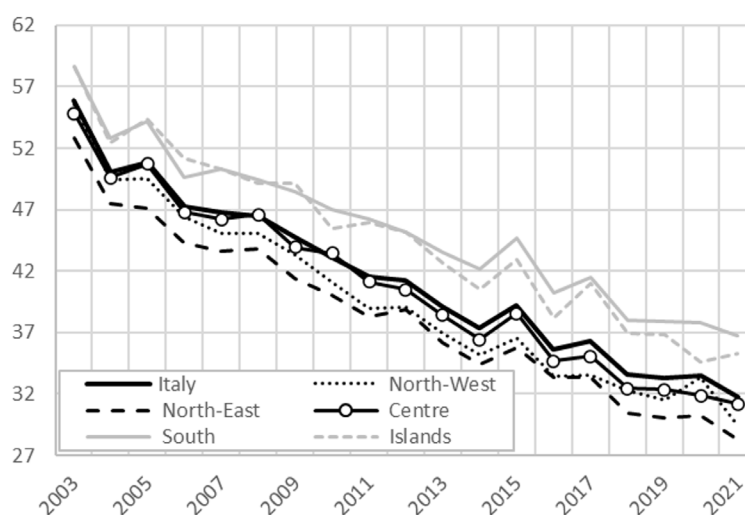

Fonte: Own calculations on ISTAT data

Over the past decade, alongside declining mortality (excluding the COVID-19 period), the quality of life has also improved, as indicated by better perceived health (Figure 6) and the declining prevalence of multimorbidity or severe limitations in daily activities. Progress has been widespread across both age and gender, to the extent that life expectancy at age 65 – which increased globally between 2013 and 2023 (from 18.6 to 19.5 years for men and from 22.0 to 22.4 years for women) – has risen solely due to the component without limitations (in years, from 9.5 to 10.8 for men and from 9.1 to 10.5 for women), while years lived with limitations have decreased.

That said, some less favourable aspects remain: improvements in survival have evidently slowed in recent years, and socio-economic disparities persist. Furthermore, the future remains uncertain, partly due to population ageing and partly because of Italy's high public debt, which may prompt authorities to reduce spending – potentially leading to cuts in health expenditure, preventive measures, and, more broadly, welfare provisions. Consequently, maintaining the high standards Italy has achieved in both the quantity and quality of survival – let alone striving to enhance them further – may prove to be a significant challenge.

Figure 6. Proportion of individuals reporting good perceived health, Italy, 2012 and 2022, by gender.
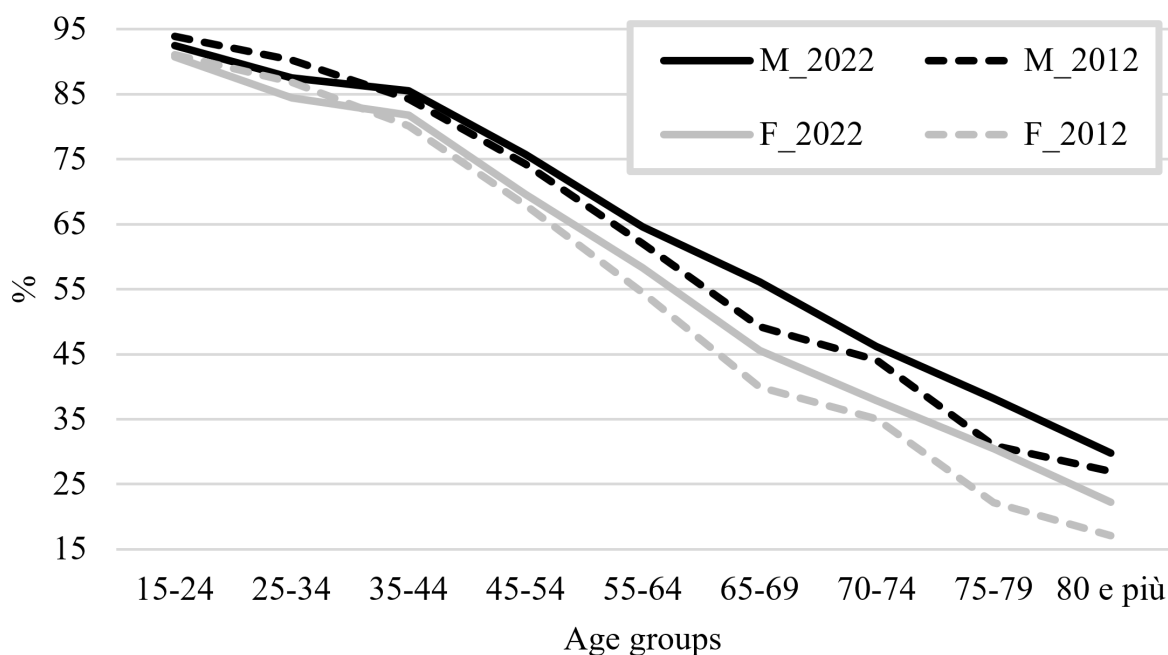
Source: ISTAT, Survey "Aspects of daily life"

