CHILD-SPECIFIC DEPRIVATION: INSIGHTS FROM ITALY[1]

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Abstract. The EU-SILC (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions) is one of the main sources of data for periodic reports on the social situation of the European Union and the spread of the risk of poverty in member countries. In the national context, the reference population of the EU-SILC survey consists of all the households residing in Italy at the time of the interview, and their members. All household members are surveyed, but only people aged 16 or over are personally interviewed. However, the needs and living standards of children are different from those of adults, even within the same households. Although many of the household-level material and social deprivation items available from the core questionnaire are relevant to the situation of children, the accurate measurement of the actual living conditions of children requires the collection of information specific to the children's situation and needs. To this end, in addition to the annual variables, the EU-SILC survey includes also variables collected every three years via a specific module on children. This thematic *ad hoc* module includes child-specific items on material and social deprivation, which made it possible to compute the child-specific indicator. To this end, in this paper we present the results of the child-specific indicator calculation for the Italian context – referring to the data from the modules included in the 2017 and 2021 survey editions, also showing which social dimensions are mainly interrelated with child deprivation.

1. Introduction

Leaving no one behind is a central focus of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which recognizes the importance of the dignity of the individual and establishes that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should be achieved for all countries, all people and for all segments of society.

While numerous SDGs address inequalities and the advancement of historically marginalized individuals and communities, the first SDG sets as a priority goal "ending poverty in all its forms everywhere" (United Nations, 2015). In particular,

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[1] All authors contributed to the study conception and design, and the paper is the result of the common work of the authors. In particular, Francesca Gallo is the lead author of Section 1, Mariagloria Narilli is the lead author of Section 2 and Livia Celardo is the lead author of Sections 3 and 4. All authors red and approved the final manuscript.

it aims at reducing "at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions". It is the first time that worldwide the governments have agreed on a multidimensional poverty target, which explicitly includes children. Moreover, this objective seems to catch concerns that require a broader conception than poverty, addressing inequality explicitly.

Low income has long been recognized as a primary indicator of poverty, but it is essential to acknowledge that other factors also play a crucial role. In more recent years, multidimensional criteria have become fundamental in the study of poverty (Nolan *et al.* 2007), posing interesting challenges, such as choosing the dimensions that are relevant and those that are not, or deciding whether or not to weigh the dimensions to obtain an overall index.

The concept of social exclusion, originally devised in 1970s (Lenoir, 1974), only started to be used more broadly, both in the literature and in the policy discourse, in the late 1990s. Specifically, an important step, which demonstrated the strong attention towards social exclusion, was the European Union's decision to place it at the center of the social policy agenda at the Lisbon summit in 2001. Subsequently, the Common European Plan for Europe 2020 strategy and more recently the Europe 2030 strategy and the work carried out by the Social Protection Committee of the European Union (European Commission, 2015) have continued to put social exclusion at the forefront.

The concept of social exclusion goes beyond the approach that places exclusive attention on monetary poverty as the main parameter for evaluating the inclusive potential of a society. Relying solely on monetary poverty to measure exclusion fails to capture the multidimensional and dynamic nature of the barriers that prevent people from being included (Saraceno, 2001). In line with this criticism, most definitions of social exclusion consider the following elements (Bak, 2018):

1. *Multidimensionality*: social exclusion includes income, poverty and other aspects that capture the level of vulnerability of an individual or group of individuals;
2. *Dynamic*: while the level of monetary poverty can change significantly from one year to the next, social exclusion seeks to capture the underlying factors that predict vulnerability over a longer period of time;
3. *Non-participation*: social exclusion seeks to assess an individual's ability to participate widely in the activities that society deems relevant;
4. *Multilevel*: social exclusion is defined at the individual level, but it refers to factors that go beyond the individual level, such as the family or community of reference.

Despite the agreement on the main factors that make up the concept of social exclusion, there is no agreed definition in the literature. One of the most popular,

which attempts to account for the various factors, comes from Levitas *et al.* (2007, p. 25): "Social exclusion is a complex and multidimensional process. It involves the lack (or denial) of resources, rights, goods and services and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to most people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political spheres. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole".