CHAPTER 6

UNEXPECTED 'SURPRISES' FROM THE TERRITORIES

Annalisa Busetta, Federico Benassi, Marco Battaglini,
Giorgia Capacci & Roberto Impicciatore

The chapter highlights the unexpected demographic vitality and territorial heterogeneity observed in population dynamics, geographical (or territorial) distribution of foreign residents, and longevity patterns. These findings contrast with broader national demographic concerns, highlighting localized divergences from expected trends. In an aging Italy with declining birth rates, some territories defy negative trends thanks to migratory and social dynamics that bring new life. While the overall Italian population has essentially halted its growth and fertility remains low, the Emilia-Romagna region have experienced significant and beneficial population dynamism, both Italian and foreign citizens, with substantial inflows and outflows. The region stands out for its ability to attract young people and students, creating a virtuous cycle that reduces aging and keeps the population active (Figure 7a).

Similarly, the age distribution of the population at the local level also reveals specificities that highlight 'positive surprises' within a predominantly pessimistic narrative of demographic dynamics. While it is undeniable that Italy is a rapidly and intensely aging country, posing challenges for the healthcare, pension, and social assistance systems, it is also true that the country is characterized by exceptional levels of longevity. Sardinia has known as one the blue zones with exceptional longevity but also in Sicily there are groups of municipalities, which seem to hold the secrets to a long and healthy life and could make this region included in the list of areas with high longevity in the future (Figure 7b).

The chapter also debunks myths about the settlement models of the foreign population. Observing the geographical distribution of the population by citizenship reveals a country characterized by a relatively smaller foreign presence as one moves from North to South (Figure 7c). However, there are some specific foreign com-
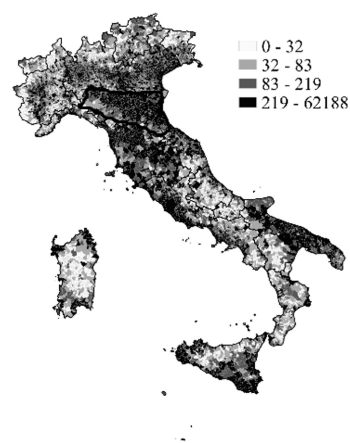
munities are not only concentrated in large cities and sometimes significantly contribute to balancing local demographic decline.

These 'demographic surprises' demonstrate how crucial it is to look beyond national averages and analyse phenomena at the sub-national and, in particular, at the local level, providing valuable insights for more effective and targeted territorial po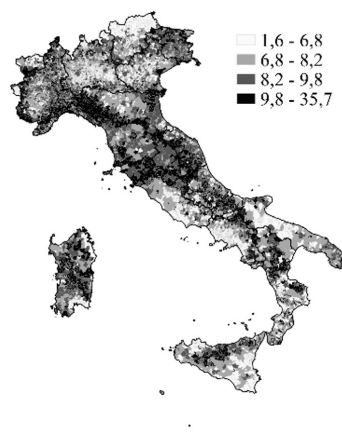licies. This is particularly true (and significant) in It-aly because, unlike other EU countries, it has a highly complex orographic and geomorphological landscape and deeply rooted local identities and spatial disparities. A careful look at the local heterogeneity can highlight geographical peculiarities that may not be visible in a large-scale overall view. Therefore, the chapter urges and pushes into a 'local thinking' approach in demographic studies and contributes to the design of effective and targeted local policies.

Figure 7. Selected demographic indicators. Italian municipalities (year 2023 for a.; and 01.01.2024 for b. and c.). Quantile maps.
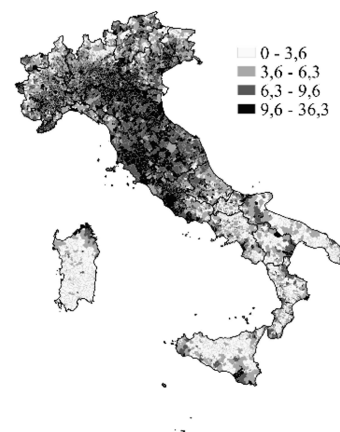
a. Attractiveness of municipalities* **b. «Extreme» aging** [§] **c. The «weights» of foreigners** [°]

*«**Attractiveness**» as the number of registrants new from other municipalities and from abroad;
§ «**Extreme» aging** as percentage of the population aged 80 and over on the Total Pop;
° **The «weights» of foreigners:** Percentage of Foreigners Pop on the Total Pop

Source: own elaboration on Istat data (Demographic balance and resident population by sex on 31st December and Permanent census of population and housing).

CHAPTER 7

GENDER AND MIGRATORY BACKGROUND DISPARITIES IN EDUCATION ACROSS THE ENTIRE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY

Dalit Contini, Raffaele Guetto, Sharon Picco & Valentina Tocchioni

The chapter analyzes gender and migratory background disparities in education, considering learning outcomes, high school choices, university enrollment, and dropout rates.

As seen in most Western countries, girls tend to outperform boys in language proficiency, whereas boys on average achieve higher scores in mathematics. These gender gaps emerge early in primary school and widen with age. By the end of high school, the average gap reaches about 0.25 standard deviations in both subjects. Over the past decade, girls have made slight gains in mathematics and the gap in language proficiency has increased – suggesting that, overall, girls have improved relative to boys.

It is widely recognized that the transition to upper secondary school (age 14) represents a crucial turning point in the educational career in Italy. Students self-select into educational tracks based on academic ability, interests, or career goals. Tracks differ along a vertical dimension (academic, technical, vocational programs), and horizontally,

according to the disciplinary emphasis (humanities, sciences, business). High school choices continue to reflect traditional gender norms: girls show stable preference for academic oriented high-schools, in particular humanities-focused schools, while boys are more likely to choose scientific high schools or technical institutes. Female students have higher university enrollment rates, even net of their better school records, and exhibit slightly lower dropout rates. Whether these advantages will translate into improved gender equality in the labor market remains to be seen.

Disparities related to migratory background are analyzed on second-generation migrants. Achievement differences with native children are very large at the start of primary school but gradually narrow in middle and high school. This trend suggests a potential equalizing effect of the education system and underscores the importance of strengthening school engagement for disadvantaged groups. Students with a migratory background are also much less likely than natives to

choose the academic high school track, but the gap almost disappears when accounting for socioeconomic background and prior performance. Migrant background students are also less likely to enroll in university, but the differential is fully explained by performance and high school choices. University dropout rates have declined and are now in line with those of native peers.

How do disparities related to gender and migratory origin vary across social backgrounds? Gender gaps are wider in lower social strata when they are in favor of girls (in reading comprehension, academic high school choices, and the transition to university). In contrast, when favoring boys (in mathematics and in the choice of STEM-oriented high schools), disparities tend to be larger among more advantaged social groups. These patterns are likely to reflect the increased vulnerability of boys from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

Gaps related to migratory background – always favoring natives – are wider in higher social strata throughout the educational career: in learning outcomes, high school choices, and university enrollment. In the transition to university, disparities are observed only among students from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. These results are consistent with the literature suggesting that immigrant families have less ability to transfer human capital and cultural resources to their children compared to native families.