The AROPE indicator, developed by Eurostat, is one of the most used indicators in European countries to measure this concept. It is the main indicator used to monitor the 2030 agenda target on poverty and social exclusion. It consists of three dimensions intended to capture different aspects of social exclusion: (1) At risk of poverty; (2) Low work intensity; (3) Severe material and social deprivation.

AROPE can be calculated for all countries of the European Union through data collected by EU-SILC survey. This has the notable advantage of comparability across territory and over time. Indeed, although different definitions may be more appropriate for some countries and provide more accurate results, a common indicator has the advantage of allowing comparability between countries. Furthermore, its definition is simple and the values are therefore easy to understand and interpret. However, it only captures a relatively small set of dimensions of social exclusion and this represents its main disadvantage.

The fight against child poverty and social exclusion and the importance of investing in children's well-being has been high on the EU policy agenda. Many authors (Gordon and Nandy, 2012; Main and Besemer, 2013; Main and Bradshaw, 2016) and many recommendations of an EU Task-Force on Child Poverty and Child Well-Being suggested the need for child-specific measures, stressing that simple age group breakdowns of AROPE indicator were insufficient to adequately capture the nature of children poverty and social exclusion. Both the needs and living standards of children can indeed be different from those of adults, even within the same households. Thus, although the household material and social deprivation is relevant to the situation of children, an accurate measurement of the children actual living conditions is required.

The 2009 edition of EU-SILC introduced for the first time an *ad hoc* module on child-specific deprivation. The 13 child-specific items that passed the robustness analysis were subsequently collected in the 2017 and 2021 EU-SILC editions, allowing for the development of a child-specific indicator (Guio *et al.*, 2018).

The advantages of using this index arise from the possibility of taking into account items that have both a direct and indirect impact on the well-being and standard of living of children, which are potentially different from those of adults in the same household. Moreover, the inclusion of the items within the EU-SILC survey questionnaire makes it possible to assess in comparative terms child deprivation and its drivers in the 27 countries of the European Union (Guio *et al.*, 2020).

In this paper, we show the situation of child material and social deprivation in Italy, which includes age appropriate child-specific information available from the thematic deprivation modules included in the 2017 and 2021 edition of EU-SILC. We summarize the main results of an in-depth analysis of these two datasets, attempting to identify the relationship between deprivation and household socio-economic characteristics, and showing how children's deprivation status is strongly influenced by family type and parental education.

2. Data and methods

The EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) is the main source for comparative statistics on income distribution and social inclusion in the European Union (Regulation of the European Parliament no. 1177/2003 and from 2021 (EU) 2019/1700). It is a multi-purpose survey, which focuses on income components, at household and individual level, and social exclusion. Particular attention is paid to material and social deprivation, providing information on housing conditions, labor, education and health[2].

Member States collect yearly data on the so-called primary variables (income, deprivation, economic activity, demography, education, childcare, housing cost, health, quality of life). In addition, a multi-annual rolling plan establishes the list of secondary variables to be collected via modules, every three or six years, to deepen the above-mentioned topics. Both primary and secondary variables are collected at two different levels, the household and the individual level. The reference population includes all private *de facto* households[3] residing in the territories of each country at the time of the interview and their members. People living in institutions are excluded. According to EU Regulation, data shall be based on representative samples drawn from sampling frames that allow households to be selected at random, with a known probability of selection; the sample should have a minimum four-year rotation scheme. In Italy, a two-stages scheme (municipalities and households) with six independent rotational sub-groups is adopted[4]. From one year to the next, part of the sample is rotated while the remaining five-sixths refer to households and

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[2] For further details, see ISTAT, 2024a.

[3] *De facto* household is a group of people habitually living in the same dwelling, who share the income by contributing and/or benefiting from it.

[4] Until 2019, Italian sample consisted of four independent rotational sub-samples, each of them remaining in the sample for four consecutive years.

individuals extracted in previous years who are re-interviewed[5]. The survey provides two types of data: cross-sectional data on income, poverty, social exclusion and other living conditions at a fixed time and longitudinal data on variation of individual/household conditions over time (six years).