Figure 8. Gender and migratory background gap in mathematics and Italian achievement between grades 2 and 13.
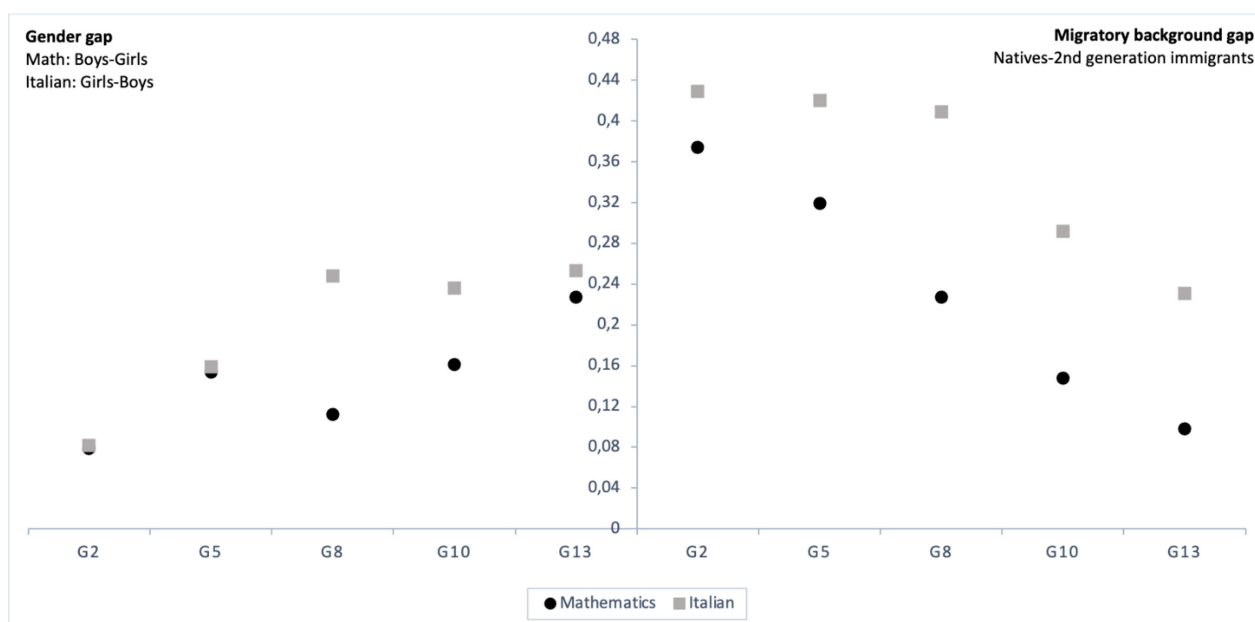
Source: Elaborations on Invalsi data (2012/13-2021/22)
Notes: (i) Standardized scores within each assessment (grade/year). (ii) Reported gaps by gender and migratory background are raw and unadjusted (no control variables). (iii) Confi-dence intervals are omitted, as they are too small to be visually distinguishable from the point estimates.

CHAPTER 8

LIVING CONDITIONS OF THE POPULATION: EVOLUTION AND CHANGES OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS

Emanuela Bologna, Lorenzo Di Biagio, Francesca Dota, Valentina Joffre, Marina Musci, Laura Zannella & Marina Zannella

Over the past twenty years, the Italian population has undergone profound changes not only in terms of demographics but also regarding lifestyles. Analyzing the living conditions of young people, adults, and the elderly, significant changes have emerged across various areas of daily life, alongside the persistence of some factors that have remained stable over time.

The younger generations, increasingly immersed in digitalisation, continue to maintain high levels of participation in different aspects of life, as they did in the past. However, while young people express the highest levels of satisfaction with life overall and in various areas compared to other age groups, they are also characterised by a decline in some lifestyle habits. This trend became particularly evident starting from the pandemic period, when an increase in emotional distress and discomfort was observed among the younger population, marking a shift compared to twenty years ago. Despite these challenges, young people

show significant resilience compared to previous generations, but addressing and resolving the emerging issues is essential to help them move forward positively into the future.

On the other hand, the elderly population has experienced, over the last two decades, improved health conditions, partly due to the adoption of healthier lifestyles. Increased life expectancy has also been accompanied by a rise in social, political, and cultural participation, with older adults becoming more integrated with new technologies. Compared to their peers twenty years ago, today's elderly are more active not only physically but also in social and cultural dimensions, leading to a more active and fulfilling ageing process.

Finally, the adult population, increasingly characterised by uncertainties regarding the transition to this phase of life, faces a context of sacrifices and delays compared to previous generations. Despite this, today's adults manage to maintain

relatively more stable situations compared to those of twenty years ago. However, behind this apparent stability lie highly differentiated behaviours, depending on the various subgroups of age and the aspects of life conditions considered. For instance, some adults, while in a relatively stable context, face economic, social, and family challenges that were not as pronounced in earlier generations.

In general, the analysis of the changes in the living conditions of different population groups highlights the need to consolidate the improvements achieved, particularly for the elderly, ensuring that these positive living conditions are maintained for future generations. At the same time, it is crucial to address the issues affecting younger people, helping them overcome emotional and social difficulties, and attempting to defuse the signs of deterioration observed in recent years. By doing so, it will be possible to build a future in which all generations can live in well-being and realise their potential.

Figure 9. Ratio of Selected Health Conditions and Lifestyle Indicators for Individuals Aged 65 and Over, by Age Group (Adjusted Parity Indices (a), 2023 vs. 2003 (b)). Italy. Years 2023 and 2003.
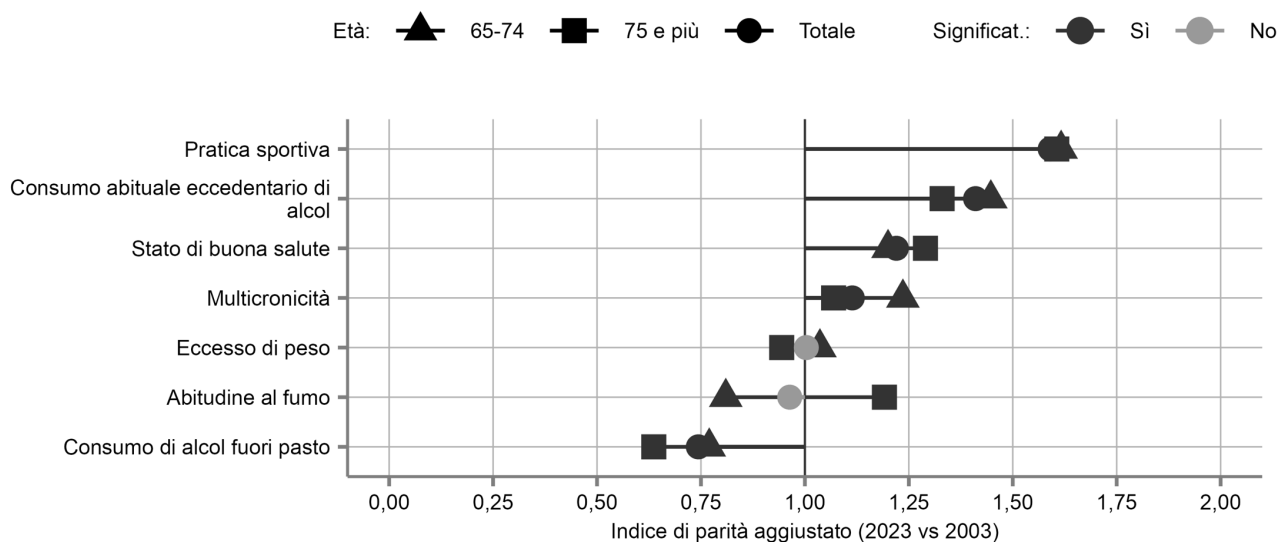
Note:
(a) An index value below 1 indicates a worsening of the indicator in 2023 compared to 2003; conversely, a value above 1 indicates an improvement in 2023 compared to 2003. For indicators with negative polarity (where an increase in the value reflects a deterioration), the inverse ratio is used.
(b) For the "multiple chronic conditions" indicator, the comparison is based on data from the 2003 and 2022 editions of the "Aspects of Daily Life" survey. For the "good health status" indicator, the comparison is based on data from the 2009 and 2023 editions of the same survey.
Source: ISTAT, "Aspects of Daily Life" survey.