As mentioned, EU-SILC pays particular attention to material and social deprivation. Material and social deprivation refers to the inability to afford a set of thirteen specific items, consisting of goods, services, or social activities that most people consider essential for a decent quality of life. Individuals unable (enforced inability rather than the "choice" not to do so) to afford five or more of the thirteen standard items (6 related to the individual and 7 related to the household)[6] experience material deprivation. The severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD) is an EU-SILC indicator defined as the proportion of the population experiencing an enforced lack of at least seven out of thirteen deprivation items. SMSD is one of the three dimensions of the "At risk of poverty or social exclusion rate" (AROPE) indicator, the main indicator to monitor progress towards the EU 2030 target on poverty and social exclusion.

In 2021, an in-depth module of the survey took a special look at the living conditions of children aged less than 16 years. The module collects child-specific information from the adult answering the household questionnaire, and not from the children themselves (Guio *et al.* 2018). According to the EU approach, even if only one child in a given household does not have an item, it is assumed that all children in that household lack it. This assumption does not allow for any differences that may exist among the children living in the same family to be captured, but it is necessary to avoid burdening the respondents (Guio *et al.* 2018). It has to be noted that the child-specific deprivation module use "an enforced" concept of lack: only children lacking an item for affordability reasons (and not by choice or due to any other reasons), are considered deprived of it. Data collected enabled the calculation

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[5] In 2021 data collection was carried out from late June to late November on about 33,000 households (the achieved sample - that was successfully interviewed - consisted of 18,561 households and 38,450 individuals), residing in about 800 Italian municipalities of different size.

[6] The list of thirteen items includes the following (seven related to the household and six related to the individual):
- o *At household level*: Capacity to face unexpected expenses; Capacity to afford paying for one-week annual holiday away from home; Capacity to being confronted with payment arrears (on mortgage or rental payments, utility bills, hire purchase instalments or other loan payments); Capacity to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent every second day; Ability to keep home adequately warm; Have access to a car/van for personal use; Replacing worn-out furniture.
- o *At individual level*: Having internet connection; Replacing worn-out clothes by some new ones; Having two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including a pair of all-weather shoes); Spending a small amount of money each week on him/herself; Having regular leisure activities; Getting together with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month.

of the specific index of material and social deprivation shared internationally, and based on certain characteristics, conditions and situations typical of minors. A child is considered deprived if he/she presents at least three signs of deprivation out of the seventeen identified (twelve child-specific and five household-specific)[7]. IT-SILC *ad hoc* module and the other household data on the items composing the indicator were replicated for each child living in the same household to compute it. There was only one exception: a reverse calculation was made on the Internet access deprivation item. Information on Internet access for personal use at home is collected for each adult (16 years or more) at individual level. First thing, the percentage of adults lacking this item for financial reasons was computed for each household. Then, each child living in the same household was considered deprived of the Internet access item when at least 50% of the adults members lack it.

The previous survey of the *ad-hoc* module on children was a one-off in 2017. The next paragraph shows the statistical analysis of data on the material and social deprivation of children (aged less than 16 years) in Italy in 2021, in comparison with 2017.

3. Results

3.1. European context

In 2021, 13% of children under 16 in the EU were deprived (Figure 1). Romania (42.5%), Bulgaria (36.5%), and Greece (33.9%) got the highest rates, while Slovenia (2.9%), Sweden (3.5%), and Finland (3.7%) had the lowest.