CONCLUSIONS

TOWARDS A POSITIVE DEMOGRAPHY: RETHINKING POPULATION FUTURES

Francesco C. Billari

How can we envision a "positive demography" for the future? This volume proposes an approach that merges scientific rigor with political realism, offering a constructive lens through which to understand population change. Rather than reacting to demographic trends as immutable fates, this report encourages us to engage with them, shape them, and harness them toward social resilience.

Demographic change often escapes the immediacy of public debate. Alfred Sauvy's classic clock metaphor—where politics moves like the second hand, economics like the minute hand, and demography like the hour hand—reminds us that while demographic shifts unfold slowly, they are the most consequential over time. Yet today's realities challenge even this metaphor: the COVID-19 pandemic, migration flows, and regional depopulation show that population dynamics can accelerate, creating both risks and opportunities. Still, many policies remain trapped in a logic of "perma-emergency"—reactive rather than anticipatory.

A positive demography implies two things: first, that demographic trends are not destiny; and second, that political choices can act like the crown of a clock, adjusting even the hour hand. Demographic change is not an immutable background process, but a terrain of intervention. The key lies in combining adaptation—adjusting to expected changes like population aging or shrinking—with mitigation—proactively addressing their causes, such as low fertility or unmanaged migration.

The analogy with climate change is telling. Just as climate science advocates adaptation and mitigation strategies, demography must also evolve beyond fatalistic narratives. Adaptation in demography means preparing for the effects of aging, spatial imbalances, or new family forms. Mitigation means enabling higher fertility through well-being-oriented family policies, or designing immigration systems

that support both labour needs and long-term inclusion.

Italy exemplifies the urgency of this approach. The 2021 report introduced the idea of Italian demographic exceptionalism—where the country ranks among global extremes on nearly every indicator. Some are desirable, such as high longevity and health; others are alarming, like persistently low fertility and regional depopulation. The current report shows how positive demography can navigate both.

Take longevity. While Italians live longer than most, significant social and territorial inequalities persist. Rather than celebrating averages, a positive demographic lens urges us to invest in equitable aging, ensuring that longer life also means healthier life for all.

On the other end of the spectrum lies Italy's fertility crisis. Reversing the trend requires moving beyond short-term "bonuses" and toward deeper, structural reforms that align with people's life projects. Parenthood today is seen as a meaningful, irreversible choice—one that demands predictability, resources, and support. Family policies, education systems, and housing all play a role. Furthermore, given the

shrinking base of potential parents, well-managed immigration that fosters family formation and integration is not optional, but necessary.

Finally, the Italian case raises a broader concern: the reproduction of inequality across generations. The report highlights the risk of a failed second generation of migrants if educational systems and citizenship pathways do not adapt. Regions that today succeed in attracting and integrating immigrants may face future challenges without proactive policies that support the next generation's full inclusion.

In short, a positive demography is not about denying challenges. It is about embracing a mindset of possibility. It rejects fatalism and builds on the insight that demographic change can be steered. Scientific evidence, longitudinal data, and integrated policy design are essential tools. As shown by international examples—from Sweden's use of population registers to France's INED model—a long-term, data-driven, and inclusive approach is feasible. The future of population is not pre-written. With the right tools and vision, we can make it more inclusive, resilient, and just.

Italian Association for Population Studies