A key factor influencing the level of child deprivation is the educational level of their parents. In 2021, 39.1% of children in the EU living with parents that had a low education level (up to lower secondary, ISCED levels 0-2) experienced deprivation. In contrast, only 3.8% of EU children whose parents had a tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-8) were affected. This results in an education-related deprivation gap of over 35 percentage points. Across EU Member States, the gap ranged from 8.2 points (Poland) and 13.9 points (Germany), to 74.4 points (Hungary) and 79.0 points

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[7] The child specific deprivation rate is the percentage of children below 16 who suffer from the enforced lack of at least three items out of the following 17 (unweighted) items:

- o   *Child*: Some new clothes; Two pairs of shoes; Fresh fruits and vegetables daily; Meat, chicken, fish daily; Suitable books; Outdoor leisure equipment; Indoor games; Leisure activities; Celebrations; Invite friends; School trips; Holiday.
- o   *Household*: Replace worn-out furniture; Arrears; Home adequately warm; Car; Internet (If at least half of the adults in the household are deprived of this item, the child is considered deprived of the item).

(Romania). Eight out of the 27 Member States showed a gap exceeding 50 percentage points (EUROSTAT, 2023).

Figure 1 – *Child-specific deprivation, by the highest level of education attained by their parents (2021, %).*
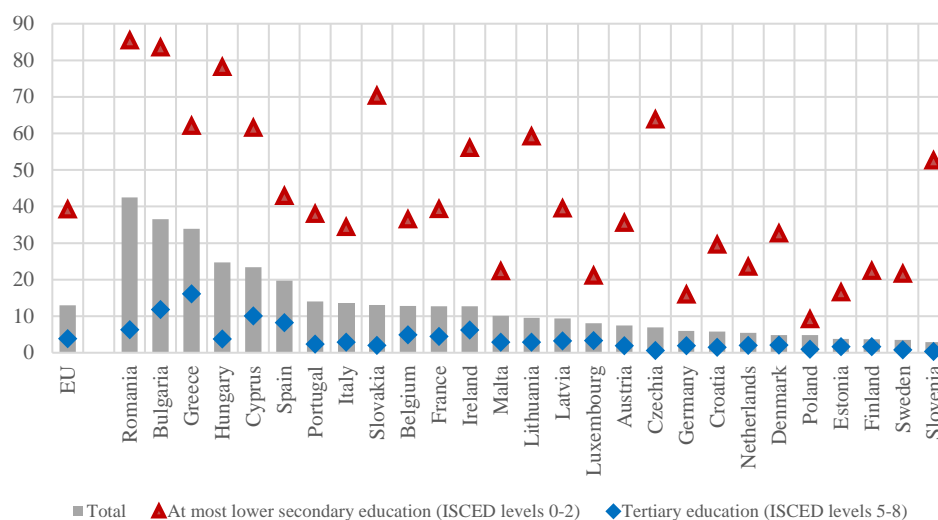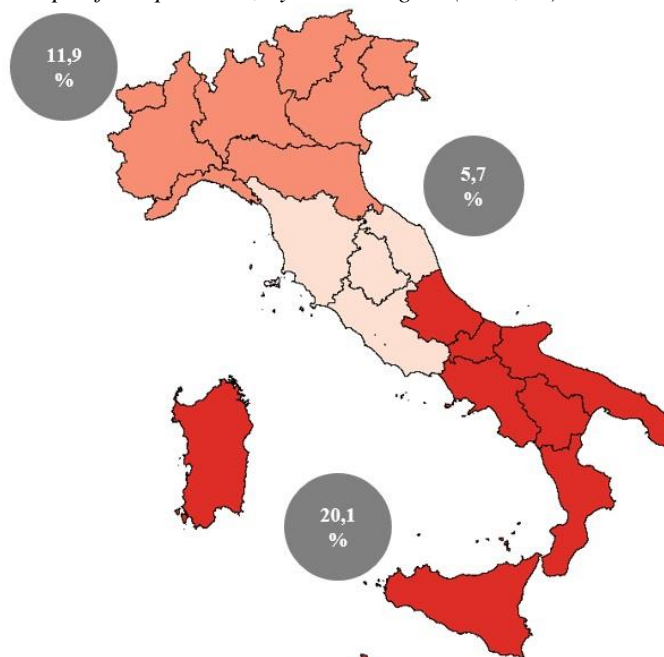

Source: EUSILC survey, EUROSTAT.

3.2. Italian context

In 2023, 4.7% of the Italian population (about 2,788,000 individuals) is in conditions of severe material and social deprivation, i.e. it presents at least seven signs of deprivation out of the thirteen identified by the SMSD indicator. The severe material and social deprivation rate is highest in the South (11.8%) and in the Islands (5.6%), and lowest in the North-East (1.6%), while the Centre and the North-West recorded a similar share (2.5% and 2.3%, respectively).

In Italy, the child-specific deprivation showed a stability between 2021 and 2017 (13.5% and 13.3%, respectively). At territorial level, in 2021 the highest incidence of the indicator was observed in Southern Italy, reaching about one in five children under the age of 16 (Figure 2). On the other hand, the regions of the central area showed the lowest incidence of the deprivation (5.7%), followed by the northern regions (11.9%).

Figure 2 – *Child-specific deprivation, by Italian region (2021, %).*
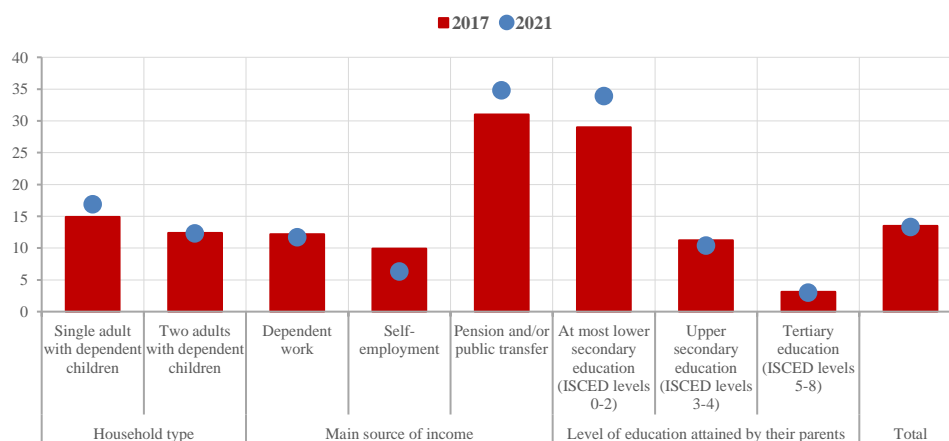

Source: EUSILC survey, ISTAT.

In 2021, the child-specific deprivation rate was highest for the 12-15 age group and lowest for children aged 6-11 (14.8%, as compared with 12.9%). On the other hand, 13.2% of children aged under six years experienced deprivation in 2021, an increase from 2017 (12.2%).

Child-specific deprivation, for children living with one single parent, increased in 2021 (16.9%, compared to 14.9% in 2017), while it remained stable for children living with both parents (12.3% in 2021 compared to 12.4% in 2017). Strictly connected to the household composition, also the number of income earners impacts on the living condition of children. In 2021, children were more likely to be deprived when the number of income earners decreases, ranging from 21.1% of children deprived where there is only one earner in the household, to 9.1% where two or more earners are present. Where the main source of income for the household is dependent work or self-employment, children are less deprived (11.7% and 6.3%, respectively), while the child-specific deprivation rate remains higher for those who can count on income from pensions and/or public transfers (34.8% in 2021, compared to 31% in 2017).

Even in Italy, as in the other countries of the European Union, children whose parents attained a lower educational level are more likely to experience material deprivation compared with children whose parents attained a higher education level. As it is well known (ISTAT, 2024b), an adult's education level affects the type of job an individual can access. Generally, the lower the level, the higher the risk is for the individual and for the household, including children, to experience deprivation compared with those with a higher educational level. In 2021, the child-specific deprivation is equal to 3% if the parental level of education is equal to tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-8), while it reaches 33.9% in case of at most lower secondary education level (ISCED levels 0-2). The child deprivation gap based on the parents' level of education — difference of child deprivation rate between the highest and lowest levels of parents' education — was therefore 30.9 percentage points.

The persistence of large achievement gaps by socio-economic status is an important factor in the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Waldfogel, 2017). Because these gaps are already present early in life, the lack of access to education and early care, which in 2021 affected 66.8% of children in the 0-3 age group, is strictly related to the living conditions of children, in particular those aged 0-5. In 2021, the deprivation rate increases of 3 p.p. for the 0-2 age class (15.3% compared to 12.6%) and doubles for the age class 3-5 (30% compared to 15%), when children do not participate in education and early care.

Figure 3 – C*hild-specific deprivation, by household type, main source of income and level of education attained by their parents (2021, %).*

Source: EU-SILC survey, ISTAT.

Overall, in 2021, about 65% of children under 16 has no signs of deprivation, 15.2% had one and 6.3% had two. Among deprived children (13.5% of the total of children under 16), 35.1% show three out of 17 signs of deprivation, 16.9% four, 11.8% have five and 21.6% a number ranging between nine and 17 (the maximum number of signals considered). In 2021, the most common deprivation item for both deprived and not deprived children is "not being able to afford to replace damaged furniture with others in good condition" (corresponding to 88.6% of deprived children) followed by "not being able to afford at least one week of vacation per year" (81.3%) and "not being able to afford to regularly carry out leisure activities outside the home" (58.4%).

Shifting attention to food deprivation, in 2021, 4.9% of children under 16 live in a household that has experienced economic difficulties that have prevented them from purchasing the necessary food; the share rises to 7.0% in the South. Furthermore, 2.5% of children do not consume at least one protein meal a day because the family cannot afford it. The family's inability to pay for one protein meal a day or the inability to pay for the necessary food outline a condition of food deprivation, which in 2021 affects 5.9% of children under 16 (6.2% in the North, 2.5% in the Center and 7.6% in the South).

There are also differences by household type: couples with minor children account for 4.7%, while single-parent families reach 7.7%.

Finally, the 6-11 age group shows the highest rate of food deprivation (6.3%), which for younger children (up to 5 years) and children between 12 and 15 years of age stops instead at 5.7%[8].

4. Conclusions

Addressing child poverty and social exclusion is high on the international policy agenda. Many authors and institutions push on the need for child-specific measures, stressing that simple age group breakdowns indicators are insufficient to adequately capture the nature of children deprivation.

Starting from the thematic modules included in the 2017 and 2021 edition of EU-SILC survey, in this paper we have shown the situation of children in Italy, in particular with regard to material and social deprivation, which includes age appropriate child-specific information. However, it is important to report some limitations of this study. Firstly, child deprivation variables in EU-SILC are not collected directly from the "voice of the child", but from the household respondents (Guio *et al*. 2020); secondly, two or more children living together are all considered

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[8] For further details, see ISTAT, 2023.

deprived of an item if at least one of them is deprived of that item. Consequently, it is not possible to investigate differences in child deprivation within the households.

We have reported in the previous section the main results of an in-depth analysis of 2017 and 2021 datasets, trying to identify the links between deprivation and socio-economic characteristics of the household. As shown, children's living conditions are closely related to the territorial context, the parents' working conditions, the household characteristics, the parental education level and the access to early education and care.

In 2021, the proportion of children aged 0-15 deprived is equal to 13.0% in the EU-27 and 13.5% in Italy. In Italy, in 2021, the South has the highest incidence of child material and social deprivation (20.1%). Parental education plays a crucial role in determining the living conditions of children. In 2021 the child material and social deprivation is equal to 3% if the parental level of education is equal to tertiary education, while it reaches 33.9% in case of at most lower secondary education level.

The lack of access to education and early care also impacts on the living conditions of children aged 0-5. The deprivation incidence increases by 3 percentage points for the 0-2 age class and doubles for the 3-5 age class when children do not participate in early childhood education and care. Finally, in 2021 still 5.9% of children aged 0-15 faces food deprivation. Children are much more affected in the South of Italy (7.6%). In addition, there are differences in relation to the family type of the child: couples with minor children have a share of 4.7%, while single-parent families reach 7.7%.

These results represent a starting point for a growing understanding of the living conditions of children, and they could help to identify causes and drivers of child-specific inequalities in specific country context, creating a knowledge base.

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